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He died and lived again to find

HE OWNED THE WORLD

Charles Eric Maine

WANDERER II, the first manned rocket meant to circle the moon, had gone off course. In the control cabin Robert Carson, knowing hope was gone, listened to the last radio message from home:

"Base HG to Wanderer II: Sorry Carson. We all did our best. Sympathy of entire world with you. History will remember . . ."

For seventeen days, as the rocket followed its long elliptical orbit beyond the sun and the air supply diminished, Robert Carson talked into a tape recorder as though clutching at immortality. Then he opened the valves of the control cabin and allowed air to scream out into the vacuum of space. After a brief but violent struggle, he died . . .

But the world did not forget its first space hero, and down through the long centuries the memory of Robert Carson was all that saved the earth from suicide.

Until at last the Wanderer II came home, and Robert Carson rose from death to claim his legacy . . .

Charles Eric Maine

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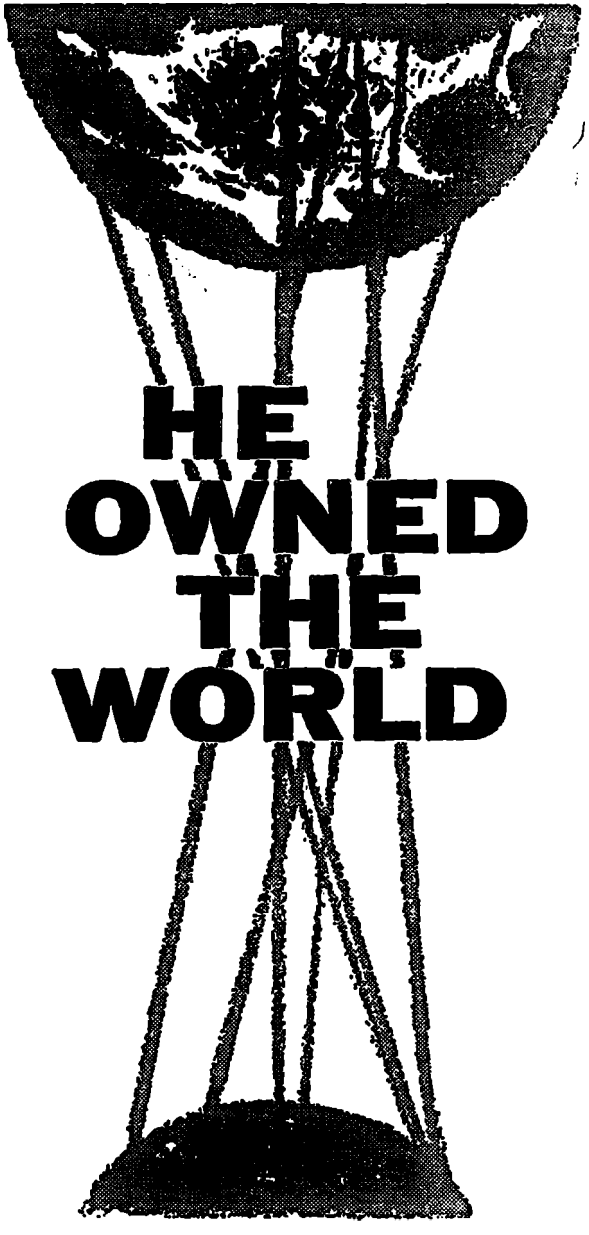
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CHAPTER ONE

About ten hours after zero, Carson knew that he was going to die. He digested the information quietly and reflectively, without any positive reaction. Later, in a calm, methodical way, he checked the radar and the servo instruments to confirm his earlier findings. The rocket was definitely low on its trajectory, some five degrees or more, and the transverse jets which would have brought the projectile back on course were not working. The stacked meters on the instrument panel indicated a fault in the fuel supply, perhaps a fractured feed pipe or some obscure trouble in the high-pressure pump; in either case an impracticable engineering job would be involved.

He reported the facts to Base HQ, using Morse telegraphy because radio-telephone conversation was no longer intelligible. They had been using electronic computers to verify the orbit of the rocket, and were able to confirm that the trajectory was nearly seven degrees low. Unless the transverse jets could be put right, the rocket would miss the moon by more than eleven thousand miles. However, there was a chance, they suggested, that he might be able to use the retrojets in combination with the weak lunar gravitation to deflect the rocket into a long ellipse which would eventually bring him back to within reasonable rescue distance of Earth. It would take eight months, and would require precise timing in firing the retrojets. The available oxygen might last, provided he injected himself with Somnalin, which would reduce his rate of metabolism to a very low level. The possibility of survival was slender, but there was just a chance. Carson allowed himself to smile grimly.

