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STORIES

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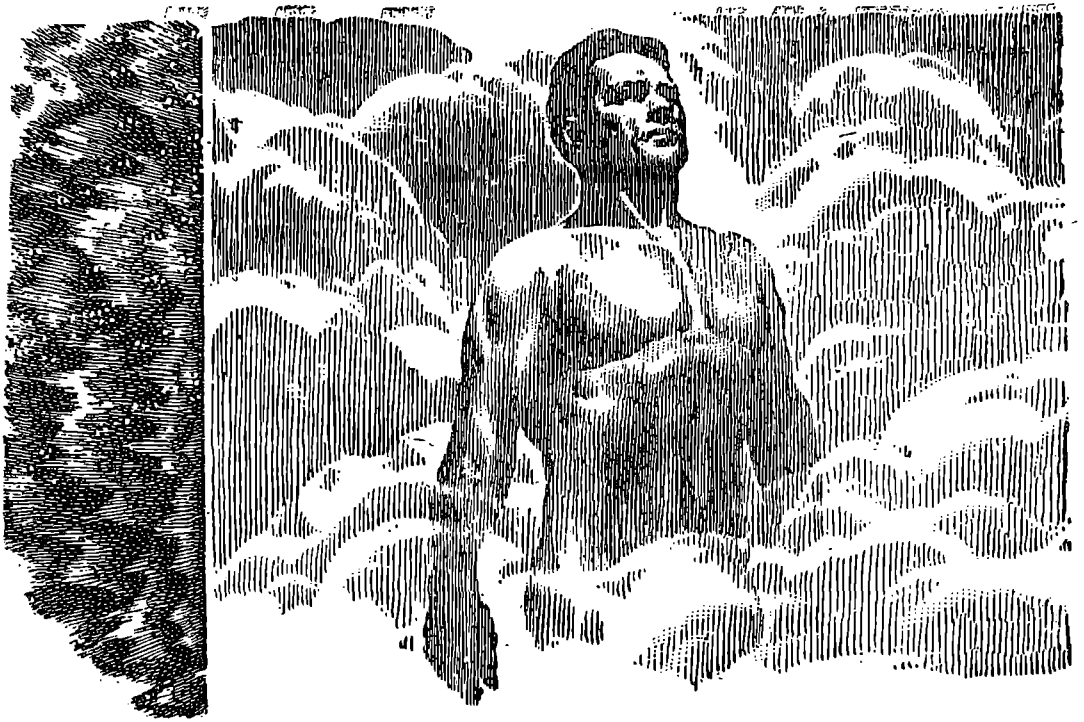
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TIME PAWN

I

THE spires were not his own. The colors were not his own. He had a moment of shattering, blinding terror—then calmness. He took a long breath of cold night air and began the job of working out his bearings. He seemed to be on some kind of hillside, overgrown with brambles and vines. He was alive—and he still had his gray-metal case. Experimentally, he tore the vines away and inched cautiously forward. Stars glittered above. Thank God for that. Familiar stars,—

Not familiar.

He closed his eyes and hung on until his senses came trickling back. Then he pushed painfully down the side of the hill and toward the glittering spires that lay perhaps a mile ahead, his case clutched tightly.

The colors shifted and he began to work out, in a dim fashion, the equation of their pattern. By the time he was half way he had it down fairly well. For some reason it made him feel better, a lot better. Here was something he could predict. Get hold of. Above the spires ships swirled and darted like silver fish.

A doctor must stand ready to answer his calls, but

this one came to Parsons out of the future.



a novel by PHILIP K. DICK

Swarms of them, catching the shifting lights. He was pleased. It was beautiful. Through the abysmal ache of his mind and body, a faint pleasure drifted. Assurance was coming back: he was grateful for small favors.

It wasn't his—but it looked nice. And that was something. So this hadn't changed. Reason, beauty, cold winter air late at night. He quickened his pace

Loris was gazing at the man with great emotion, as if in the grip of a swelling tide of feeling

Illustrated by VIRGIL FINLAY

and came onto a highway. He was getting nearer.

He hurried.

As he hurried he let his thoughts wander around aimlessly. Bringing back the last fragments of sound and being, the final bits of a world abruptly gone. Wondering, in a detached, objective way, exactly what had happened.

PARSONS was on his way to work. It was a bright sunny morning. He had paused a moment to wave to his wife before getting into his car.

"Anything you want from town?" he shouted.

Mary stood on the front porch, hands in her pockets. "Nothing I can think of, darling. I'll find you at the Institute if I remember anything."

In the bright sunlight Mary's hair shone a luminous auburn, a flashing cloud of flame. She was small and slender in her green slacks and close-fitting foilite sweater. He waved to her, grabbed one final vision of his pretty wife, their small stucco house, the garden, the flagstone path, the hills rising up in the distance, and then hopped in the car.

He spun off down the road, allowing the car to operate on the New York guide-beam. It was safer, that way. And a lot quicker. He didn't mind having his car operated from a hundred miles off. All the other cars racing along the eight-lane highway were guide operated. Made accidents almost impossible, and meant he could enjoy the countryside.

The countryside was fresh and virginal. Attractive, since President Cantelli had nationalized the soap, tire, and hotel industries. No more display signs to ruin the hills and valleys. Wouldn't be long before all industries were in the hands of the ten-man Economics Planning Board, operating under the Westinghouse Research Schools. Of course, when it came to doctors, that was another thing.

He tapped his gray instrument case

on the seat beside him. Industry was one thing; the professional classes another. Nobody was going to nationalize the doctors, lawyers, virus research workers. During the first part of the century the technocratic and professional classes had gradually gained control of society. Instead of businessmen and politicians it was scientists rationally trained to—

Something picked up the car and hurled it from the road. Parsons screamed in horror as the car spun dizzily onto the shoulder and careened into the brush. *The guide had failed.* That was his last thought. *Interference.* Trees, rocks, came looming up. A shrieking crash of grinding plastic and metal, and his own voice, all mixed together in a chaotic blur of sound and movement. And then the sickening impact that crumpled the car up like a plastic carton.

He was thrown clear—into a rolling void of gray. He remembered spinning slowly, coming to earth like a weightless, drifting feather. Everything was slowed down, a tape track brought almost to a halt. He felt no pain. Nothing at all. An enormous formless mist seemed all around him.

A radiant field. A beam of some kind. The power that had interfered with the guide. He realized that—his last conscious thought. Then darkness descended over him.

He was still gripping his gray instrument case.

AHEAD the highway broadened. Lights flickered around him, geared to his presence. An advancing umbrella of yellow and green dots that showed him the way. The road entered and mixed with an intricate web of other roads, branches that dimmed and faded into the darkness. He could only guess their directions. At the hub of the complex tangible he halted and examined a sign which immediately glowed alive for his benefit. He read the unfamiliar words aloud.

DIR	80c N
ATR	46c N
BAR	100c S
CRP	205c E
EGL	67c N

N, S, and E obviously were North, South and East. But the rest meant nothing. The C was a unit of measurement. That had changed; the mile of his own time was evidently gone. The magnetic pole was still used as a reference point; that was the same.

Cars were moving along the roads that lifted above and beyond him. Drops of glittering light. All colors. Like the spires of the city itself, they shifted hues as they altered space relationship with him.

He gave up on the sign. It told him

Hunger. Almost a sexual hunger. It was clean and bright. Cut against the sky like a diamond. As fresh as a flower, moist and glowing with life.

He began to walk again, buoyed up with new vigor. His spirits were rising—and fast. Excitement and joy flooded over him. What would he find? What kind of world? Whatever it was, he'd be able to place himself. The thought drummed triumphantly in his brain *I'm a doctor. A hell of a good doctor. If it were anybody else.*

A doctor would always be needed. He could master the language, the social mores. Find a place for himself in the glowing orb of metal and plastic rising up ahead.

THE RIGHT TO LIVE

SPECIALIZATION brings rewards and penalties. In this picture of a far future society, even the right to live is narrowly specialized. Medicine has died, replaced by a ruthless euthanasia to improve the stock. There is no thought of healing—of curing. Yet the supermen of the future have to import a doctor from the past when it becomes vitally necessary to save one life.

This is time travel with a slight difference—the traveler is always an involuntary passenger.

—The Editor

only what he knew already, nothing more. He had gone ahead. A considerable jump. The language, the mensural system, the whole appearance of society had changed.

He hoisted himself from the lowest road up to a hand ramp and from there to the next level. Quickly, he swung up to a third and then a fourth. Now he could see the city with ease.

It was really something. Big and beautiful. It took his breath away. Standing on the ramp in the cold night darkness, the wind rustling around him, the stars overhead, the moving drops of color that were the shifting cars, Parsons was overcome with emotion. The sight of the city made his heart ache.

Parsons gripped his gray-metal case and hurried. He was in love with the city. He wanted to be near it—inside it, as soon as possible.

While he was hurrying breathlessly down the incline of the road, a silent drop of color came smoothly to a halt a few yards ahead of him and slid open its door.

"Hin," a man's voice commanded.

Parsons thought foolishly: but I didn't even have my thumb out.

"Hin!" the voice repeated urgently. The motor started up impatiently.

Parsons got in. The door slammed shut and the drop leaped forward. Parsons was crushed back against the seat by the velocity. The car shot ahead,

passed a number of slower-moving cars, hurtled like a bullet along the smooth road toward the city.

THE man behind the wheel was astonishingly young. Parsons had a moment of surprise—then managed to integrate without showing any reaction. A youth, hardly more than a boy. Eighteen or nineteen. Driving with easy confidence. Obviously master of the car and the situation.

Dark hair, almost black. Coffee-colored skin. Flat, wide cheek bones. Almond eyes that glistened liquid in the reflected light of the city. A prominent nose. Roman? American Indian. And his coffee-colored skin and thick black hair.

The man was an American Indian. But not pure blood. Mixed with something else. The cheek bones suggested Mongolian. The eyes were southern. Negro or Polynesian. The hair clearly Indian. The skin color was more brown than red. A polyglot of everything. He wore a two-piece robe, dark red, with an embroidered herald on his chest. A stylized eagle.

Eagle. EGL. And the others. *DIR* was deer. *BAR* was bear. The rest he couldn't guess. What did it mean? He leaned over to speak, but the youth cut him off.

"*Whur venis a tardus?*" he demanded.

Parsons was floored. The language was unfamiliar—but not alien. It had a baffling ring, something almost understood, but not quite.

"What?" he asked.

The youth qualified his question. "*Ye kleidis novae en sagis novate. Whur iccidi hist?*"

He was beginning to get the drift. A strange mix of languages, based on Latin. Latin and something Indo-European, probably Germanic. The man wanted to know why he was out so late and why he was dressed so strangely. And why he spoke as he did. Parsons framed some Latin—then forgot it, as the youth said calmly and unmistakably:

"*Yer vita hin periculum hist.*"

"Why?" Parsons demanded, chilled to the core. "I haven't done anything."

The youth said nothing. They were entering the city. A broad span lifted them over a moat. More and more cars were visible. People on foot. Parsons glimpsed crowds, great masses moving along spidery ramps, entering and leaving the spires, pushing along sidewalks. They were all young. Like the youth beside him, they were coffee-skinned, black-haired, large luminous eyes and flat cheek bones. An endless variety of robe-colors. Emblems on each. Animal, fish, bird heralds.

Why? Society organized by totem tribes? Different races? They all were physically alike. Only the robe colors and heralds differed. All wore their hair long, braided and tied in back. The men were considerably larger than the women. Stern noses and chins. The women hurried along laughing and chattering, bright-eyed, red lipped. Incredibly smooth skin. But so young—almost children. Merry, laughing girls and boys.

The car slid to a halt. The youth snapped off the motor and opened the door. For a moment he sat deep in thought. Then he spoke a few clear sentences.

Persons listened. At first he didn't follow. The youth repeated them. Then Parsons, by a violent mental effort, threw them over into his own semantic system.

"You shouldn't be outside," the youth had said, firmly and quietly. "Not until you have different clothing and have mastered more of the customs. It isn't safe. But if you do what I say, danger can be averted."

Parsons phrased a question carefully. In as close an approximation as possible of the youth's Latin and Anglo-Saxon, he asked: "Do you know who I am?"

"*Ne.*"

"Do you know why I'm here?"

The answer was *ne*. The youth abruptly slid out onto the sidewalk and motioned Parsons after him. Awkward-

ly lugging his instrument case, Parsons followed, across the pavement and into a spired building.

A FEW people were lounging in the lobby. When they saw Parsons they froze with surprise. All eyes were on him as the youth led him through the lobby and into an ascent lift.

They rose an indefinite distance. Parsons followed him obediently out of the lift and down a luxurious hall. He obeyed unquestioningly. There was nothing else he could do. He had seen the expressions on the faces of the people in the lobby. A mixture of horror and—disgust. But why disgust? It shook his confidence roughly—and made him follow.

They came to a door. The youth raised his hand and the door faded. A room where four or five people sat, lay ahead. The people looked quickly up, conversation abruptly broken off. Parsons felt a momentary stab of panic. Again the mixture of horror and disgust. A woman scrambled back. Two men arose. Startled exclamations.

—Behind him the door locked shut.

II

THEY were all young. Almost children. A boy no older than ten. A girl in her early teens, virginal unformed body under her robes. The oldest of them was the youth who had brought him; and he was a mere boy. Various robe colors and heralds. But physically all alike.

"Who are you?" a man demanded in the dialect.

"Where did you get him, Wade?" a woman asked. "Good Lord, what'll Loris say?"