The control cabin of the rocket was small and cramped, but he was quite comfortable. There was no sense of motion, and only a slight feeling of weight induced by the slow, centrifugal spin of the projectile. Air pressure was low—around eight pounds—but he had been conditioned for

months to live normally under such circumstances, and he no longer felt breathless. The latex pad on which he lay was soft and resilient, and he could reach everything simply by lifting a hand: the controls and instruments, the oxygen feed valve, the food dispenser, the sanitation devices, and the books in the small library which had been provided as an antidote for boredom. More remote, but still accessible, were the racks holding the monitoring equipment, the compact television transmitter, the radio-telephone, and the apparatus for measuring radiation, magnetic fields, cosmic rays, meteor particles and temperature—and, of course, the gadgets designed to record his own physiological reactions to flight through space. Everything was functioning normally as predicted, with the exception of the small transverse jets—four of them—positioned radically around the shell of the projectile. On such a point of detail depended the matter of life or death.

The possibility of death in the cold vacuum of space had been foreseen. During the long months of training before the launching, nothing had been overlooked. The team of six men selected for the first orbital flight around the moon had been under no illusions about the dangers involved. Carson smiled reminiscently as he remembered the disappointment of his colleagues when he had been finally chosen by the Selection Board. He found himself wondering just how they would feel now, once the news was released that the much vaunted *Wanderer II,* the first manned rocket planned to circle the moon and return to Earth, was destined to miss its target and become a minor satellite of the sun.

I was adequately briefed, he thought, *and they talked about death objectively and scientifically.* He remembered how they discussed the big chance of success and the small chance of failure. They talked statistically, mathematically, about the risk involved. If the worst happens, they said, and death is inevitable, then you will have the facility to die as and when you choose, easily and pleasantly. At no time will there be cause for desperation. The entire operation should be completed in ten days, if all goes well, but you will have food and oxygen to last you a month. If anything should go wrong, then you can take Somnalin capsules, and in the subsequent state you will be able to survive for much longer—six months, perhaps more.

"We have taken every possible precaution," they added. "*Wanderer II* is the apex of modern astronautical engineering, and you have been singled out by rigorous tests as the one man in the Western Hemisphere most fitted to pioneer the long trail to the moon."

"Dead or alive," Carson had commented sardonically on that day long ago.

He unfastened the straps around his body and sat up carefully, inclining his head to avoid a cluster of metal pipes cleated to the roof of the cabin. He was dressed in a flexible gray one-piece suit with a metallic fitting around the neck to which the space helmet could be securely attached. The cabin was airtight, of course, and he had removed the helmet as soon as he had recovered from the black-out following the take-off. Now he withdrew it from a small locker near the floor, inspecting its transparent surface carefully for any indication of flaw or fracture, then put it over his head, snapping the clips firmly into place. Finally he slung the compact oxygen pack over his shoulders and screwed the breathing tube into place. His thumb pressed a small valve, and oxygen hissed cheerfully into the helmet.

He turned his attention to the control panel, operating switches and moving a wheel. A red warning light flashed solemnly as air sighed from the cabin. The needle of the meter registering air pressure dropped gently to zero.

Satisfied, he moved across the cabin, holding on to a metal rail to maintain his balance against the unsteadying effect of near-weightlessness, climbed over a narrow bulkhead bisecting the floor, and advanced cautiously until he reached a circular flanged hatch set in the rear wall. Slowly he unscrewed the heavy locking wheel, then threw back the pressure clips. The hatch opened sluggishly like the door of a safe, revealing a dark cavity beyond.

Clumsily he pulled himself through the hole, then switched on the interior light. He was in the main body of the rocket, surrounded by massive tanks and arrays of pipes and cables. The curved inner shell gleamed dully in the subdued light. He stared blankly at his strange metallic environment for a while, striving to recall the technical information he had absorbed during his period of engineering training. Somewhere among this confusion of equipment and conduits was the pump and its associated feed lines for the transverse jets,

but he was not immediately able to orientate himself. He advanced farther into the hull, holding the guide rail.

Even when he located the pump, he did not at first recognize it; the shape was different, in some subtle way twisted and distorted. Furthermore, the unit seemed to be hanging loose from its mounting bracket, dangling rigidly from bent piping. It was only when he stooped to inspect the undersurface of the pump that he saw the cause of the trouble: a jagged hole torn in the tough steel casing, with thick green oil dripping slowly from the punctured hydraulic cylinder.

Despondently he surveyed the damage, scrutinizing the interior of the pump mechanism and noting the scored piston and the bent cam rod. The thing looked as if it had been hit by a pickaxe—a sharp pickaxe with a serrated edge—but obviously there could be no question of sabotage. Intuitively he knew the true explanation, and he turned to the curved shape of the hull in search of confirmation. He found the hole in less than ten seconds. It was a big hole, as meteorite punctures went, slightly larger than a penny, and roughly triangular in shape.

It was possible to draw, in imagination, a straight line joining the hole with the torn casing of the fuel pump, but, of course, one had to allow for the physical displacement as the unit had been jolted and wrenched from its securing bracket. Somewhere in the other side of the rocket hull, diametrically opposite, would be another similar hole where the meteorite, traveling at possibly five miles a second, had made its exit. The damage to the hull-structure was relatively unimportant, since only the control cabin was airtight, but the wrecked fuel pump was a different matter entirely. It meant failure for the *Wanderer II* and death for its pilot.

Carson pouted cynically. In his mind he could hear again the confident, incisive voice of the instructor at the College of Astronautics: *The meteor hazard has been grossly overstated. In fact, the vast majority of meteors in space are mere particles of dust, smaller than grains of sand. The chances of impact with a meteor of appreciable size—say, as big as a marble—are so remote as to be negligible. On a statistical basis, one might expect such a meteor to pass within a radius of a thousand meters of a rocket vehicle once every ten thousand years. As for direct impact—once in half-a-million years, not more.*

"Bad luck," Carson said aloud. The statistics were probably right. Half-a-million years might indeed roll by before another rocket suffered a major meteor impact, but that was little consolation in the here-and-now. The thing had happened; the *Wanderer II* had been penetrated cleanly, quickly and efficiently at some point after take-off. The transverse jet system was out of action, and there wasn't a thing he personally could do about it. The payload of the rocket had been calculated down to the last gram, and space didn't allow for the transport of spare fuel pumps and pipelines.

He made his way back to the control cabin, sealing the hatch behind him, and filled the cabin with air, adjusting the pressure to the specified eight pounds. Wearily he removed the space helmet, and stowed it in the locker. He sat down pensively and spent fully a minute staring at the gray panel of the radio transmitter, not seeing it, but seeing through it with a kind of inner vision. Beyond it was the vast, black wilderness of interplanetary space speckled with burning stardust; and already, it seemed to him, the Earth and its moon were far behind and almost indistinguishable from the phosphorescent cloud of the Milky Way that defined the limits of the galaxy. There was no bitterness or resentment in him, just a quiet and slightly melancholy acceptance of the situation. The real terror and torment, he realized, was yet to come, but there were ways of dealing with that.

Carson found his thoughts drifting to people he knew back on Earth—to friends such as Keegan and Brown and Drayton, and his parents, waiting hopefully for each new bulletin reporting the rocket's progress, and dark-haired beautiful Valerie, the girl he had abandoned for the chance to pioneer the frontiers of space. He snapped his attention back to the radio transmitter. Thinking nostalgically about people back home was like looking down from the top of a high ladder: it didn't add to mental stability.

He switched on the transmitter and thumbed the Morse key, sending a formal message to Base HQ reporting the damage to the fuel pump and feed lines. The reply, equally formal, came back in thin, piping dots and dashes through crackling static. *Stand by for retrojet maneuver in about eighteen hours. Computing now—will send full briefing later.*

He transmitted an acknowledgment, then switched off the

equipment and lay back on the latex pad, fingers interlocked behind his neck. "I've no faith in the retrojet maneuver," he told himself. "There are too many variables and too many unknowns to balance the equation—and the biggest unknown quantity is human life itself. But I suppose they'd like to get the rocket back even if I fail to survive the long eight-month ellipse. I'd be almost as useful to them dead—they could open me up and run Geiger counters over me and study the long-term effects of Somnalin on human physiology, and in that way I'd be making things safer for the next sucker who flies a rocket to the Moon.

Cynicism trembled acidly in his mind for an instant, then evaporated. He realized that he didn't care overmuch about his fate, and that in the long run one had to take an impersonal view. That was why he had been selected for the assignment: not because of courage or technical brilliance or initiative or I.Q., but because he happened to be the controlled, objective type of individual—the non-reacting type, the kind who would act logically, without much feeling, in whatever circumstances might arise. The human robot, whose brain was bigger than his heart.

Not me, he decided abruptly. I've got a heart, though perhaps I haven't used it much, and there were occasions in the past when I was out of control and swept by passion or anger or sheer irresponsible bloody-mindedness. I could have been an ordinary man-in-the-street, working in an office or a factory, with a wife and family. I might have been happier. Even so, I'm not unhappy now—I ought to be, but I'm not. Death is always a little unreal, particularly when it is a predetermined death lying in wait beyond an interval of months. At the age of thirty-four it's difficult to take the idea of death seriously, and anyway, the retrojet maneuver might be successful. While there is still an atom of hope left, then death is always very far away.

He took four tablets to make sure he stayed awake, then settled down to wait for the moment of the retrojet maneuver.

Carson was never quite sure just why the retrojet maneuver failed. It may have been due to an error of judgment on his part—a fractional delay in pressing the firing switches and cutting in the boost pumps—or he may have forgotten to allow for the interval of time required for radio signals to

reach the rocket from Earth. On the other hand, the computers at Base HQ may have been at fault, or inadequately programmed. Obviously it would be difficult for the operators at Base HQ to take into account every conceivable factor that might affect the orbit of the rocket.

The retrojets had responded instantly, at full power, so inducing gravitational drag into the free-falling projectile that Carson nearly blacked out. He obeyed the radioed instructions from Earth to the precise instant, and then, when the jets were silent once more, sat back to wait for a report from Base HQ on the *Wanderer*'s new orbit.

The message came four hours later. By now the radio signals were so faint that they were almost inaudible above the background level of static. Carson had to break in frequently and ask for repeats of words, but eventually the entire text of the message was written down. It made depressing reading.