"Is he sick?" the little girl piped. "What's wrong with him? Why does he look that way?"

All of them had withdrawn in a hostile, remote ring. It was not curiosity on their handsome, coffee-colored faces. It was outright loathing.

"Make him leave!" the boy shrilled

in a lilting, musical voice. "He's sick!"

"Be quiet," the youth named Wade ordered sharply. "All of you get out. And don't say anything."

They got up and moved slowly toward a side door, eyes still on Parsons. One by one they left the room, murmuring and talking in low tones. Faces unified in a single expression of fascinated revulsion. As if he were some kind of refuse.

"What's the matter with them?" Parsons demanded.

"Pay no attention," Wade said indifferently. "When you're washed and have clean clothing you'll be all right." He examined Parsons closely. "Your skin. Why is it white?"

"We're all that color."

"Where?"

"Back in my own time."

"You're from the past?" There was no surprise, no astonishment. Mere desire for accurate identification. "What era?"

"Twenty-first century. I was picked up by some kind of force-field. I don't know why. Maybe I'll find out."

Wade computed. "That was seven hundred years ago. Before the War?"

"Before some wars, I suppose. After some. What's the matter with those people?"

"It'll take a while for you to become accustomed to our standards. Assuming you can at all." Wade had gone to the window and was gazing thoughtfully out at the city. "It was lucky for you I came along. One chance in a thousand."

"Why you?" Parsons was getting mad. "Are you the only one with empathy? To the others I'm just a freak, some kind of—"

"Seven hundred years is a long time. Much has changed. There was the War. Society as you knew it came to an end. We built up from the bottom. I don't know if you can adjust to this."

Something in Wade's voice made Parsons forget his anger and the shadow of fear. "What do you mean?"

"We have rigid standards. Maybe you can fit in—maybe not. Unfortunately, there's no middle ground."

"In other words, either I'm accepted as one of you, or I'm no part of the human race."

"That's about it."

Shakily, Parsons got out a cigarette from his case. He struck the strike end and puffed rapidly. "I see the emblem of the eagle on your robe. Eagle, Otter, Deer, Bear, Wolf. What are you, divided into tribes? Back to some sort of a tribal basis?" He was really sweating, now. He was familiar with the psychology of tribes. The in-group concept. The exclusive orientation. "I'm beginning to see the set-up. A number of tribes with totem-identification. Yours is the eagle. You exalt the eagle qualities? Ruthlessness and quickness?"

"Not exactly." Wade moved away from the window. "All tribes are unified. The race has a common outlook as a whole. We know nothing about eagles. Only a word—not characteristics. Our tribal names came out of the Age of Darkness that followed the War."

FROM the hall a shape entered. A woman. She stopped at the sight of Parsons. "Oh!" she gasped, dark eyes wide with astonishment. "Who—"

Wade greeted her. "Come in. Icafa, this is—"

"Parsons. Doctor James Parsons."

The woman nodded nervously. She was perhaps twenty. Slender and dark-haired, with an armload of brightly-colored packages. In a gray robe, with the herald of a wolf between her small pointed breasts. She advanced breathlessly toward Parsons. "Who are you? Where are you from?"

"Parsons came here unintentionally," Wade said. "From the past. Before the War."

"Really?" There was awe in her large black eyes. "Why is your skin chalk-colored?"

"In my time we were divided into white, yellow, brown, black, all varieties

of sub-races within the species. Apparently there was a mix sometime after the War."

Icara's finely-shaped nose wrinkled. "Separate sub-races? How awful. What are you doing here? Has Loris been notified? Where are you going to stay?"

"I don't know where I'm going to stay. It's not my fault I'm here. Something—*somebody* brought me here."

Icara walked all around him, examining him from every side. "Wade, I don't see—I mean, it's going to be such a problem. The Soul Cube will be thrown off. You'll be in trouble with the Government. How can he be fitted with the Fountain? All sorts of things. He's so very different!"

"Is that bad?" Parsons demanded.

Icara blinked. "Bad? Why, of course it's bad. Isn't it? If you're different then you don't have any place. You don't—"

"*Belong.*" Parsons finished harshly. "Is that it?"

"But you can learn!" Icara exclaimed. "Wade will give you the right clothing. You can learn to speak the language without an accent. But your skin. I don't see how—"

"We can use dyes." Wade broke in impatiently. "The real problem is orientation. His period was lacking in concepts impressed on us at birth. Basic concepts we get as babies. He can't possibly assimilate enough at this late date." A thought struck him. "How old are you?"

Parsons was taken aback. "Thirty-two."

Wade and Icara exchanged glances. "Oh dear," Icara said. She changed the subject quickly. "What do you have in that gray box?"

"My instruments."

"And what about the Lists?" Wade said, half to himself. "The Government won't like it. He can't be fitted into any of the tribes. He'll throw the count off."

Parsons was opening his instrument case. "Look," he said grimly. "I don't give a damn about your tribes. You see these instruments? They're the best surgical tools developed in twenty-six

centuries. I don't know how good or how extensive your own medical work is, but I can hold my own in any culture, past or present. Maybe I'll never know. But I can be of value anywhere, with my kind of knowledge and skill. I know *that*—if nothing else. My medical knowledge will always find me a place. In this society and anywhere else!"

Icara and Wade were blank. "Medical knowledge?" Icara faltered. "What's that?"

Parsons was appalled. "I'm a physician."

"You're a—" Icara searched for the word. "What was it I read in the history tape? Was it *alchemist*? No, that's earlier. Sorcerer? Is a doctor a sorcerer? Does a doctor work with magic and supraterrrestrial forces?"

AT THE DOOR, a man appeared. In a blue robe, with a dog emblem on his chest. "Icara. Did you get them?"

Icara nodded. "Of course."

"Bring them here. We're all waiting."

"Later. In a minute." Icara's attention was on Parsons. "Your period specialized, didn't it? You have a specific vocation you've been trained for. We don't have that. Knowledge isn't learned. It's impressed on us at birth. There's no time lag and no division. Each of us possesses the full knowledge of our society. There's no separation by trade or vocation, except in actual activity."

The man had come into the room. "Icara, come here. Get away from that—" He used a word Parsons couldn't catch. But he got the tone.

"In a minute," Icara repeated. "It might be that the impression would work, even at your age. If not, I don't see how you could—"

The blue-robed man grabbed her by the shoulder. He wasn't a man, really. Like all the others he was a smooth-faced youth, probably not over twenty. Black, thick hair tied against his neck. Liquid eyes. Right now those eyes were blazing. "I told you to come here."

"Let go of me!" Icara dropped her packages, her coffee-colored cheeks flushed. She tore his hand away. "I'll come when I'm ready."

"Get out of here, Kem," Wade ordered. "I told you to wait in the other room."

Kem's face was ugly. "And I told her to come." He grabbed Icara by the neck, and with one quick shove threw her against a table of ornaments. Icara and the table crashed to the floor.

Wade swung. Kem ducked and kicked Wade in the groin. Wade went down gasping with pain. Kem strode over and dragged Icara to her feet. She struggled futilely, crying and slashing at him with her nails. Broken bits of colored glass lay everywhere. Blood ran down Kem's cheeks as the girl's nails dug into the smooth flesh. Kem grunted, jerked her to her feet, and drew back his fist.

The others were pouring back into the room. Shouting and milling excitedly. Parsons stepped in. He smashed Kem with one hard blow directly on the jaw. He was tired—but he still had plenty of arm muscle. Blood and broken teeth gushed from Kem's mouth. He staggered back, clutching—not at his face—but at his belt.

PARSONS saw it coming. Bright and spinning. Like an egg beater, flashing across the room. He threw himself down—but the thing wasn't aimed at him. Too late he saw where it was heading.

The flashing vanes caught Icara as she was getting unsteadily to her feet. It was ingenious. It started where it struck, a little above her stomach, and worked its way up. Icara screamed and tried to push it away from her. The thing crawled up her body, a blur of whirring blades. It slashed into her breasts like a lawnmower. It climbed her neck, crossed her face, passed over her eyes and around the side of her head. Icara beat at it and screamed helplessly, wildly. Her shrieks echoed through the room. She tottered against

the wall, slipped, fell, lay rolling and screaming.

Somebody kicked the thing from her. A foot came down on it and the demoniac blades crunched into immobility.

Icara lay face down in a growing pool of blood, twisting and moaning. Everyone was running and shouting. The hall door faded and people spilled out into the corridor.

"Get help!"

"Get the building Euthanor!"

"Her own. She has her own Euthanor."

"No time. Get the building Euthanor. On the ground level."

Parsons dragged his instrument case over. He ignored Kem; two men had pinned him down on the floor and were systematically beating him. He bent over the dying girl. The blades of the thing had cut two inches deep. Her breasts had been virtually severed. He tore the remains of her robe back, soggy with blood and ribboned flesh. Had the blades reached her heart?

He gave her a quick shot of morphenol. Her moans faded. She sagged into unconsciousness and her slashed body relaxed. Her heart was still beating, slowly, faintly. The rib cage had been penetrated on one side. Bloody specks bubbled from her half-severed windpipe.

He worked fast, hands flying. For the damaged heart he plugged a Dixon Pump into her chest, driving the prongs in expertly. The robot unit began to throb at once. Then he turned his attention to her throat.

Wade had come to. He stood unsteadily over Parsons, with several others. "Can you help her?" he demanded shakily.

Parsons nodded. "It's my job."

He sprayed art-derm tissue over her gashed windpipe. Her vascular and respiratory systems were the first thing. He turned the little art-derm nozzle on her exposed ribs. One lung had collapsed. The other seemed intact. Once she was breathing again, and her blood circulating—

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" the little boy demanded. His eyes were bulging out of his head at the sight of the ruined body lying in its own blood. "Maybe we better get the regular Euthanor."

The hell with him, Parsons thought grimly. "I'm doing all right," he muttered aloud. His fingers flew with a life of their own. Twisting, cutting, spraying, breaking open plastic tubes of tissue graft and fitting them into place.

He couldn't do much about the face. One eye was gone. She probably wouldn't talk again; at least, not very well. But she'd live. The furrow from her stomach to her temple had been covered with a thin coating of air-proof plastic. No infection, if he had got every exposed place. The Dixon pump beat regularly. Handy little unit.

Yes, he knew what he was doing. The girl would live. In another half minute her life would have ebbed out of her throat and chest—and nothing would have saved her. In spite of his horror, a kind of triumph licked through his brain.

His skill, his knowledge, had saved her.

A SHAPE loomed up at the door. A gray-haired handsome man with something under his arm. The Euthanor. Parsons grinned coldly. "It's all over," he said, standing up. "I took care of her. You're a little late."

"I was out of the building," the Euthanor said. He took in the sight of the girl and his eyebrows rose. "You did this?"

What was left of Kem had been tossed in the corner. It stirred feebly. "Him next, I suppose," Parsons said. "He's not worth it, but that's none of my business. Let the law take care of that end. That's not my department."

He examined Kem. His arms, legs, nose, most of the smaller bones in his body, had been carefully broken. He wasn't in serious shape—but he was a hell of a mess.

Parsons began to work, aware of the

Euthanor still standing uncertainly at the door. They were all watching him work, watching his flying fingers. His skillful hands that moved in a blur of speed. Healing hands. The watchers were awed. His obvious assurance, his competence, had made even the Euthanor silent. On the man's face a begrudging, admiring expression was forming. Mixed with vague doubt.

"I can't follow your work," the Euthanor admitted. "I've never seen anything like it." He was overcome with curiosity. "Who are you? Where are you from? How did you learn to work like that?"

Parsons didn't answer. He was enjoying the fierce thrill of his craft, the power of his hands, strength flowing through his fingers. Faster and faster he worked.

Icara was beginning to regain consciousness. She gave a faint cry and moved her arms.

There was a moment of stunned silence. "What does this mean?" the Euthanor demanded hoarsely.

"She'll live," Parsons answered irritably. What the hell did they expect—a miracle? "Better get her into a bed. I can't do anything about her eye. But there's no longer any danger."

"No longer any danger?" Wade repeated.

"That's right," Parsons said slowly. What was the matter with them? "She'll live. She'll recover. Understand?"

Wade was trembling violently. "I understand. You god damn insane pervert! You—maniac!"

And then they all closed in on Parsons. All robe-colors. All emblems. A single, grim mass.

In the dimly-lit room the two shapes watched the glowing procession of words intently, avidly, leaning forward in their chairs, powerful bodies taut.

"Too late!" the strong-faced man cursed bitterly. "Everything was out of phase. No accurate junction with the dredge. And now he's trapped in an inter-tribal area."

"Eagle," the other whispered, lips curling with disgust. "Dog. Eagle. What's the matter with the emergency team? Why aren't they there? They've had fifteen minutes! The first flash was sent out as soon as—"

"It takes time." The strong-faced man paced restlessly back and forth, feet lost in the thick carpets that covered the floor. "If only we could come out in the open."

"They won't get there in time." The seated figure struck out savagely and the flow of illuminated words faded. "By the time they get there he'll be dead—or worse. So far we've completely failed, Helmar. It's gone wrong."

III

NOISE. Lights and movement around him.

Parsons opened his eyes. A shattering blaze of white drove remorsefully down on him from all sides. He winced in agony. Through an aching haze he made out dim shapes moving in the light. Men. Equipment. A faint hum of machinery, steady and unchanging.

"*Namen,*" a voice murmured.

Another voice answered. Not his own. Someone else giving the answer. "James Parsons."

"*Olt?*"

"Thirty-two."