Base HQ to Wanderer II: *New orbit solar aphelion 250,000,000 miles, perihelion indeterminate, probably 75,000,000 miles. Cyclic period 3.8 years.*

About three minutes later, there was another radio message, on the fringe of audibility. Mechanically he took it down. This time the words were informal. Authority had finally relaxed.

Base HQ to Wanderer II: *Sorry, Carson. We all did our best. Sympathy of entire world with you. History will remember. Radio contact deteriorating rapidly. This may be last message ever. Good-bye. Good luck. . . .*

Carson switched off the radio equipment with a sigh. The click of the switch might have been the click of the lock on a steel door. For the first time, loneliness began to creep in on him—a black, brooding loneliness that oppressed his mind and made him feel restless and uneasy. He clenched his fists and rubbed the knuckles of his fingers against his chin, grinding them into the stubble of his rapidly growing beard. What to do? he thought—what to do at this point, when there's nothing left to do but wait? Wait for what? I'm off on a three-and-a-half-year orbit around the sun, and at the end of that time I may return to within a few million miles of Earth. By then I'll have been dead three years. I can end it now, or I can drag it out for as long as the food and oxygen lasts—or I can use Somnalin and live unconscious

for six months, then die in my sleep. At all events I'm well and truly on my own, and there's no longer the possibility of radio communication with other human beings.

Tentatively he switched on the radio transmitter and sent a call to Base HQ. Minutes passed while he listened to the blank static coming through the receiver. At one point he thought he heard the faint, intermittent piping of a Morse signal, but it might have been imagination. There was never any discernible reply; Base HQ had been swallowed up by the random background noise of space.

He switched off the equipment for the last time, then opened the small observation shutter in the side of the cabin and peered through thick armored glass. The stars rotated slowly as the rocket spun leisurely on its axis. He caught a glimpse of Earth hanging like a tennis ball in the sky, glowing whitely in a first-quarter crescent. A moment later the naked sun swept into view, blinding him momentarily. The Moon seemed to be out of sight, probably to the rear of the rocket; if he wanted to see it he would have to use television, but somehow he had no desire to look at the Moon, and no wish to see Earth any more. He closed the observation shutter.

I'll stay alive, he decided suddenly, in a mood of defiance. I'll stay alive for as long as I can, conscious, without using Somnalin, but taking drugs to prevent gloom and depression. I'll see the thing through to the end, and perhaps I'll use the tape recorder to make notes of impressions and observations. Someday, in the near or far distant future, the information may be useful to someone. The important thing is to keep my mind occupied during these final weeks. . . .

Carson managed to keep his mind occupied during seventeen long days and nights of harrowing, confined solitude, talking to the tape recorder as if it were a personal friend, reliving and recounting the details of his life as though, in so doing, it were possible to guarantee for himself a kind of immortality beyond death.

Then despair struck him down. In a grim mood he opened the air valves of the control cabin and allowed air to scream out into the vacuum of space. He died quickly, after a brief, violent struggle to suck non-existent air into his collapsed lungs.

Wanderer II continued on its long elliptical orbit round the sun.

CHAPTER TWO

Certain curious phenomena were taking place in the blackness. A purple glow trembled like aurora, then changed color, moving tranquilly through the rainbow of the spectrum. It vanished abruptly, then reappeared, to repeat the performance, and kept on repeating it for an eternity. Somewhere remote a musical tone echoed in a vast invisible hall, then slowly ascended the chromatic scale, rising higher and higher in pitch until it was no longer audible. And there were tentative sensations of feeling: tiny pinpoints of physical awareness like the impact of cosmic rays on exposed nerves.

The colors and the tones and the atoms of feeling seemed to merge and coalesce until they became a complex universe of abstract light, sound and touch. They built up to a crescendo of intense sensory experience, then faded slowly over the years until the ebony featureless night returned. In the course of time they came back, but now the colors were broken into jagged patterns, and the tones were blended into harmony and discord, and the points of feeling were harsh and irritating, bordering on the threshold of pain.

These things were happening in a void, and there was nothing in the void that possessed any sense of personal identity, but they were witnessed, and the entity that was witnessing them was able to recognize certain qualities which, though abstract, were intrinsically human. The pain, for instance—that was a subjective thing. In the physical world of nature there was no such thing as pain; it was a psychoneural reacton characteristic of a sentient being. It could not be measured, weighed or analyzed, but it was real, nonetheless. There was an awareness of pain, and that implied an awareness of a living body, even though the body existed on a level beyond that of the basic sense data.

The rainbow colors and the musical tones, too, were interesting, for in the world of abstract physics there is nei-

ther color nor music, only frequencies of varying wave lengths in differing media. Color implied psychoneural interpretation, as did musical pitch; neither could exist without a living brain.

Something was thinking. Something was analyzing the implications of sense data, observing the colors and hearing the tones and feeling the atoms of physical sensation, and that something was in some way independent and apart from the things it was analyzing. The simple world of color and tone and touch had differentiated in a subtle way: now there was the subjective and the objective, and whereas originally the phenomena had been real, now they were no longer real in the same way, but merely recorded changes in the consciousness of the entity that was aware of them. It was, in a way, the fundamental evolution of life itself, the discrete process by which a simple cell becomes a thing apart from its environment and begins to react to the world around it, so that the cell, although basically an intricate assembly of complex but inert molecules, acquires a quality not possessed by the molecules which surround it.

The sentient being was nameless and eternal, and limited in function, simply watching the colors and hearing the tones and feeling kinesthetically the sensations of physical contact. But slowly, almost imperceptibly, the colors hardened and the patterns became static. The tones, settling into dissonant harmony, became congealed and tremulous, persisting like the echo of a strange chord in a minor key. The atoms of touch became penetrating needles, multiplying and spreading over a curved surface.

Suddenly there was consciousness, the awareness of a naked body lying on a cold, hard surface; there was light, and a thin face with deep green eyes, and insupportable pain vibrating in every limb as the atoms of feeling expanded. The consciousness lasted for a fraction of a second, then snapped into extinction. Dense, unfeeling night seemed to endure for a thousand years. There was no more color or tone or physical sensation.

In the course of time Carson awoke.

Initially he was confused—that was to be expected. The room was bright to the point of incandescence, and detail was blurred. A shadow flitted across an opalescent ceiling,

but he was unable to follow it with his eyes because they ached intolerably. It seemed to him that he was lying under a curved transparent shell on a smooth plastic surface, and a fine network of wires covered his naked body. He attempted to move an arm, but the muscles failed to respond; and he was only able to lie motionless in a condition of paralysis, staring straight up at the blinding light.

There were sounds which he could identify: a faint ticking, like a clock, but much slower, and the shallow noise of breathing, quick and irregular. After a while, it came to him that he was listening to the sound of his own breath issuing from his lungs. Far away he could detect the murmur of subdued voices, but they were unintelligible.

The shadow moved across the ceiling again, and something came solidly into his field of vision. It was a face—one that he had seen before, mingled with the colors and the tones and the atoms of feeling: a thin white face with green eyes and a hairless dome of a head. The eyes stared intently into his for a moment, and then the face disappeared. A moment later, the plastic shell above him moved to one side; cold air swept across his body. The light dimmed slowly to a comfortable level.

Something gripped his limp arm and lifted it. A needle punctured his flesh and, almost immediately, hot fire raced through his arteries. The face returned, and the green eyes scanned him intelligently, as if seeking some kind of response. He attempted to move his lips, to utter a word that would indicate his alert consciousness, but the paralysis still held him in its grip and he was quite powerless.

The face went away again, and now he could hear voices, but they were speaking a tongue that was largely unfamiliar. Here and there he recognized a word, but the inflection and articulation were different. It seemed to him that he was listening to the English language intimately blended with foreign languages, and spoken with a curious continuity, in which the words were run together to form complete units comprising whole phrases and even sentences. One thing he could understand—a certain subtle sense of academic urgency in the intonation of the speech. He knew they were talking about him, and he realized that he was the subject of anxious, expert attention.

The injection he had received had begun to revitalize him.

He found he could move a finger, and shift the position of his right leg infinitesimally. His lips were still rigid, but there was a feeling of flexibility about them which suggested that he might soon be able to say something—anything to prove that he was alive and conscious.

He attempted to lift an arm, but a restraining hand grasped it and held it firmly.

"Don't move," said a stilted voice.

He stopped trying to move.

"Can you hear me?" said the voice, speaking in a flat mechanical manner, as one might read words from a book of phrases in a foreign language. "If you can hear me, blink your eyes twice."

He did as requested. The fingers relinquished their grip on his arm, allowing it to fall back to the cold plastic surface on which he lay.

"Good," the voice continued. "Listen carefully. You are in a very weak and emaciated state. That is to be expected. You were dead for a long time. You have undergone many major surgical operations involving tissue transplantation. Your body is being kept alive electronically, and there are many thousands of wires connected to your flesh and nerve centers for that purpose. You must not move. Do you understand?"

He blinked his eyes again to indicate that he understood.

"You are alive, but only just," said the voice tonelessly. "You must obey every instruction. You will remain here under electronic stimulus for five years. During that time you will gain strength and improve. Afterwards, with care and training, you may be able to live the life of a normal man."

There was a pause. The thin face appeared above him and the green eyes stared into his.

"You must sleep again, for a long, long time. There are more operations to be performed. When you awake, in two years from now, you will be much better, much stronger. You will be able to talk and move, and you will begin to remember. Three years later we shall remove the wires from your body."

The slotted mouth in the face extended into what might have been a smile. "It is a slow process. Death is a difficult

disease to cure. Normally we would not take the trouble—but in your case. . . ."

The face turned suddenly to one side. "Hypnomin," said the slotted mouth.

The sharp needle punctured Carson's arm for the second time. Nothing happened for five seconds, and then the face and the room dissolved into an empty void. The sleep was black and dreamless, and lasted no time at all. The moment of coma and the moment of returning consciousness were one and the same. The incandescent light had returned and was burning into his eyes, but now there was energy flowing through his body, despite the paralysis which still persisted and held him motionless.

He gulped air into his lungs and screamed.