The voices blurred off. He was lying down—strapped or weighted. Men were talking off in the distance. Talking about him. Facts, figures. One asking, another answering. Grouped around a table, some sitting, some standing. Reading their answers from charts. He was in a laboratory. Or a clinic.

He had been beaten up. Maybe this was a hospital. But they didn't have hospitals. Not in this insane world where people happily put each other to death, hired Euthanors instead of doctors. Euthanor. Euthanasia.

The men had noticed he was regaining consciousness. Shapes gathered around him. Black-haired, coffee-col-

ored skins. The smooth skinned, bright-eyed youths. All of these were in plain white robes. Children—but they didn't have to be trained. What had the girl said? Knowledge was fused into the flexible infant brain at birth. These children probably had ten times the knowledge he had, from years of painful step-by-step learning.

"Are you able to understand?" one asked him in the jargon, part Latin, part Anglo-Saxon.

"Yes."

"We came just in time. Another minute and they would have put an end to you."

PARSONS focused with great effort. Faces swam into view. One boy was addressing him. He, like everybody else, was too young. Not over thirty. He had the bored, indifferent expression of an old man. He sat perched on the edge of a table, watching Parsons critically. "Can you get up?" he asked.

Parsons struggled to sit up. His body shrieked with agony and he settled back. For a moment blackness swarmed around him. He grunted and bit hard. Gradually, reluctantly, the blackness receded. Again the ring of faces swam into view.

His clothing was gone. He had on a two-piece robe like the others, a nondescript white—without emblem. The same as those around him. Sandals. He touched his cheek. Cuts, bruises. His ribs felt cracked in several places. The whole gang had jumped him. All of them, including Wade.

"Where am I?" he demanded.

"This is neutral ground." the bored-faced youth answered. "They can't come here."

"They?"

"The tribes. This is Government-operated."

"What is this? A hospital? But you don't have hospitals. A lab of some kind?" His mind was racing. Maybe he had found *them*—the ones who had brought him, sucked him into the fu-

ture. Torn him from his own time. Maybe he had finally made contact. "For God's sake, where am I and who are all of you?"

"This is the Fountain, the organization and equipment which maintains the Soul Cube. I'm Stenog, Director of the Fountain, in charge of the Cube. Responsible to the Government, not to the tribes." He leaned toward Parsons. "You're the man from the past?"

"Yes."

They were all listening intently. "You were suddenly brought here? Picked up by a time-dredge?"

"A force field of some kind." He searched their faces wildly. "Are you—"

"Nobody else came with you? You're the only one? Is there anybody with you?" Stenog's youthful face was hard. "Do you know who brought you here? Why you were picked up?"

Parsons sagged. "No." He shook his head wearily. "I thought maybe—you knew. I don't. There's no place for me in this insane society. I don't know why I'm here or who brought me."

Stenog referred to his notes. A strange look slid over his smooth face. "In your own period you're a—*doctor*?"

"That's right."

An uneasy murmur moved through the room. Stenog hesitated, then continued: "You saved that girl's life?"

"Yes." Parsons struggled up. "Of course I saved her life! She was dying—that sadist cut her to bits. What should I have done, just stood there while she bled to death?"

STENOG drew back a little and licked his lips nervously. The muffled murmur still moved around the ring, from Stenog down the line and all the way back. Stenog took a deep breath and plunged grimly on. "That was a crime. A major crime. You will not be allowed to return to tribal ground. You'll be sent from here to the prison colony on Mars. From now on your contact will be with robot guards exclusively."

Another figure intervened. "Can I question him in the time remaining? There are a few things that didn't come out in the psych-tap."

"Of course, Certer." Stenog retired.

This man was older. Heavier. There was a faint trace of gray in his black hair. His neck was a trifle puffy. He was not as dark as the others. There was a cold, unblinking hardness in his gray eyes as he approached Parsons.

"Parsons," he grated. "I'm interested in you and your world. In a few minutes you'll be taken from here to the relay rocket. In the meanwhile, you are willing to answer questions?"

Parsons nodded. A realization of what he had lost—Mary, his home—sickened him. He was too numb to care what happened now.

"I have read about your period in the history tapes," Carter continued. "You are a *doctor*. I understand the meaning of the term, the function you performed. But I cannot grasp the ideology behind it. *Why?*" His hard face became alive with emotion. "What was the purpose of it? That girl, Icara. She was dying. Yet, you made skilful and deliberate alterations in her system for the purpose of keeping her alive!"

Parsons answered with an effort. "That's right."

They were all murmuring. "In your culture that would have had a positive value?" Certer persisted. "Such an act would have been sanctioned?"

"Your profession was honored?" Stenog interrupted, unable to comprehend. "There was a valued social role for a person of your type?" He shook his head in bewilderment. "I don't understand."

The hard-faced Certer was also having difficulty. "I find it impossible to believe a *whole society* could have been oriented around such a drive. Surely only a small segment of your culture approved such behavior."

Parsons heard them, but their words made no sense. Everything was out of focus. Distorted. As if turned inside

out by a warped mirror. "Healing was respected," he managed to say. "But you people seem to think it's somehow wrong."

A furious rustle leaped through the circle of listeners. "*Wrong!*" Certer snapped. "It's insane! Don't you see what would happen if *everybody* were healed—all the sick and injured? The old?"

"No wonder his world collapsed," a strong-faced girl said, eyes wide with horror. "It's amazing it stood so long. Based on such a perverted system of values."

"It demonstrates," Stenog said thoughtfully, "the almost infinite variety of cultural formations. That a whole society could exist oriented around such drives seems to us beyond belief. But from our historical reconstruction we know such a thing actually went on. This man here is not an escaped lunatic. In his own world he was a valued person. His profession had social sanction and prestige."

"But they didn't realize the consequences," the girl pointed out.

"They continued to function a considerable time, however. The War was almost a century later. It took time for the toxic effects to rise and become evident."

"I'd like to ask him something," the girl said grimly. "Parsons, did you heal *anyone* who was sick?"

"Yes."

"Anyone at all?" She was incredulous. "The aged? You kept the aged alive as long as possible?"

"Yes."

"And the deformed?"

"We healed anybody who needed healing."

The girl shook her head. "Intellectually, I can accept it. But not emotionally."

CERTER edged forward. "Parsons! Let me ask you this." A cunning gleam slid over his cold features. "I know a related fact. Your science was

also devoted to keeping new life from appearing. You had—contraceptives. Chemical and mechanical agents preventing zygote formation within the oviduct."

Parsons started to answer. "We—"

"*Rassmolt!*" the girl snarled, livid with fury.

Parsons blinked. What did she mean? He couldn't convert it into his own semantic system.

"Do you remember the average age of your population?" Stenog asked.

"No," Parsons muttered. "About forty, I think."

Stenog tightened up. "Forty! Our average age is—fifteen."

It meant nothing to Parsons. Except there were no old people. But he had already seen that. "You consider that something to be proud of?" he asked wonderingly.

A roar burst from the circle around him. A spontaneous exclamation of rage. "Take him!" Stenog lashed. A group of armed men approached quickly. "Load him on the rocket. We're through with him."

Certer stopped them a moment. "All the legal details have been taken care of?"

"Of course." Stenog waved a sheaf of papers. "We have the girl's complaint. Filed with us just before she died."

Parsons reacted.

"*Died!* But—"

"She died half an hour ago."

Parsons was dumbfounded. "But she was recovering! She was getting well."

Stenog laughed. "This paper is her official complaint. Against you." He pushed the paper in Parsons' face. "Charging you with deliberately obstructing the natural process of *seel-motus*. As soon as she had completed this form she called her family Euthanor and underwent the Final Rite."

"You mean she—"

"It was her pleasure. By her own will she undid the harm you had attempted. She is dead."

"HIS will have to be brief," Stenog said. "We can't stay here long. The rocket is automatically launched and follows a prescribed schedule."

The chamber was huge. Parsons was staggered by the endless maze of corridors and passages that stretched off in all directions into the great globe that was the nerve-center of the Government. This building was the Fountain, the control mechanism by which the Government maintained the planet and regulated the tribes.

One side of the chamber was the wall of a gleaming cube. A vast tank that exceeded the dimensions of the chamber itself. With a shock, Parsons realized he was seeing only a portion of the cube, a single section. The cube lay mostly below the surface, buried deep in the earth.

The cube was alive. A constant undercurrent pulsed through it. Along the visible portions, countless white-clad technicians hurried back and forth. The whole chamber was one vast hive of activity. Equipment, machines, meters, power cables, at work everywhere. Armed guards posted by all the passages. Robot freight elevators moving tons of supplies.

This was the core of their world. This cube, this vast metal square set in the heart of the Fountain.

Stenog pointed to a row of viewslots along the exposed portions of the cube, directly above the entrance locks. "We're being watched from inside. The two of us as we stand here. I'm the Director of the entire Fountain system, but every minute I'm down here they have their beams trained on me." He smiled humorlessly. "If I lost my head and began running toward the tube, they'd blast me out of existence. The exposed side of the cube is a wall of energy tubes. If the emergency order were given, the cube would be insulated instantly and this tangent area reduced to radioactive ash. There's no approach

to the cube not covered."

"What's in it?" Parsons asked.

"Arrested zygotes. Frozen in cold-pack. By the hundred billion. Our total seed. Our horde. The *race* is in there. All of us living are a minute fraction of what's contained in there—the future generations to come."

"How is it regulated?"

"Two billion eight hundred million men and women walk the face of the earth. That number is a constant. Each death automatically starts a new zygote from cold-pack along its regular developmental path. For each death there is an instantaneous new life. The two are interwoven."

"Where do the zygotes come from?"

"Contributed according to a specific pattern. Each year we have Lists. Contest examinations between the tribes. Tests that cover all phases of ability and prowess: physical fitness, mental faculties, psycho-biological skills, powers of cognition, Gestalting and intuitive functioning at every level and of every description and orientation. From the most abstract to the object correlatives, the manual skills."

Parsons grunted in understanding. "The contribution of gametes is proportional to the test-ratings of each tribe."

"That's right. In the last Lists the Wolf Tribe gained sixty victories out of two hundred. Therefore it contributed thirty per cent of the zygotes for the next period, more than the three next highest tribes. As many gametes as possible are taken from the actual high-scoring men and women. The zygotes are always formed here, of course. Unauthorized zygote formation is illegal—and impossible. All males are sterilized at birth. The Fountain controls all male games extant. A fixed supply, to which the best female gametes are contributed, by the high-scoring women."

"In other words, your future generations are obtained from only the most outstanding persons of the race."

"Extremely talented persons have made substantial contributions over

many years. Once a gifted individual is located, all efforts are made to obtain his or her total supply of gametes. The Mother Superior of the Wolf Tribe, for example. None of her gametes are lost. Each is removed as it is formed and immediately impregnated at the Fountain. inferior gametes, the seed of low-scorers, are ignored and allowed to die."

Parsons' mind was spinning. "Then your stock is always improving."

Stenog showed surprise. "Of course!"

"And the girl, Icara. She wanted to die—knowing she was maimed and disfigured. She would have had to compete in the Lists that way."

"She would have been a negative factor. She was what we call *substandard*. Her tribe would have been pulled down by her entry. But as soon as she was dead, a new zygote was released. A superior zygote, from a later stock than her own. And at the same time, a nine-month embryo was brought out and severed from the Soul Cube. A Wolf died. Therefore this new baby will wear the emblem of the Wolf Tribe. It will take Icara's place."

Parsons nodded slowly. "It'll compete in her place. A healthy individual—with no disfigurement or no handicaps." He was beginning to see the ramifications. "She died, knowing that."

"You understand?" Stenog glanced abruptly at his wristwatch. "The rocket." He signaled to the guards and they moved around Parsons. "Sorry, but we have to go back up. I wish I could show you more, but it's out of my hands. I didn't write the penal law. I only execute it."

THE sunlight was hot and shimmering in their faces, as they emerged from the Fountain and out onto the roof ramp. The afternoon sky was blue and cloudless. The city lay stretched out on all sides, spires and webs and gleaming spans. People swarmed everywhere, bright colorful dots below. Laughing, chattering crowds of young men and women, clean-cut faces, coffee-colored

skin. Bright almond eyes. Strong noses and chins. A handsome race. Noble, imposing men. Full-breasted women with warm lips and black hair.

A fine race. Laughing, hurrying excitedly through their magnificent city. And it *was* magnificent. Below the roof ramp a man and woman passed along a narrow strand of metal connecting two spires. Neither of them was over twenty. Holding hands as they rushed along, eyes bright, talking and smiling at each other: Parsons caught a glimpse of the girl's small face, slender arms, tiny feet in their sandals. A rich face, full of life and happiness. 'And health.

Yet the thought drummed in his brain, refusing to go away. *This was a society built on death.* Death was a part of their lives. It didn't make sense. Individuals died and no one was perturbed—not even the victims. They died happily, gladly. It was wrong: It was against nature. A man was supposed to defend his life instinctively. Place it before everything else. This society was a denial of man's basic needs and drives.

"But they're happy!" Parsons said out loud.

"Why not?" Stenog inquired.

Parsons struggled to find words. "They live with death. You—invite death. When someone dies you're glad!"

"Of course." Stenog was astonished. "Death is perfectly natural. It's part of the cycle of existence—as much a part as birth. Everything that lives must die. You saw the Soul Cube. For us, death is a further movement of *seelmo-tus*, the forward development of the race. Human evolution. Each death has meaning. A man's death is as significant as his life. Death has been integrated into our society. It plays a vital part in our lives."