They calmed him down with injections, and talked among themselves in the curious flowing language which he found so difficult to comprehend. There were three of them—two men and one woman—dressed in translucent green smocks. The tall man with the thin face and the green eyes was familiar, and he seemed to be the leader of the medical team. The other man was shorter, but still thin, and of swarthy complexion. His head had been shaved, but the scalp was showing a dark area of fine stubble. The woman was gaunt and sharply featured, and her hair had been cropped so that she looked vaguely masculine. Carson, now able to turn his head, was free to observe them and, further, could study the room with its complex equipment.

It was a large room, white from ceiling to floor, with a bewildering array of lights which, he imagined, were intended for irradiation rather than illumination. One entire wall was a mosaic of minute colored lights which came on and went out individually in an apparently random fashion. He had no idea of their purpose. He was lying on the same hard-surfaced bed, pinned down by the same complex network of fine wires, but the curved transparent cover had been removed, and he was able to see that the wires from his body were gathered into tied bundles which were connected to a long coffin-shaped metallic object adjoining the bed. There was other equipment, too, lining the walls, but he found it impossible to guess at its function.

After a few minutes the tall man with the green eyes

came over to the bed and looked down at him in a professional and slightly impersonal manner, as one might inspect a biological specimen. "There," he said, reverting to the strangely mechanical intonation which characterized his use of simple English, "two years is not so long. Your condition has improved tremendously during that time. In fact, you are almost fully alive."

He turned to the wall bearing the matrix of colored winking lights and pointed to it with a skeletal hand. "But not so fully alive that you could survive without electronic assistance," he went on. "Here we have a visual monitor panel which shows quite clearly where and when electronic stimuli are fed into your psychoneural system. As soon as a nerve center begins to fail, the correct revitalizing frequency is automatically applied. The fact is registered by a light on the panel."

He focused his hypnotic eyes on Carson again. "As you gain strength, and as your body learns how to live once more, there will be fewer lights on the panel. One day the panel will become dark and will stay dark. On that day you will be alive in the true sense of the word. We can then disconnect you from the psychoneural stimulator. Meanwhile you must be patient for three years, possibly more. Do you understand?"

Carson nodded weakly.

"You may try to talk if you wish," said the green-eyed man.

Carson moved his lips and squeezed breath from his lungs. The voice was a mere husky whisper, a dry, attenuated, disused voice, but the sounds and syllables were there.

"How long was I dead?" he breathed.

The doctor regarded him solemnly. "Not long, if one thinks in absolute terms, but certainly long enough to make antimortic procedure extremely difficult." He paused reflectively. "You were dead for about eight-thousand years—terrestrial years, that is. Fortunately you died in vacuum, so that your body was quite well preserved. There was a certain amount of internal damage of the kind one would expect—ruptural lesions in the heart and lungs and some microbiotic decomposition of the abdomen due to anaerobic organisms. However, we were able to replace the faulty parts."

"Replace?"

"Eleven years of transplantative surgery, supervised, I may say, by none other than Dr. Hueste himself—who is probably the greatest living expert in the entire solar system. Of course, we have techniques that you would not know about. Your new heart, for example, is a graft of nylon and other materials of high tensile strength with selected human muscle. It will last for a thousand years. Your lungs are interwoven with synthetic cells to improve their efficiency. Your entire gastric system was removed for what one might call factory reconditioning. You will find it much superior. The intestines are lined with Raedeker's catalytic enzyme filter, which is quite an improvement on nature. One other thing, we also found it necessary to recondition the entire urinogenital system, for reasons which have to do with the structure of our modern society."

The doctor paused for a few seconds, then continued: "During the next three years there will be long periods of unconsciousness. But after all, what are three years in eternity?"

"Eternity?"

The smile persisted as if frozen to the thin lips. "Of course. Time and space have passed you by, and you would not know about these things. There have been great advances in the past millennia, and we know the secret of immortality. You are a privileged man. You were born in an age of birth and death, an age of futility when the accumulation of knowledge meant the passing on of knowledge—the wasted years of learning and teaching and relearning. Today we have new methods. We have abolished death and birth is no longer necessary. We have reached the point where man is no longer required to function as an animal, because he is no longer an animal. He has the forces of the cosmos at his command, and the terms of life and living can be controlled by technology."

"Immortality," Carson whispered. "It's unbelievable."

"You were dead. Now you are alive," the doctor pointed out. "We regard death as a curable disease."

"But—do you know who I am?"

"Yes," said the doctor crisply. "And that is why we have gone to such trouble to restore your life. You are very important to us, Robert Carson."

"Why?"

"You will find out in the course of time. To explain everything would merely confuse you. For the present, relax, sleep, and allow the natural forces of your body to gain strength and take over from our electronic machines, as they will surely do. You have a great deal to learn, but you must learn slowly."

Carson nodded wearily; already fatigue was swamping him in the familiar paralysis. The doctor had rejoined his colleagues and was talking once more in the unintelligible blended dialogue which seemed to be the language of this day and age. He stared at the monitor panel on the wall for a few minutes, watching the tiny lights as they blinked on and off in various colors—red, yellow, green, blue, and purple. The lights symbolized his life; they signaled the pulses of energy flowing into his body to vitalize it in a kind of electronic reincarnation. Presently he closed his eyes, feeling soothed and satisfied.