Parsons shook his head mutely. He couldn't understand. His whole existence had been geared to a denial of individual death. Death was pushed back, kept off as long as possible. Death of

a person meant suffering for all his family and friends. It was suppressed, taboo. And remembering Mary, he thought how much there was to live for—if he could ever get back. The system he saw was not a part of life as he knew it, but its negation. The only explanation of death in his world was—

No explanation. A man simply lived out his life and tried to pretend he wouldn't die.

Yet, in some baffling way, these people had worked death into their daily living. Instead of being the negation of life it was a valuable part—the culmination of existence for an individual, the moment at which he made his greatest contribution. When a person got sick, or was injured, or started to get old, the Euthanor was called and the person quietly destroyed. No one cried. No one sorrowed. An individual had been reabsorbed into the race—advanced his species, his tribe, up one more notch.

STENOG pointed to a shrub growing by the edge of the rocket stage. "See that bush?" He lifted up a heavy stalk. "What do you notice growing?"

"A bud."

"Here is a bud." Stenog lifted another stalk. "Here is a blooming flower. And over here—a dying flower. Past its bloom." He took a sharp knife from his belt and with one swift, clean swipe he severed the dying flower from the bush and dropped it over the ramp edge. "You saw three things: the bud, which is the life to come. The blossom, the life going on *now*. And the dead flower—which I cut off, so that new buds could form on the plant."

Parsons was deep in thought. "But someplace, somewhere in this world, there's somebody who doesn't think like this. That must be why I was brought here. Sooner or later—"

With a crashing roar the rocket began to test its launching jets. Parsons' words were drowned out.

"Ready, sir," a technician signaled to Stenog.

Stenog moved toward the rocket, Parsons beside him. "There's one thing I wanted to ask you. Center said your society used gamete-destroying agents. I didn't believe it, at the time. Is there any truth in it?" He searched Parson's face. "Surely it isn't possible your society deliberately practiced *rassmort!*"

Parsons started to answer. But what could he say? He could see the flickering horror in Stenog's eyes, fear he would hear confirmation, not denial.

the spires and fragile webs of the city—and then the hatch locked shut.

The rocket throbbed and shuddered impatiently under him. A nervous pulse, eager to go. Held back by powerful brakes—already being removed by the control tower.

Parsons sank wearily down on the metal bench provided, and rested his arms against the safety bars. There was no control board. No viewscreen. Only the bare metal walls.

How could he explain?

He couldn't. It wasn't possible to explain his world to this man. Not in the brief seconds left.

"I have nothing to say." Parsons turned toward the rocket lift. "Let's get it over with."

HE WAS led into a single compartment, a four-sided cell of bleak metal. A brief glimpse of Director Stenog, the great globe that was the Fountain,

The take-off threw him crashing. The safety arms slid away from him and he sprawled onto the floor. Waves of shock rolled over him.

A second convulsion came, greater than the first. Dimly, he realized the rocket was gaining escape velocity. The shock waves dinned to a violent inferno of lapping force. Blackness began to drift into his mind. He was losing consciousness. The blackness dissolved into the shock waves and eased the crushing

load of the acceleration.

When he next became aware of things, the jets had become silent.

The rocket was coasting. There was no sound, no sense of motion. Nothing. Parsons got unsteadily to his feet. How much time had passed? The rocket had apparently reached maximum velocity. Broken free of Earth's pull and entered free space. The shuddering, the roar, the constant lap of force, were gone:

Only a distant whistling. The air stream around the rocket.

Air. He wasn't in free space. The rocket hadn't left Earth. He was still—

The rocket hit with a bursting roar. There was no warning, no time even to throw up his hands. He saw the bleak metal wall come up at him—and then an infinity of flashing fragments. The wall burst around him and his being dissolved in a single shriek of agony.

As consciousness died, one final thought remained. Burned deep in his fading mind.

The rocket hadn't left Earth. Only a short time had passed—not even long enough to escape Earth's atmosphere. The rocket had never reached Mars and the robot-operated prison colony.

Something had gone wrong.

V

PARSON'S senses seeped slowly back. Gradually, his mind reformed itself. It took a long time. How long, he didn't know. Seconds, hours, centuries. There was no way to tell.

He opened his eyes.

He was in a luxurious apartment. Satin covers on the wide, incredibly soft bed. White pillows behind his head. Lush wine-colored drapes. Thick multi-colored carpet from wall to wall. Lamps. Furniture. Bric-a-brac.

A woman's apartment.

Through a half-opened closet door he made out the dim shapes of a woman's clothing. Robes and gowns. Slippers. Black-mesh slips embroidered with gold as fine as spider web. Furs. Capes. Silk

underclothing.

While he was wondering vaguely where he was and how he had got there, the woman appeared at the door.

She was beautiful. Even beyond what he had already seen in this world of youth and robust bodies. This woman was *different*. Parsons pulled himself up and concentrated his mind.

She was older. Perhaps thirty-five. A powerfully-built creature, with cascades of black hair, a heavy torrent all the way down her shoulders to her waist. Finely-chiseled nose and chin. Deep red lips. Her large brown eyes were fixed intently on him as she came into the room, rustling silently toward him, her lithe body rippling the faintly-luminous robes that clung to her breasts, her loins, her long legs.

On the front of her robe, lifted high by her full breasts, was a herald, an intricate design woven into the rich fabric, that rose and fell with the motion of her breathing. A wolf's head.

"You're—Loris," Parsons muttered.

"That's right," the woman answered. Her voice was low and husky. A deep throbb. "How do you feel?"

"Better. What happened?"

"Our beam wasn't perfectly phased. The rocket was only partially under our control. It crash-landed a few miles from here."

Parsons digested the information. Loris moved around the room, still watching him as she straightened things here and there. He could see why she had become the Mother Superior of her tribe. Why her contribution to the Soul Cube was of supreme importance. He could see it in her eyes, in the firm lines of her body, her mouth, her wide forehead.

She was the first real adult he had seen. Either in this world or in his own. She was fully mature, mentally as well as physically. Her body was ripe, perfectly formed. Her breasts, her thighs, her throat and shoulders—utterly complete. There was nothing more nature could add. She was the most im-

pressive living creature he had ever seen.

This was what they were trying to reach. This was what they would become, his own race; in some future time. For several years, her seed had swelled and enriched the racial stock, strengthening the already potent generations to come. He could imagine what the race would be like as her descendants emerged, increased and multiplied, populated the Earth.

"Are you hungry?" Loris asked. "You've been fed intravenously two days, now. What medical knowledge we possess has been used to repair the injuries sustained in the crash."

IT TOOK a little time for the significance to sink in. "*Medical knowledge?*"

"We don't have much. Nothing to compare with your own. We're hampered by lack of tradition. All we have to go on are the history spools made from dredge-reports. What we've been able to organize is sketchy, patched-together. And with the whole society against us—"

"Who are you? A group?"

Loris smiled. "No. Just myself and a few others. A few who are—sympathetic."

"Within your tribe?"

"Yes."

Parsons was beginning to see the situation. "Not the Central Government. They didn't know why I was here. Not the random people I encountered. No understanding. No place. I was beginning to think I was washed up. It looked like no contact was coming. They were serious about sending me to the prison colony on Mars. That was on the level."

"The Government won't know for another twenty-four hours that something has gone wrong. A routine check during the next day will reveal the rocket never arrived at the prison colony. They'll begin to trace it back. After a few months it'll officially be written off as 'lost in space.' Struck by a meteor.

Such does happen, from time to time."

"I never left Earth, did I?"

"The rocket was brought down ten miles up. Right now you're approximately twenty miles outside the city. It's unfortunate we failed to make immediate contact with you as soon as you arrived. The dredge is highly inaccurate. We couldn't narrow it down to an exact day or place. We had only a general idea which continuum you'd enter. The Government got to you before we did. They have considerably greater resources."

"Suppose they learn the rocket was brought down? And that I'm here—and not a burnt cinder out in space?"

Loris shrugged. "Probably, they won't. And this is tribal ground. No Government people are allowed here. There was a risk, but it had to be taken. It was imperative to get you here. The failure to make contact in the initial moments, the critical first hour, had to be rectified."

Parsons considered before he spoke. "Up to now I've been working in the dark, not knowing why I was brought here—or by whom. Now I know. Things are beginning to get a little clearer. You say you've done some medical work." He chose his words carefully. "Is there a medical problem you've tried to solve—and failed? A problem beyond the ability of this society?"

Loris had stopped pacing. She stood unmoving at the foot of the-luxurious bed, an intense frown on her face. Abruptly she tossed her head in a gesture of decision that sent a shower of dark hair swirling. "Yes. We have such a problem."

"What is it?"

Loris was breathing quickly, short harsh gasps. Her lips were half parted, her fists clenched at her sides. Tidal emotions shuddered through her.

"Watch!" She turned to the wall, pressed a stud, then stepped back out of the way.

The wall dimmed and faded. It flickered—and was gone. Parsons sat up,

conscious of the tension of the woman, the significance of the moment. He didn't know what to expect. But whatever it was, it was important. It was the reason for his presence. For the whole chain of events that had started so suddenly, that had altered his whole life.

They were looking beyond, into another room. A chamber. It reminded Parsons of something, some place he had seen. He concentrated. Was it—the Fountain!

Not quite. Everything here was minute, microscopic in comparison. This chamber was a replica of what he had seen at the Fountain. A miniature—letter perfect. The same syndromes of equipment, power cables, freight elevators, but greatly reduced in scope and size. And at the far end, the gleaming blank surface of a cube—a small cube, perhaps ten feet high and three feet in depth.

"What's in it?" Parsons demanded.

LORIS hesitated, then touched the stud again. The blank face of the cube faded. They were looking inside, into its heart. Into the swirling liquid that filled it.

A man stood upright, suspended in the depths of the cube. He lay motionless, arms at his sides, eyes shut. With a shock, Parsons realized the man was dead. Dead—and somehow preserved within the cube. He was tall, powerfully built, great gleaming coffee-colored torso. His nude body was maintained uncorrupted by this miniature Soul Cube, this small version of the great cube at the Fountain.

Instead of a hundred billion zygotes and developed embryos, this small cube contained the preserved body of a single man, a fully developed male perhaps thirty years old.

"Your husband?" Parsons asked.

"No. We have no husbands." Loris was gazing at the man with great emotion. She semed in the grip of a swelling tide of feeling. "All reproduction is

handled through the Fountain."

Parsons persisted. "You had an emotional relationship? He was your lover?"

Loris shuddered—then abruptly laughed. "No, not my lover." Her whole body swayed, trembled, as she rubbed her forehead and turned away from Parsons for a moment. "Although we have lovers, of course. Quite a few. Sexual activity continues, independent of reproduction." She seemed almost in a trance. Her words came slowly, hesitantly. For a time she was silent. Then she reached out a shaking hand and touched the wall stud. The cube faded back to an opaque surface and the figure within its depths disappeared from sight. The wall of the room again came into being, and the chamber beyond vanished.

Loris began to pace restlessly back and forth. She was still fighting with her emotions, struggling with herself, oblivious of Parsons. Her whole body was tense with the battle. It shuddered and rippled through her, stirred her loins and shoulders, caused her to clench and unclench her fists and set her white teeth together.

Abuptly she whirled toward Parsons. "When do you think you'll be recovered?"

Parsons blinked. "I—"

"Time is short. As soon as you can begin to function, we'll give you opportunity to repay your debt." Her husky voice was harsh, impatient. "We saved you from the prison rocket. You'd be there, by now. At the colony. If it hadn't been for us."

PARSONS was startled by the desperate urgency written across her handsome face and in the harsh tinge to her voice. "I don't know how soon I'll be able to work. Not long, I suppose."

Loris signalled and an armed guard quickly entered the room. He laid something carefully down on the luxurious carpet and moved back a pace.

Parsons recognized the object instantly. His gray-metal instrument case.

"We examined them," Loris said, "but their functions are beyond us. We have no comprehension of medical work. We can't grasp the basic principles! With the time dredge we've brought back endless spools of information, but we can't do anything with them. Our orientation—lack of tradition, our whole training makes it impossible to apply the knowledge."

"How did you get this case back?"

Lois shrugged impatiently. "How do you suppose?" She nodded to the guard and moved toward the door. "You'll be guarded. This man will remain here at all times. When you want me he'll relay the message."

The sight of the gray-metal box made Parsons realize the extent of their problem. They had no doctors here. They had dredged up the necessary knowledge, but no one had been able to apply it. They had finally been forced to go outside, beyond their own culture. They were desperate. To bring him here, out of his own world, to do something they couldn't do themselves, they had taken this incredible risk.

"The man in the cube," he said. "You want me to examine him?"

"The man in the cube," Loris said slowly, "has been dead thirty-five years. The medium of the cube is cold-pack, the arresting substance used to maintain the zygotes at the Soul Cube. Perhaps he can be restored. Perhaps not. In any case, you will be expected to do what you can." Loris halted for a moment at the doorway. "The man is my father. It means a great deal to me. Anything you can do."

"And if I do, will you send me back to my own time?"

"We shall see," said Loris, and left him.

LORIS *must* have him back," the voice grated.

Parsons froze. He stopped work. "Who—"

"All her life she's been devoted to that one task," the voice continued. "Everything she's done has been with one purpose in mind: to bring him back to life. He was a great man. The greatest the world has ever seen. He died in his prime. A tragedy. Loris won't rest until she has set it right."

Parsons turned from the work table. A man stood directly behind him, in the gray robes of the Wolf Tribe. For a flash Parsons was struck dumb. His mouth opened, but nothing came. *The man in the cube, the dead man—*

No. Like him, but someone else.