He slept for many months.

CHAPTER THREE

In retrospect, Carson could hardly remember the long years of electronic therapy. There were phases of consciousness alternating with blank intervals of deep, dreamless sleep, and he suspected that they used drugs to lessen his awareness while awake and obliterate much of his memory in the months following. The twinkling lights on the monitor panel blinked into extinction over the years until, one notable day, the panel was quite dark and unilluminated, and stayed that way. He knew then that he was alive, fully and independently, and that he need no longer be sustained by the miracle of psychoneural electronics.

Soon afterward, within the week, they applied an anesthetic and removed the wires from his body. He recovered in a different room—a small chamber with amber walls and a luminous frosted ceiling, with simple furnishings in a light metal alloy. There was no window, but from somewhere high on the walls cool air circulated throughout the room. The

bed on which he lay was soft and resilient. He observed that he was still naked.

Despite his physical weakness, he made the effort to examine his body. The electronic wires had left a rash of minute red pinpoints over the greater part of his torso and limbs, and he could detect a pattern of fine silvery scars across his chest and abdomen where, presumably, he had been cut open for surgical purposes. He put one hand across his ribs to feel the pulsations of his nylon reinforced heart; the beat was steady, like a machine. He tapped his abdomen experimentally with his fingers and found the flesh firm and strong. Then he lay back to think and reflect.

He tried to recall what it felt like to be dead, but there was no recollection in his mind beyond the final frantic moments in the *Wanderer II* when he had subjected himself to asphyxiation by vacuum. He remembered the death struggles, the abrupt and urgent change of intention, the irrational desire to continue to live at all costs—when it was already too late. He remembered the black cloud that had engulfed his senses, and after that there had been nothing—just a measureless interval gently disturbed by the rainbow lights and the musical tones. And in that interval, eight thousand years had elapsed.

It will be a different world from the one I knew, he thought. *They have told me nothing of what lies beyond these four walls—merely clinical details of fantastic surgery, synthetic body organs, and electron treatment of the disease known as death. What are they really like, these people—and what do they think of me? After eight thousand years they must surely regard me as some kind of primitive animal bordering on civilized intelligence. Supposing a Stone Age man had been transported to the London I knew in the twentieth century? On the other hand, the doctor had made a strange, enigmatic remark:* "You are very important to us, Robert Carson." *How can I be important?*

He stared idly at the blue fluorescence of the ceiling and allowed his thoughts to ramble, without discipline or direction. Immortality, for instance—that was hard to believe. Even admitting their progress in clinical and surgical techniques, immortality was a faintly incredible concept. They probably knew how to extend life by the replacement of diseased and tired organs, and perhaps the average span of

human life had increased to centuries, but complete immortality must obviously be an exaggeration. There had to be a limit, and there had to be a stop; sooner or later even an organism consisting of new and reconditioned parts must fail, just as a car, for instance, could not be serviced indefinitely.

And what of the outside world—the London, New York, and Paris that he used to know so well long ago? They must have changed, radically and fundamentally. Indeed, London might well be an eroded ruin blanketed by the soil and sand of time—and New York, too. There might be a new world Metropolis, perhaps in Africa, or Asia. And what of the science of astronautics? After that first abortive attempt to send a manned rocket around the Moon, how had humanity progressed in the technology of space flight, or had the whole thing been abandoned in the end?

His mind was too full of questions, he realized, and questions without answers were useless. Knowledge was a matter of fact, not speculation. It occurred to him that information about the outside world might have been withheld deliberately so that he could adapt himself by degrees to the changes that had taken place over the millennia. At all events, they seemed to know what they were doing, and even after eight thousand years, humans were still humans. He was alive and back on Earth, and in an advanced technology the future must be assured, even for himself, a virtual anachronism in an unimaginable new world.

Carson, although he could not know it then, was wrong in every respect.

For the first few days after his return to full life, he was attended by a nurse. She was a woman of indeterminate age, quite attractive in a mature way, who brought him food and drink and examined him periodically with the aid of unfamiliar instruments. The food was highly colored but tasteless, and took the form of pressed and processed cubes which dissolved easily in the mouth. The general effect was satisfying enough. He assumed that the food was, in fact, synthetic, and occasionally he found himself longing for some ordinary meat with potatoes and greens.

The nurse was uncommunicative. On one or two occasions he was able to elicit some information from her, but it did

not add considerably to his knowledge of his environment. One morning, when she had delivered to him the usual colorful pastiche that constituted his main diet, he said, "When will I see my doctor again?"

"Which doctor?" she inquired impassively.

"The one with the thin face and the green eyes."

She smiled subtly. "You won't see him again, Mr. Carson. You are alive now. Dr. Wier is a specialist in antimortic pathology, and he has no further interest in your case."

"Then—what will happen to me now?"

"You are cured," she pointed out. "There will be a period of convalescence, and after that—"

"Well?"

"You will be fit and well. You will become a citizen of the State. Various people will want to see you."