"Who are you?" Parsons demanded shakily. It had given him a real scare. Above him rose the gleaming cube. Within its depths the silent figure floated, the massive body, powerful head, iron-gray hair, stern nose and jaw. This man in the gray robes bore a superficial resemblance. But now that Parsons looked more closely he realized this man was a youth, a mere boy compared to the giant suspended in the depths of the cube.

"I'm Helmar," the man said. "Loris told me I'd find you here. I'm in charge of the cube. What little I know has kept it functioning."

"You didn't build it," Parsons said slowly. "It must have been built before you were born."

"That's right." Helmar's eyes moved curiously toward the open instrument case and the charts and report spools. "Any results?"

"Nothing so far."

"What do you think? Is there any chance?"

"I don't know. It all depends on how much deterioration there's been. The brain tissue breaks down almost at once. If that's happened—"

"Cold-pack was applied at the instant of death. There was no time lapse. It should say so in the reports."

"It says the man died of suffocation. How? Why? What were the circumstances?"

Helmar's youthful face was blank. "I

have no idea. That was thirty-five years ago. No one alive today knows more than what you've seen on the spools."

Parsons eyed the youth. He had had plenty of time to do some deep thinking during the last ten days while recovering from his injuries.

VI

HE HAD learned something of the physical lay-out of the place. As Loris had said, he was about twenty miles from the city, the great hub of spires and webs, where the Fountain squatted, with its precious Soul Cube within. This place was the Manor, the official castle of the Wolf Tribe. Loris, as the Mother Superior, occupied the grounds with her retinue of lovers, attendants, guards, servants, workmen, and numerous friends.

There were plenty of friends, coming and going continuously. Racing back and forth from the city in their bright little drops of color. Shooting down the white bands that made up the intricate network of roads connecting the cities.

The Manor was self-contained. Like an ancient Roman villa, it was totally independent economically and physically. Underneath the buildings were massive power turbines, atomic generators centuries old. He had briefly glimpsed the subterranean landscape of grinding gears and whirring shapes, rust-covered masses of machinery that roared and throbbed ceaselessly. Then he was quietly turned back by armed guards who appeared abruptly in front of him and questioned his presence. He had been forced to fill in by inference.

Food was grown artificially in sub-surface chemical tanks. Clothing and furniture were processed from plastic raw materials by robots working someplace on the grounds. Building materials, industrial supplies, everything that was needed was manufactured and repaired on the Manor grounds. A complete world, a self-governing cosmos, carefully guarded and maintained. He

had seen a lot—but it was relatively little compared to what had been denied him.

The core of the Manor, like the city, was the cube. The miniature "soul" beside which he was now working. He didn't need anyone to tell him how carefully the secret of its existence was kept. Probably only a few persons knew of it; probably not more than a fraction of those living at the Manor. And how many of them understood its purpose, the reason for its existence—perhaps only Loris herself knew.

"Are you related to Loris?" Parsons asked Helmar bluntly.

"Why do you ask?"

"You resemble the man in the cube. Her father. And you resemble her, faintly."

Helmar shook his head. "No relation."

Parsons started to ask him more—but Helmar had abruptly turned his back. Apparently he considered the matter closed. He was intently examining Parsons' instruments, carefully laid out on the work bench.

THERE were things Parsons didn't understand. Things he hadn't been told. Too much was being kept back from him. He accepted the obvious: that Loris was acting illegally. Had been for some time. The very possession of this miniature cube was clearly a crime of the greatest magnitude. The maintenance of the body, the attempt to restore it to life, the capture of the prison rocket—all were part of a carefully guarded plan of which the government and probably the other tribes knew nothing.

He could understand Loris' desire to see her father alive. It was a natural emotion, common in his own society. He could understand the elaborate lengths she had gone to, in attempting to realize that wish. With her great power and influence, it might actually be possible to do this—as contrary as it was to everything the society stood for. After all, the man had been preserved thirty-

five years. The cube, the elaborate maintenance equipment, the whole Manor was geared to this task. If so much had already been done, the rest might follow.

Only one thing didn't make sense. In this society, all zygotes were developed and preserved by the Fountain, in a common central pool. Each birth occurred at the Fountain, a purely artificial process.

How did Loris know the man in the cube was her father?

"There must be something I don't know about your system," Parsons said to Helmar.

"Why?"

Parsons chose his words carefully. "I was told by Director Stenog all zygotes were formed within the Fountain. That gametes not utilized by the Fountain, were destroyed."

A heavy mask slid over Helmar's features. He shrugged indifferently. "It's difficult for an outsider to comprehend the complicated relationships of another culture."

"This man, Loris' father. Was he born at the Fountain?" Parsons saw the youth tense. "Or was he—"

Loris appeared and Parsons broke off. "How is work coming?" she demanded without ceremony.

Parsons forgot Helmar. "I've made a complete study of the charts and record spools. Before the cold-pack is withdrawn it's vital I know exactly what shape I'll find the body in."

Loris had been sunning herself. She wore a knee-length robe of some transparent gray plastic, fastened at the waist with a leather cord. She was bare-foot. Her thick black hair was tied back and fastened with a metal comb. Her sharply-cut features showed extreme impatience. "I want to know what you think. Can it be done? Can he be restored?" She was watching him intently, hanging on his reply.

Parsons hedged. "I won't know until I actually begin work. If I knew more of the circumstances of the man's death—"

"No one knows more. None of us was alive at that time." Loris hesitated uncertainly. "Don't you have enough to go on? You have all those spools and charts!"

"Who built this cube?" Parsons demanded bluntly.

Loris froze. "Why?" Her voice was hard.

"This whole layout must have existed before any of you were alive. Somebody who preceded all of you—somebody who knew a hell of a lot about cold-pack and the whole cube system."

"The design," Helmar said slowly, "is the same as the Fountain the Central Government maintains. No special knowledge was required to duplicate on a small scale what the Government operates on a large scale."

"Somebody brought schematics here and constructed all this," Parsons persisted. "Obviously at great risk—and for considerable purpose."

Loris indicated the man suspended within the depths of the cube. "To preserve him."

Parsons pounced like lightning. "Then the cube was built *after* his death?"

LORIS and Helmar glanced quickly at each other. A look passed between them. An uneasy, wary look. It was Loris who finally broke the silence and answered. "I don't see," she said slowly, "what this has to do with your work. We saved you from the prison rocket. All we ask is that you do your job—the work you're skilled at. What you must have done most of your life. As you said yourself, one of the basic ideological factors we can't comprehend is the doctor's ethical conviction that *all* deserve healing—no matter who they are."

"What happens if I succeed?" Parsons asked. "What happens to me when I've finished my work?"

There was no answer. Loris turned and moved off, without a word.

Helmar tapped the report spools. "It would be appreciated if you would work

as quickly as possible. You can understand her feeling. She's waited all her life for this—the time when he might be restored. There's never been any chance before. We have no medical ability—only random scraps we've gleaned from past ages. Your arrival here changes the whole picture. It was extremely difficult. The dredge is inaccurate, almost unmanageable. We had to pass at you repeatedly."

Parsons grunted sourly. "Did you ever consider I might not want to come? Maybe I didn't want to leave my own time, my family and everything I'm familiar with. I've been tossed around like an inanimate sack of equipment—valuable, but not really sentient. I'm nothing but a pawn in all this. A time pawn, yanked from one world to another!"

"Loris risked everything to bring the rocket down," Helmar continued patiently. "To save you from the prison colony. The whole program was put in jeopardy by that overt show. The Government will trace the flight all the way back to the launching stage. It was the greatest risk we have ever taken. A major calamity occurred, when Government agents got to you before we did."

Parsons believed him. It had been a risk, all right. Although he might have pointed out that it wasn't his fault he had been on the prison rocket or even in this world. And no doubt Loris wanted the man in the cube restored at any cost. He could easily believe the powerful, splendidly-built woman lived for the moment when her father would be returned to life.

But his questions hadn't been answered. Loris and Helmar were holding back information.

He filed his suspicions away for future consideration and turned back to the charts and report spools.

THERE is a basic fallacy in their thinking," Loris murmured, half to herself.

It was evening. Parsons and Loris were standing on the balcony of the

main Manor building, watching the distant lights of the city. The lights shifted and moved constantly. An ever-changing pattern that glittered and winked through the clear darkness of the night. Like man-made stars, all colors.

"Who do you mean by *they*?" Parsons asked.

Loris started. "What?" She waved her hand vaguely. "The Central Government, I suppose. The whole system. The Soul Cube. The Lists. That girl, Icara. The one you saved—"

"It didn't do any good. She killed herself as soon as possible."

"I know. It's common. An accepted part of our society. She killed herself because she had been disfigured. She knew she'd drag down the tribe when List time came. She knew she'd score badly because of her physical appearance. *But such things aren't inherited!*" Bitterness swept through Loris' husky voice. "She sacrificed herself for nothing! Who gained? What good did her death do? She was certain it was for the good of the tribe—for the race. But how could it possibly benefit the race? Sickness and injury aren't carried by the genes. The Lists test things which are not related to heredity and are not transmitted to the next generation."

Parsons had been thinking that, too. "But her act was rational in terms of the system. The way it's set up, her death *did* benefit her tribe. As long as the Lists test such things as physical appearance—"

"Then it's the system that's at fault!"

Parsons didn't argue with her. He glanced at her tall, stately figure outlined against the railing of the balcony, a regal column in a dark gray evening gown, fur neckpiece and gloves, fur slippers instead of sandals. How deep did Loris' resentment go? How much of the system did she personally reject? Was this only a momentary emotional outburst of bitterness—or was there more?

"How was your father killed?" Parsons demanded suddenly.

Loris pulled away. "I—don't know."
"Do you blame the system for his death?"

Loris made a strange, choked moan. Parsons was startled. He could only barely distinguish her shape in the darkness. She had turned her back to him, and stood with her arms folded tightly, body swaying. "I'm cold," she gasped. "I think I'll go inside."

Parsons reached out and touched her arm. She jerked away from him violently. "What is it?" he asked her. He could hear her close beside him, breathing in deep gasps that made her whole body shudder. As if she were trying to force something down, to keep her emotions under control.

UMINOUS night moths fluttered beyond the railing, among the trees and moist bushes. Someplace in the forest small animals crashed around, growled, moved sullenly off. Sounds of breaking twigs, stealthy footpads. Hissing.

"Cats," Loris whispered shakily. "Domestic cats."

"Gone wild?"

She nodded faintly. "Yes. Gone wild." She seemed to have got hold of herself. She was wiping her eyes with her knuckle and trying to smile. Dimly, Parsons could make out her face, her trembling lips, long lashes, great black eyes sparkling with tears.

"I'm sorry," Parsons said. "I didn't mean to—"

"It's all right. We've been under a lot of strain. For a long time. All my life. You understand—I've never seen him alive. He was dead even before I was born. He had been dead three years." Her lips twisted. "To see him, day after day, suspended in there, beyond reach, beyond touch—utterly remote from us."

"Like a god."

"All the time I was growing up I thought of nothing else. *To bring him back.* To have him again, to possess him. If he could be made to live again—" Her hands opened, reached out, yearn-

ing, groping, closing again on nothing. "It's been our goal. Our one desire. What we can do, once we have him back—" Abruptly, she broke off.

"Go on," Parsons prompted.

Loris shook her head and turned away. Parsons touched her soft black hair, moist with the night mist. She didn't protest. He drew her close to him; still she didn't protest. Her warm breath drifted in a cloud, rising around him, mixing with the sweet scent of her hair. Against him her taut body vibrated, intense and burning with suppressed emotion. Her bosom rose and fell, outlined against the darkness, her body trembling under the silk of her robe.

His hand touched her cheek, then her throat. Her full lips were close to his. Her eyes were half-closed, head bent back, breath coming rapidly. "Loris," he said softly.

She shook her head. "No. Please, no."

"Why don't you trust me? Why don't you want to tell me? What is there you can't—"

With a convulsive moan she broke away and ran toward the doorway, robes fluttering behind her.

Parsons started quickly after her. "Loris!"

From the darkness a shape loomed ominously. A presence grimly blocking his way. Parsons halted, chilled.

"Don't follow her," Helmar grated. "I told you not to bother her, Parsons. If there's any more of this—" Something gleamed in Helmar's hand. It looked like an eggbeater. With a rush of horror Parsons identified it. The sadistic weapon Kem had used on Icara.

Did they all carry that?

He retreated reluctantly. "I guess I don't have much choice. Maybe sometime when you don't have that little gadget with you, we might—"

"Come along with me," Helmar cut in, motioning toward the descent ramp. He waved the gleaming metal eggbeater. "Let's not waste any more time."

"What's this all about?" Parsons demanded.

Four armed guards detached themselves from the shadows and closed in around Parsons. "You've had plenty of opportunity to study the charts and record spools," Helmar stated. "If you can't restore him to life now, you'll never be able to. We've had enough stalling."

He moved off rapidly toward the descent ramp. The four guards prodded Parsons into motion. "I'm coming," he muttered. "Keep your hands off me."

He moved slowly after Helmar, his mind spinning. Things had begun to happen. Maybe now he'd find out some of the missing facts they had been holding back.

VII

THE chamber was a blaze of lights. The miniature cube had been removed from its mount and laid on its back. Within its depths the inert figure rested quietly, eyes closed, body limp. The dead god, suspended between worlds, waiting to return. . .

The chamber was crowded. Men who had stayed in the shadows until now were beginning to emerge. Parsons hadn't realized the extent of the project. He paused to take in the sight of the first appearance of the real force, the actual strength that operated the Manor.

Was it his imagination—or did they resemble one another? Of course, all members of this society looked somewhat alike to him: the same skin color, eyes, skull formation, hair texture. They all came from a common stock. And this group of men and women appearing on every side of him wore identical clothing, the gray robe and chest-emblem of the Wolf Tribe.

But there was more. A certain heavy brow. Wide forehead. Flaring nostrils and prominent jaw. Strong chin. Powerful frame and shoulders. As if they were all a family.

He counted forty men and sixteen women and then lost track. They were

moving around, murmuring and talking with each other. Taking places where they could watch him as he worked. They wanted to see every move he made.

"I am aware," Helmar said, close to his ear, "that this may fail. Your skill may be insufficient. In the event of failure, you will be destroyed at once—whatever the specific reason."

The bluntness of Helmar's words shocked Parsons. "You believe in coming right out and saying what you mean. At least, you do *now*. I'm getting the unvarnished picture, finally."

"I want you to know the situation. You have a certain ability and knowledge—which this world utterly lacks. For that, we brought you here. You can be of paramount value to us. But if that ability fails, you are merely another human being."

"What happens if I succeed?"

"Then we will be in your debt. And if we cannot return you to your own time, you will be kept here and protected from the Central Government."

With a sinking feeling, he turned away. The cube had been opened by Manor technicians. The cold-pack was being sucked out greedily by plastic suction tendrils. In a moment the body would be exposed.

"These people shouldn't be here," Parsons said nervously. "I'll have to open his chest and plug in a Pump. Danger of infection will be great."

The men and women heard him, but none of them stirred. "You worked on the girl before others," Helmar answered smoothly. "You have sprays and sterilizing toxins. Use them."

PARSONS cursed under his breath. He turned away from Helmar and slid on his plastic protection gloves. He began to arrange his instruments out on the work table. As the last of the cold-pack was drained off by the suction tendrils, Parsons flicked on a high-frequency field and placed the potentials on each side of the cube. The terminals hummed and glowed as the field warmed.

Now the inert body was within a zone of bacteria-destroying radiation. He concentrated the field briefly on his instruments and gloves. The watching men and women took everything in without expression, faces blank masks of concentration.

Abruptly the cold-pack was gone. The body, for the first time in thirty-five years, was exposed.

Parsons moved into action. There had been no decay. The body was perfectly fresh. He touched the limp wrist. It was *cold*. A chilling miasma that trickled up his arm and made him quickly let go. The utter cold of outerspace. He shivered and wondered how the hell he was going to work.

"He will warm rapidly," Helmar grated. "It's no form of refrigerator you're familiar with. Molecular velocity has not been reduced. It has been differently phased."

The body was now warm enough to touch. Whatever alteration had been made in the vibration pattern, the molecules were already beginning to return to their natural orbits. The man had been suffocated, all right. His face was taking on a bluish cast. Oxygen starvation. The lungs were immobile.

Parsons locked a mechanical lung in place and activated it. While the lung exerted rhythmic pressure on the inert chest, Parsons concentrated on the heart. He punctured the rib cage and plugged the Dixon Pump into the vascular system, bypassing the suspended heart. The Pump went immediately to work. Blood flowed. Both respiration and circulation resumed in this body that had died thirty-five years ago! Now, if there hadn't been much tissue deterioration from lack of blood—

The chamber was tense. They were all watching the body. No one moved or breathed. There wasn't much more he could do. The records indicated no organic injuries. Parsons touched the man's neck. A thin crease had been pressed into his throat. The outline of a wire? Had he been strangled? Al-

ready, the crease was disappearing. However his death had been accomplished, there was no certain mark. Nothing of which he could be positive. Could the man simply have held his breath?

Impossible. No human could do that. Automatic neural reflexes would have maintained lung action, whether the individual willed it or not.

Paralysis? Some kind of muscle-freeze? Maybe a beam of some kind. One of their neat little weapons.

Silently, unnoticed, Loris had come into the chamber. She was watching, bright-eyed, her handsome face pale. Rigid as stone. Like all the others, holding her breath.

Parsons started to address her, but Helmar cut him off. "Don't speak to her. Concentrate on your work."

One of the men across the table turned to Loris. "Nothing yet."

Loris nodded slightly.

"I should have more data," Parsons began. "I have no way of telling how his respiration was initially—"

The man stirred. His eyes opened.

A gasp came from the watchers. A simultaneous expression of amazement and joy.

"He's alive," Helmar breathed. "Thank God."

The man was looking up at them. His eyes moved as he focused. His powerful body twisted. He raised one arm slightly, haltingly, then lowered it again.

Parsons pushed Helmar aside. "The crucial part comes next." He waited a moment, breathed a silent prayer, and then touched the switch on the mechanical lung.

THE mechanical lung died. Swiftly, Parsons slipped it from the man's body and laid it aside. He waited tensely, watching the rising and falling coffee-colored chest for any sign of failure. It continued to move—without the lung.

Parsons sagged with relief. "He's

taken over. His own respiratory system is functioning. We'll leave the Dixon Pump on for awhile—as a safety precaution."

"You think he'll live?" Helmar whispered.

"I think so. He's breathing normally. That's the miracle, the crucial point."

The chest hesitated. For a terrifying moment it ceased. Horror swept through the watching men and women. A frightened hum of dismay rose from their throats. Then the man breathed deeply, hoarsely. Again the agonizing pause—followed by deep, loud gasps.

"What is it?!" Helmar demanded excitedly. "Is he all right?"

Parsons grinned shakily. "He's fine."

"But what—"

"You've never seen a baby being born. That's Cheyne-Stokes breathing, something babies do before they establish a regular pattern. Curious, that this man should revert so far. As if he were being born again."

There was almost a religious awe in the silence that filled the chamber, the rapt, intense faces, eyes wide, mouths half open. Men and women transfixed with wonder. A circle of gray-robed men and women in the grip of overwhelming emotions. They had waited a long time for this miracle. And it had finally come.

"Very much," Helmar murmured. "Very much as if he were being born again."

Parsons started to say something. But his words choked off. He had, for the first time, noticed *her*.

SHE HAD come in silently, a few moments after Loris. Two armed guards on each side of her. A great stir now moved through the chamber. The awed silence was broken. Everyone was talking and murmuring and moving aside to let her pass.

She was old. The first old person Parsons had seen in this world.

"He's alive," Loris said to the old woman, her face radiant, transfigured

with a hot glow rising up from within. "He'll live again."

The old woman advanced silently toward the cube, toward the man who lay within. She was, even at her age, unusually handsome. Tall and dignified. A mane of white hair down the back of her neck. The same broad forehead. Heavy brows. Strong nose and chin. Stern, powerful face.

The same as the others. The old woman, the man in the cube, everybody in the room—all partook of the same physical characteristics.

The stately old woman had reached the rim of the cube. She gazed down, unspeaking. In the cube, the man stirred feebly. His eyes were open. He saw her, the old woman bending over him. Wonderingly, he gazed around the room, at the circle of gray-clad men and women standing on all sides of him.

What did he think? There was no telling. His massive face was blank with wonder. The group of men and women, sturdy, handsome, strong-bodied, so much like him.

"How—are you?" the old woman asked in a deep, vibrant voice, thick with emotion. She reached down and touched his forehead.

The man's lips moved. There was baffled confusion in his eyes. A glazed look of bewilderment—and dawning fear.

Parsons approached. "We should be careful. He's still weak. It'll be some time before the danger is over."

The old woman became aware of Parsons for the first time. Abruptly, her features hardened into distaste. "Who are you?"

Loris took her arm. "Mother—"

There it was. The old woman was Loris' mother. The wife of the man in the cube.

It fitted. He had been in the cube thirty-five years. The old woman was probably seventy. *His wife!* This pair, this couple, had spawned the powerful full-breasted creature who ruled the Wolf Tribe, the most potent human being alive.

"Mother," Loris said softly, but firmly. "He's right. He's the man who brought Corith back."

The old woman was still looking frigidly at Parsons. Gradually her features softened. "All right." She lingered by the cube a moment, touching the frowning, baffled forehead with her pale fingers. "All right. Later. When he's stronger. We don't want to take any chances."

The old woman and her attendants moved away, back toward the lift from which she had emerged. She had come up from the subsurface levels of the Manor. The levels forbidden to Parsons. The guarded, secret core of the Manor.

All the men and women stood silent as the old lady passed among them. Heads bowed slightly. Reverence. They were all acknowledging her, Loris' mother. The regal white-haired old woman who moved slowly and calmly across the room, away from the cube. The mother of the Mother Superior—

Something clicked in his mind.

The mother of all of them. She had halted at the lift a moment and half turned. She made a faint motion with her hand, a motion that took them all in. She was recognizing them. All the faces.

Her children.

It was clear. Helmar, Loris, all the rest of them. The same physical characteristics. All seventy of them were descended from this old woman, and from the man who lay in the cube, breathing for the first time in thirty-five years. Breathing like a new-born infant.

Yet—one thing didn't fit.

The man in the cube and this old woman. If they were man and wife—

"How is he?" Loris asked, interrupting his thoughts. The old woman had entered the lift and was gone. The chamber moved back into sound and motion, its activity resumed. "What are his chances, now that he's breathing again?"

"Good," Parsons murmured. His mind was racing. *The old woman and the man in the cube.* Corith, she had

called him. Corith. Their father. That made sense. Everything made sense but one thing. And that one thing was a little difficult to get past.

Both Corith and the old woman, his wife, showed identical physical characteristics.

"What is it?" Loris was demanding. "What's wrong?"

Parsons shook himself and forced his mind to turn outward. "We should move him," he muttered. "Get him out of the cube and into bed where he'll be kept warm. Feeding should begin as soon as possible."

Loris gave orders. Guards lifted the unprotesting body onto a transport cart and covered it carefully with wool blankets. The car was wheeled quickly from the chamber, onto an ascent lift. The lift doors slid shut after it.

"Will you continue to watch him?" Loris asked anxiously. "To make sure nothing goes wrong? It would be terrible if something went wrong—if he were to die again."

"Of course." Parsons moved automatically toward the lift. What was lacking? What factor had been left out? Some vital element was missing. He understood—but not completely. Something basic hadn't become known. It was obvious this was a single family, descended from Corith and the old woman. All of them were brothers and sisters. But that still didn't explain the physical resemblance between Corith and his wife. The thing had to be carried back to another level.

As he came to the lift he saw something. Something that made him freeze abruptly into immobility.

This time, he was the only one who had seen. The others were talking together excitedly, their backs turned. Even Loris hadn't noticed.

Here was the missing element. The basic key that had been lacking.

VIII

SHE was standing in the shadows, at

the very edge of the room. Out of sight. She had come up with the other old woman, Loris' mother. But she had not emerged from the darkness. She remained hidden. Watching everything that happened, from her place of concealment.

She was unbelievably old. A tiny shriveled-up thing. Wizen and bent, claw-like hands, broomstick legs beneath the hem of her dark robe. A dry little bird face, wrinkled skin, like parchment. Two dulled eyes, set deep in the yellowing skull, a wisp of white hair like spider web.

"She's completely deaf," Helmar said softly, close by him. "And almost blind."

Parsons started. "*Who is she?*"

"She's almost a century old. She was the first. The very first." Helmar's voice broke with emotion. He was shaking visibly, in the possession of primordial emotions that vibrated through his whole body. "Nixina—the mother of them both. The mother of Corith and Jephthe. She is the *Urmutter*."

"Corith and—Jephthe are brother and sister?" Parsons demanded quickly.

Helmar nodded. "Yes. We're all related."

The ascent lift had come. Parsons moved reluctantly into it. There were endless questions he wanted answers for—but Helmar had already gone, and the doors were sliding shut. The lift began to rise, carrying him along the route they had taken Corith.

His mind spun wildly. Brother and sister. Yet, parents of Loris, Helmar, all the others. All the group.

Inbreeding.

But why? And—how?

How was inbreeding accomplished in this world—where the racial stock was thrown into one common pool? How had this magnificent family, this genuine family, been maintained?

Three generations. The grandmother, the mother and father. Now the children.

Helmar had said: *She was the first*. The tiny shriveled-up creature was the

first—*what?*

The lift halted. In a daze, Parsons moved out into the corridor. Desperately, he tried to comprehend what he had learned. He needed time. *Time*.

"This way," an armed guard directed, indicating a heavily-guarded doorway.

Parsons passed slowly inside, between the double row of guards. Into a luxurious bedroom, one of Loris' own chambers.

Corith lay in a silken bed, arms at his sides, his massive head resting on two soft pillows. His chest rose and fell under the rich covers. The Dixon Pump whirred efficiently, a bulging square of metal and plastic rising up on the right side of his body.

Corith was watching him. Studying him as he came into the room. Following his movements.

"How do you feel?" Parsons asked him.

The lips moved faintly.

Parsons bent down. "Do you understand what has happened?"

"It is—later." The voice was almost inaudible.

"Thirty-five years later. A whole generation. You saw your daughter?"

"The—woman? With the Wolf on her breast?"

"That's your daughter, Loris." Parsons' ear was almost to the man's lips. "All of them are your sons and daughters. Your wife has aged. She's over seventy. And your mother. She was there."

Corith struggled to speak. He gasped, fought to collect his mind. "You are—"

"A doctor. I was the one who brought you back."

"A—doctor?"

Parsons smiled. "From the past. From another age. I was brought forward in time. To repair and restore you. To bring you back to life."

The answer wasn't what he had expected. It jarred him violently, when it came. The words were faint, but sharp and biting, with an inner desperation that cut like a savage knife-blade. "You

fool! You damn fool! I died *once* to get away. Wasn't that enough?"

Parsons was dumbfounded. "You killed yourself? But—"

"They're insane!" the urgent rasp came. "All of them. My wife. My mother. The whole crowd. They want to seize power and kill off everyone else—destroy the Fountain, the Soul Cube. Get out of here, whoever you are! Get to the Central Government. Man from the past—now you know the truth!"

The massive head lifted from the pillow in a spasm of despair. A trembling, wrathful face, god-like features torn with agony and horror.

"It's your fault! You brought me back. You've got to set things right. *You've got to get out of here!*"

PARSONS looked quickly around. The guards at the doorway had certainly heard. Time was running out fast. He leaned close to the man on the bed. "They're inbred—but *how?* Aren't all births from the Fountain? From the common stock?"

Corith laughed harshly. "That's where I come in. Nixina was the beginning. My mother—the first of us. She got me past the birth-process station unsterilized. The only unsterilized male of the new race. After me, the Government clamped down sterilization through the entire culture."

"New race?"

"Mutants. A higher species—according to them. I bred with my sister, Jephthe. Her gametes were matched with mine as they entered the Soul Cube. She kept strict watch. None of her seed was diffused into the common stock."

"And they were born from the Fountain?"

"Our minor cube failed. We could preserve zygotes but not give them birth. We had to depend on the Fountain. A bitter blow. We had to depend on their processes."

"Your mother was the Mother Superior." Parsons understood. "She had periodic access to the Fountain."

"Then Jephthe. And now my daughter Loris." Corith's face contorted wildly. "She wants me! She wants to mate with me—have children by me—populate the world! Erase all but our spawn. Destroy all others, all the common race. But I killed myself. I deprived them of my seed. I escaped."

"But these others. The third generation males."

"Sterile! Too late. When I was born, the Government was already passing males through sterilization-process stations. Nixina maneuvered desperately to get me past. I was the only one—and *I died!* Without warning I destroyed myself, ruined their plans. They needed more zygotes. Jephthe and I had formed only eighty. Then I learned what Nixina and Jephthe were planning.

At the doorway the armed guards stirred. One of them moved away, down the hall.

Instantly, Parsons became alert. "They must have heard." He glanced quickly around. "We're twenty miles from the Fountain."

"Forget about me and go. Hurry! Before they—"

Corith broke off. Helmar entered the room, the flashing-bladed eggbeater in his hand. He took in the scene, Parsons standing by the bed, Corith's twisted, pain-wracked face. His fingers tightened around the butt of the eggbeater.

Parsons swung. Helmar ducked and slid agilely to one side. The hall outside echoed with sounds. Guards poured into the room. Gray-robed figures came hurrying, pushing in after the guards. Helmar had dropped back, face livid with hate. Now the eggbeater came up—aimed square at Parsons.

"All right, *doctor*," Helmar said coldly. "Sorry to have to do this, but—"

"Run!" Corith shouted. And tore the beating Nixon Pump from his chest.

Blood gushed from him. He gasped, his eyes filmed over, his body sagged limply. Loris shrieked, a shrill wail of despair. Helmar dropped the eggbeater and ran to the bed.

"*Corith!*" Loris, screaming and sobbing, threw herself on the dying man. "Help him! Help him! Don't let him die again!"

Parsons hesitated. Guards were milling excitedly around the room. Helmar and Loris struggled wildly, futilely, to stop the spurting blood that gushed up between their hands, down their arms and formed a thick pool on the silk covers. Parsons moved half a step toward the bed.

A GUARD grabbed him roughly. He lashed out and connected. The guard grunted and slid aside. Another loomed up. Parsons kicked him and grabbed his gun from his paralyzed fingers. He smashed at a shape barring his way, a gray-robed woman. She wailed and crumpled. Parsons hurried past her, out the door and into the corridor.

Gray-robed figures were everywhere. Pushing and shoving in confusion, faces blank with horror and grief. Moaning and crying like helpless children. Parsons made his way through them and began to run. The sounds dimmed as he turned off to the right.

He was high up. Above ground level. He ran down a flight of metal steps and emerged from the building, out on a wide balcony.

The night was cold and black. Stars glittered above. Dimly, he could make out the shapes of trees beyond the balcony. He was about fifteen feet from ground level.

Guards were pounding down the passage behind him. Shouts, metal against metal. A siren wailed someplace and was joined by another. The first guard emerged, blinked in the sudden darkness, raised his gun and fired blindly.

The bolt passed over Parsons' head as he scrambled over the railing. For a second he poised, still holding on. The guard was joined by others, shapes cutting off the light, spilling out and feeling their way toward the rail. A spotlight was dragged up. Cables and shouting

men. The flash of guns and boots.

Parsons let go.

He landed on his feet, rolled down the moist side of a hill, crashed and came to rest in a tangle of vines that slapped and cut at him. His ankles ached. His head spun. But no bones broken.

Fingers of heat probed for him from the balcony above. The spot traced an uncertain line among the trees, searing light mixed with the flash of the energy guns. They converged briefly on a shrub, puffed it to ash, then came on, leaving a trail of glowing rubbish behind.

Parsons scrambled to his feet and tore the vines loose. His eyes were getting accustomed to the gloom. He felt his way quickly forward, down into a hollow, up the side of a hill. He increased his pace, bent over, taking deep breaths and not looking back.

"Stop!" A desperate, pleading voice from the balcony, a piteous wail that was picked up by the night wind and tossed about, lost in the rustling of the great trees. Parsons kept on. It was Loris. As he turned down a dry creek bed he caught a momentary glimpse of her, outlined against the doorway. Surrounded by guards and gray-robed figures, who were already coming over the railing after him.

Patrol cars roared out of the stone-walled rim that surrounded the Manor. Their headlights lit up the night on all sides, racing drops that shot forward at reckless speed. Parsons left the gully and came up onto a meadow. He missed his footing, stumbled, fell down a hillside and picked himself up again, gasping and panting.

Twenty miles. He didn't have a chance.

He was clutching the gun he had grabbed from the guard. The butt was slippery with blood; he had struck the woman with it. For a moment he halted and stood listening and getting his wind, head cocked warily.

The patrol cars were fanning out, forming a broad circle around him. Behind, torrents of guards on foot poured

out after him. It wouldn't be pleasant when they caught him. Corith was dead. He couldn't live more than a few moments. And this time it was for keeps. Nobody could bring him back. The blood would be gone from his brain; tissue deterioration would have begun, before the cold-pack could be pumped back into the cube.

Parsons ran swiftly through the darkness, between the trees and tangles of vines that loomed up on all sides. He forced panic away and concentrated as calmly as he could.

Far to his right a line of multi-colored dots moved. A highway, connecting the various cities. Cars moved along it in brilliant clusters, on their way to the neutral area of the Government, the great globe that was the Fountain.

He changed direction and headed toward the highway. He was already getting winded. His body hadn't completely recovered from the crash of the prison rocket. His legs and loins ached from the leap off the balcony. He couldn't go much farther. It wouldn't be long.

IX

THE night breeze carried the faint crashings of men hurrying on foot. And the still more distant snarl of patrol cars. The cars wouldn't be of much use. They were confined to the roads. But they could let off guards at regular intervals. Pockets of armed men, spaced endlessly ahead of him, all the way to the city. Waiting for him the whole twenty miles.

He had no choice. He kept on in the direction of the highway, his gun gripped tightly.

He saw the four guards before they saw him.

They had set up a temporary barricade and were squatting behind it, heavy-duty rifles in position. The guns covered a broad swath of the woods in front and on both sides of them.

Parsons dropped and lay crouched,

getting his wind and analyzing his position. In the darkness, a few night animals scratched and skittered through the underbrush on their various errands. A twig snapped here and there. As Parsons lay hidden, the moon came out briefly, hesitated, then passed behind a cloud again. An owl hooted someplace off in the distance, his hollow tones mixing with the wail of the Manor sirens.

There were four guards—but they hadn't seen him. Just beyond them was the highway. Probably they had been let off by a patrol car and had scrambled down the bank to set up their barricade. The passing lights of the little drop-cars outlined them and their guns. Four youthful, coffee-colored faces. Tense and nervous. Gripping their guns and listening to each night sound, each rustle and slither.

Parsons crooked his left arm, extended his right in the cradle, closed one eye, and fired.

His first shot caught the barricade dead center. The wooden beams roared up in a crackling pillar of heat. Parsons leaped up and ran directly at the towering mass of fire that billowed across the ground and licked at the nearby trees. Dimly, he could make out the shapes of the four guards, retreating uncertainly from the flames, shouting at each other and trying to beat the fire off.

He reached the barricade, turned to one side and skirted past it, through the rim of the flames. The ground was burning underfoot. Bits of blazing debris rained down on him. He passed the corner of the barricade and opened fire point-blank at the four guards, who were trying to drag their equipment back out of danger.

One crumpled. The other three dropped their heavy guns and scattered. One of them was on fire. He ran in a frenzied circle, beating at his clothing and screaming. Parsons ignored him and concentrated on the other two. A bolt of energy from a hand weapon seared past him and cracked a tree into ash.

Swirling clouds of soot lapped on all sides, half-blinding and choking him.

—He dropped to his knees, fired, then crawled up the bank toward the highway. One of the remaining guards was moving in a wide arc with the idea of cutting him off. A single figure that leaped and jumped and hurried to get between him and the highway.

Parsons halted and waited. The guard climbed the bank and for a brief moment stood outlined against the lights of the passing cars. Parsons fired. Half of the man's head disappeared. The lifeless corpse tottered and plunged back into the vines and moist shrubbery. It lay, feet upward, one hand still gripping an energy tube.

Parsons emerged cautiously on the highway. Bright cars were moving everywhere, a dozen lanes of streaming, multi-colored traffic. Gray patrol cars were parked at intervals. The nearest one had already seen him and was grinding into life. It gained speed and headed directly at him.

Parsons ran out into the first lane, his arms up. He had perhaps thirty seconds—at the most. The patrol car was bearing down on him: Parsons moved into the second lane, into the buzzing, blur of lights. Horns honked, brakes screamed. Startled coffee-colored faces loomed up, swerved, skidded and raced on—

A yellow drop ground to a halt besides Parsons. "What's going on?" a yellow-robed youth demanded, eyes wide with astonishment. "For God's sake—"

Two of them. The youth behind the wheel and a small black-haired woman beside him. Snake heralds on their robes. Parsons tore the door open. "Get started."

"But—"

Parson aimed his gun directly at the woman's terrified face. "I know you wouldn't mind dying," he said grimly to the youth. "But you might miss her."

The youth hesitated a split second. Then the car jerked wildly forward. Parsons slammed the door and hung on

tight. At the same second the patrol car ballooned up and hurtled directly at them.

The youth swerved desperately. Parsons was thrown against the hull. A massive shape like a battleship filled the windows in front of them. The woman shrieked and buried her head in the youth's shoulder. The car twisted to one side and struck violently against the fender of the patrol car. The patrol car glanced off, spun away from the impact.

A car in the third lane plowed head-on into the patrol car. With a blinding flash the two cars locked together, caught a third car, a fourth, then tied into an endless procession of smashing metal and plastic, as the massed wreck rolled from lane to lane.

"Keep going," Parsons gasped.

The youth picked up speed automatically, his face glazed. The girl was unconscious, a limp bundle on the seat beside him, trembling with the vibration of the car.

"Don't stop for anything," Parsons said. "Not until we're on Government property. Not until we're in the city—inside the neutral zone."

DIRECTOR Stenog rose half-way from his desk. "Parsons! But the rocket was lost! Destroyed out in deep space!"

"The rocket never left Earth," Parsons shook himself loose from the white-clad Government guards. "It was pulled down ten minutes after it was launched."

Suspicion crossed Stenog's face. "We had a radarscope on it. According to the expert's report—"

"Shut up and listen," Parsons snapped. "And get these guys off me."

Stenog hesitated—then nodded to the guards. "Let him go. But stay here." He came around the side of his desk and faced Parsons warily. "What's this all about? It's obvious you escaped. But I can't understand why you should come back here. It doesn't make sense."

Parsons told him.

When Parsons was finished, Stenog had turned sickly white. "I don't believe

it," he said flatly. "Loris is the most valuable contributor to the Soul Cube. By herself she's raised the stock to a new level. And her predecessor, Jopthe. And before her Nixina—" He broke off. "Mother. Grandmother. But it's not possible! They've put so much in—"

"And taken out," Parsons answered. "Everything they put into the Soul Cube is kept under their control. Each zygote is watched. When it's born they bring the person to the Wolf Manor. You think they're enriching the stock, but you're wrong. Their seed never mixes with the rest of the stock. They keep it separate."

Stenog's ashen face twisted uneasily. "It's possible, of course. Each zygote is marked. It would be possible to follow individual zygotes through. But I—"

"Corith said they planned to destroy the Fountain system as soon as there were enough of them to take control. Without the Soul Cube, the human race would die. Aren't all male gametes stored there? Isn't the supply at the Soul Cube all that exists?"

Stenog nodded slowly. "The supply of male gametes was laid up a century ago. Since then, all males have been sterilized at birth. If something should happen to that supply—" Abruptly Stenog broke off.

"What was it?" Parsons demanded.

"You say Corith is dead. Then *they* have no male gametes. If they destroyed the Fountain there'd be no male gametes of any kind—it would mean the end of all of us. Themselves, us, everybody!"

"How many zygotes exist in the Soul Cube?"

"Four hundred billion. Enough for two hundred generations. Six or seven thousand years." Suddenly Stenog relaxed. "We could obtain male gametes from any male zygote. All we'd have to do is allow a male zygote to continue its development and be born."

"If they destroyed the cold-pack envelope how long do you think your four hundred billion zygotes would last?"

Stenog's youthful face showed shocked

disbelief. "You think they'd destroy the human race, knowing none of their males is fertile? Knowing there'd be nothing to come after us? Themselves, or our own?"

"Corith thought so," Parsons answered.

For a moment Stenog hesitated. Then he touched a button on his desk. "All right, Parsons. The Fountain is alerted. By the time we're there, the Soul Cube will have been sealed off." He pushed past Parsons and out into the hall. "Let's get going. I want to see for myself if something is *really* happening."

Certer met them at the entrance to the great chamber within the Fountain. "What's going on?" he demanded. "The Soul is closed off. They won't let us through."

"The Fountain is preparing for an attack," Stenog answered. "I've ordered the Soul Cube sealed tight."

Certer's jaw dropped. "An attack?" He hurried after them. "What's happening? For God's sake, is some kind of attack going on? Are we in danger?"

STENOG ignored him. "It will take days," he said to Parsons, "to check your story. Records will have to be gone over carefully. Papers and tapes minutely examined. If it's true that mutant zygotes exist, we may eventually have to wait for—"

"Mutants!" Certer gasped. He looked quickly from Parsons to Stenog. A glint of understanding passed over his features. "Have we been raising children not our own?"

"There's a bird that does that," Stenog said, half to himself. "Lays its eggs in other nests. When its young are born they push the genuine brood over the side." He turned to Parsons. "You're about to see an unusual thing. The Soul Cube is in the process of separating into a sealed-off fortress. Even if the Fountain is taken, nothing will get across into the Soul Cube."

They had come to an observation platform at the side of the chamber. Stenog

halted. And pointed.

Everything had been cleared from the vast chamber. The machinery, the robots, the working men, the endless heaps of equipment, were gone. The chamber had become a barren space, utterly empty, separating the Soul Cube from the globe that contained it. Its energy tubes had emerged, a line of hollow muzzles the length of the gleaming metal wall. A sheer cliff of death rising up at the far end of the bare chamber.

"Nothing can cross that space," Stenog stated. "Nothing can get from here to the Soul Cube."

"How about the other sides?" Parsons asked.

"Watch."

Something was happening. For a moment Parsons was puzzled. Then he understood.

The great Fountain Globe was coming apart. The immense sphere was dividing into sections. Each section was separating. Even as he watched, the numerous points of tangency was severed.

RAPIDLY the Soul Cube was being isolated. The structure of the Fountain was about to be sacrificed. Under the ground surface, powerful force-fields were applying growing pressure on the segments of the globe. Gradually, with a low rumble, the segments came to rest, spread out, lying flat on the ground away from the Soul Cube. Like an orange that had been peeled, the Soul rose up in the center of a ring of flat fragments. Scattered pieces on all sides of it that had been the massive Fountain. The Soul Cube gleamed and flashed as its energy tubes moved into position. The lights of the city outlined it, a solid block of steel jutting up from the ground.

"There's no way it can be approached," Stenog said.

"Can we get into it?" Parsons asked.

"They'll pass me." He became suspicious. "Why? Better to stay here. I want it completely sealed off. I can contact the control turrets and have one of the locks opened, but—"

"Contact them," Parsons said. "I'd prefer to be inside the Soul Cube. Not standing out here looking at it."

Stenog eyed him. Then he grunted. "All right. I've gone this far with you." He raised his hand and signalled. "The tubes have been sighted on us since we came."

Parsons blanched. "You mean if it hadn't been you—"

"We're well within range. There—the lock is opening. Come along."

They raced across the open space toward the wall of the Soul Cube. As they approached it a circular doughnut slid to one side. Stenog hurried inside, Parsons close behind. The lock slammed shut instantly.

They were inside. A silent corridor stretched off and was lost in an intricate maze of passages. Stenog wasted no time. He hurried up a ramp and onto an observation platform. Parsons followed him.

It was strange, being inside the Soul Cube and looking out. A narrow view-slot showed Parsons the broad strip of barren ground on all sides of the cube. Seeing it from within, he could believe the cube was safe. Visibility was perfect. Nothing could approach unnoticed by surface or air. The Fountain globe had been laid flat. There was nothing obstructing vision for half a mile. Beyond the barren swath the city itself rose, brightly-colored spires and webs that glittered and winked in the evening darkness. Moving dots of light that were cars.

"Nothing will get across," a white-robed officer said. "It's impossible."

The platform was crowded with military men. The cube garrison had come up from the subsurface levels to prepare for the attack.

"Any sign of anything?" Stenog demanded.

"No unusual activities," the commanding officer answered. "The city is fairly quiet. The collapse of the Fountain has been noticed, of course. There has been some comment."

"No sign of any organized movements? Any groups forming?"

"None," the officer answered. "We have good taps on the city. We'd know if there were anything forming."

Stenog glanced at Parsons. "Nothing. What do you say to that?"

Parsons addressed the officer. "When did your last report come through?"

"A visual report. Within the last few minutes. Loris brought it."

Stenog choked. "*Loris?*"

"When she came over. Just before, the alert. She said everything was going exactly as expected."

X

PARSONS was the first to get there. He bowled astonished Government troops out of the way and reached the interior of the Soul Cube. Tunnels and compartments deep within the cold-pack. A constant hum of machinery. Pipes, moist floors, low-ceilings and flickering lights. With Stenog right behind him he entered the control-office from which the zygotes were taken to the artificial wombs that made up the lower levels.

Loris greeted them quietly. She was sitting at one of the long analysis tables, among the delicate meters and instruments that measured and maintained the cold-pack. "I wondered when you'd get here," she said to Parsons. As an afterthought she added: "I left the Manor as soon as Corith died. I came by air."

She showed no emotion. Her handsome face was blank. She sat at the table with her hands folded, fingers interlocked. She seemed preoccupied. As if she were listening to some faint inner voice, a voice none of the others could hear. She had thrown a traveling cloak over her gray robe, an ankle-length mantle of heavy metal foil that became a cowl over her dark mane of hair.

"So Corith is dead," Parsons repeated.

Loris glanced up. "Oh, yes. Almost at once. We had no way to stop the blood." She was holding herself carefully, her

powerful body under absolute control. For a time she sat in silence and then continued quietly: "His own heart had never resumed beating. As soon as the mechanical unit was gone, he perished. He wasn't able to live even a moment without it."

"Loris," Stenog said, "then this is true?"

She nodded. "Yes, of course."

"Jepthe is your mother?"

"Yes."

"And Nixina! I can't believe she's alive. My God, she's a legend!"

"Nixina is deaf and blind. She's a century old. We are longer-lived than you, apparently."

Parsons edged forward. "Loris, there are no male gametes left?"

"Of ours? None. All have been already formed into zygotes. We have no supply. They didn't expect him to die; they never knew why or how. It was only today we learned he had taken his own life. If we had known—"

"*Do any of the zygotes remain in the Soul Cube? Or have they all been born?*"

"Some remain in the cube. Perhaps a dozen."

Stenog and Parsons looked at each other. "What becomes of them?" Parsons demanded tensely.

Loris held a small bit of paper between her folded fingers. She laid the paper on the table thoughtfully. "This tape," she said, "is the code record of the dozen zygotes that are ours. A dozen out of four hundred billion."

She reached over and dropped the tape into an automatic disposal slot. The tape flashed bright red—and was gone. Dissolved into free energy.

"There's no record of the code positions in my mind," Loris said. "The psych-tap won't be of any help. I've never allowed myself to look at the tape. I've been very careful."

"Was that what you came here for?" Stenog asked hoarsely. "To destroy that tape? Nothing else?"

"Nothing else. The tape was hidden here. I wanted it destroyed. There was

always the chance you'd go over every atom of the control offices. I wanted it safely out of your hands."

"Why?" Stenog demanded.

LORIS smiled. "So our zygotes could never be separated from the common horde. So they could never be found. One dozen—out of four hundred billion. We had been moving them ahead. They were near the exit compartments, about to pass from cold-pack to the embryo stage. But now I've restored them to random positions. I did that while I waited for you. It's amazingly easy to lose twelve zygotes among four hundred billion like drops in the ocean. But they're not really lost, are they? They'll appear from time to time during the next forty centuries."

Stunned silence.

"We lost," Loris continued in her thoughtful, husky whisper, "when Corith died the second time. There was no hope after that. With Corith, perished all our dreams and plans. Those of us who remain will live out our lives and then quietly die. We will be gone from the Earth. And there will be none after us." She gazed up intently at Parsons and Stenog as she touched her finely-chiseled temple with her long fingers, a gesture of graceful intensity. "That is, none—until the first of the dozen is born."

She sat calmly, touching her dark hair, pushing it absently back from her face. Her luminous eyes glowed. Her whole face shone with a steady fire that rose up from deep inside her.

"I think there are a dozen," she added. "Perhaps there are actually a few more than that. Let's say, of ours, there exist a dozen—*plus*."

PARSONS stood in the warm sunlight, watching the multi-colored crowds surging along the sidewalks. The fast-moving drops that filled up the streets. The fragile webs that ran glistening from spire to spire.

"Nice, isn't it?" Director Stenog said.

"Very." Parsons shrugged wryly. "I wish I had a place in it."

"Strange. In your society your role as a doctor was of great value. Yet the same role in our society is dangerous. By healing Corith you set into action a chain of events which may eventually destroy us. Sometime within the next four thousand years, as Corith phrased it."

"What did you do with her?"

"Loris? Sent to the penal colony on Mars. All of them. All the sisters and brothers. And the two old women." Stenog shook his youthful head. "I saw her with my own eyes. Nixina. A century old. I looked it up in the records. A hundred years! They'll be on Mars a long time."

"What do you think will happen when the dozen plus are born?"

"I don't know. Maybe they won't identify themselves. Maybe they'll live out their lives without knowing. In the service of mankind, contributing their produce and ability—and finally die. Or—"

"Or construct a revolutionary organization and try to wipe out all human beings."

"Only time will tell." Stenog considered. "You know, Parsons, if I was sure it would be toward the *end* of the four thousand years, I'd feel better. By that time we may be a match for them. But I'm afraid some of them will start showing up soon. Next year. Or in the next ten years. We won't know. Every time an exceptional person arises we'll suspect him. Every time somebody shows unusual ability we'll have to remove him and shoot him off to the penal colony. It defeats the whole purpose of the Lists—the whole Fountain system. It undermines everything!"

"Maybe," Parsons said, "you'll have to give up the Fountain system and go back to normal reproduction. Unify reproduction and sexual intercourse into one act."

Stenog shot him a quick glance. "Perhaps. You may be right." He pondered moodily. Then a thought came to him.

"Well? Have you decided?"

"About going back? Yes, I've made up my mind."

"I can see. You want to go back."

"I have a place there. Here, I'm useless—harmful, in fact. Alice through the looking glass. Everything in this world is reversed, inverted. Turned upside down."

"I hope we can make good continuum contact. The dredge isn't accurate—the history labs developed it to salvage records and materials. But we'll do our best."

A gust of sweet-scented air blew up in Parsons' face, bringing with it a sudden murmur of voices from below. A golden hum from the city of shifting lights, dancing spires and webs. The Fountain globe had been restored. It glowed and shimmered as before. The nucleus of the city was functioning again. Drops of color that were carsped to it in swarms, darting through the crowds of youthful men and women in their gay robes.

A GAIN, the yearning ache came up in his throat, the pain he had felt when he had first seen it. Seen it in the night, glowing like a cut jewel against the sky. When his body had been shaken by the intense hunger, the overpowering desire to unite himself with it, to make himself part of it.

But it wouldn't work. He had no part here. His place was in his own world.

Parsons turned abruptly away. "Let's go. I want to get started before I do any more harm."

"Wait." Stenog came after him carrying something awkwardly. "Don't forget *this*. It belongs to you."

He set down Parsons' gray-metal instrument case.

"We gathered up as much of it as we

could find," Stenog said, his smooth face breaking into a proud grin. "Some parts had been lost. A lot was damaged when our teams broke into the Manor. There was considerable fighting. But we did our best. We thought you might want it. We have no use for it, of course."

Parsons picked up the instrument case slowly. For a moment he stood holding it. "Thanks," he murmured finally. "I hope I can find a use for it—wherever the hell the time dredge lands me." He moved off slowly.

"Yes," Stenog agreed. "Let's hope you'll be able to fit in someplace." He moved along with Parsons, wondering if there weren't something more he could say. Something encouraging. After all, it wasn't Parsons' fault he didn't fit in. Stenog felt a great glow of magnanimity sweep over him. He put his hand on Parsons' shoulder. "There's really an amazing range of cultural variation. You should be able to find numerous societies where your function is valued."

"Good God," Parsons answered. "I want to get back to my *own* society. Not just any."

"Of course. I understand. Your friends, job—"

"Job, hell. I've got a wife."

"A *wife!*" Stenog jerked his hand away as if he'd been burnt. His youthful face flushed deep scarlet. "Yes, I suppose so. Now that I think of it . . ." He stopped walking and fell behind, magnanimity turned to disgust and embarrassment. He didn't look directly at Parsons. "A *wife*. Well, almost any kind of society can exist. Almost any system of morals."

Parsons smiled a little and gripped his gray-metal instrument case more tightly. "Just about any. I guess you sort of have to take the broad view of it."