"What people?"

"You will find out in due course."

After a pause, he asked, "Tell me, nurse, where am I?"

"In a small, specialized private clinic."

"What I mean is—am I in London?"

"No."

"Then where?"

She smiled discreetly. "You are too impatient for knowledge. In any case, I am not permitted to tell you."

"Why not?"

"Those are my orders, I'm afraid."

He considered for a moment, then said, "I don't understand your orders. True, I come from an age that has been dead for eight thousand years, but I'm not an animal, and I have a certain degree of intelligence. Why am I being kept in ignorance of basic information? Why should it matter if I know whether I'm in London, New York, Paris or Moscow?"

Her expression became blank for a revealing instant. Abruptly he realized that the names held no great significance for her.

"There are things you will be able to find out for yourself," she said. "You have not lifted yourself from your bed in five years—since life was first injected into your nervous system. When you begin to walk, you will discover something that will provide you with a certain amount of—basic information, as you put it."

"Such as what?"

"Patience, Mr. Carson. You are trying to run before you can walk."

She removed the tray from his bed and began tidying up. He watched her for a while, and then asked, "How old are you, nurse?"

She eyed him sardonically. "A man should never ask a woman her age. How old do I look?"

"I don't know. Smooth enough to be in the twenties, but mature enough to be more than forty."

"I was born nearly a thousand years ago," she said simply.

"I don't believe it," he stated bluntly.

"There are many things you won't believe, at first. Don't be impatient, Mr. Carson. You have all the time in the world to learn, and in the end you will believe—because you, too, will live to be a thousand, perhaps ten thousand. Who knows?"

"One other thing," he said, as she was about to leave the room. "Why am I so important? That's what they told me."

"I must leave that for the politicians to explain," she stated. "There are complications which you do not even begin to suspect."

"You speak my language very well," he observed. "Much better than the green-eyed doctor, for instance."

"I was adequately trained. During the five years of your treatment I was assigned to study antique terrestrial English. It was difficult enough, but I achieved a fair competence. All those individual words, and verbs—the elementary semantics, so complicated because they were so simple. However, so long as we understand each other. . . ."

She went out of the room shortly afterward, leaving him alone with his thoughts. One thing in particular remained in his mind, something she had said. He struggled to recall her exact words: *When you begin to walk, you will discover something . . .*

An experimental mood gripped him. *I'm alive,* he thought. *Perhaps I'm not very strong, but I can move my limbs. I could try to walk.*

Cautiously he eased himself toward the edge of the bed, then, summoning his strength, pushed his legs over the side. Suddenly he was sitting up. Dizziness came and went in a

cold wave. He placed his hands firmly on the edge of the bed, then pushed himself to his feet. For an instant he stood upright, but he was unable to maintain the posture and tottered forward helplessly. His legs moved forward automatically, three steps, four steps. Despite the overpowering sensation of instability, he strove to analyze his feelings, noting the long strides and the curious light-headedness. It ended abruptly in a spectacular fall in which he seemed to float to the floor, and the impact was not so hard as he had expected.

Conclusion, he thought, picking himself up lethargically: *either I'm extremely light and weak, or gravity is rather low —or perhaps both.* But the experiment was disappointing and indecisive.

He went back to bed.

There was no rhythm of day and night in the accepted conventional way, nor was there a clock or similar device by which he could measure the passage of time. All the lighting in the room was derived from the luminous ceiling, and periodically the illumination was dimmed to a low level. In this way, time was arbitrarily divided up into artificial days and nights—each phase lasting about ten hours, so far as he could judge.

After about a week of such days he was visited by a team of six medical men who examined him thoroughly, as one might carry out a detailed inspection of a complicated machine. They said little, but it was apparent that they were satisfied with his condition. When they had completed their probing, they departed in silence, leaving their patient slightly mystified.

About an hour later the nurse introduced another visitor in the form of a Mr. Jaff, an official from an administrative department of the government. Mr. Jaff was a rotund man of cheerful appearance (probably not more than a thousand years old, Carson thought whimsically). He was wearing a very brief black garment, not much larger than a swimsuit, and from his shoulders hung a silvery cape pierced with a multitude of pockets stuffed with papers. His red hair was cropped. A thick plastic sole seemed to have been glued to the underside of his feet.

Mr. Jaff made himself comfortable on a slender metal

chair which seemed too frail to support his ample bulk, and referred to a blue document which he produced from a pocket at the back of his cape. He spoke jerkily, with a lack of fluency which indicated want of familiarity with antique English.

"Medical report good," he said. "Now you go from here to surface. Three weeks exercise, training, rehabilitation. After that, normal citizen." He beamed benignly at Carson.

"Surface?" Carson queried.

Mr. Jaff pointed a squat forefinger vertically upward. "Long time down below," he explained. "Now you have change of view, change of people, time to think and talk. What you call convalescence."

"When?"

"Two hours, three hours."

Carson made no comment.

"Remember, you very important person," Mr. Jaff went on. "Therefore you must obey all instructions. Also you must learn to speak our language. No great difficulty. We have psychocerebral techniques."

"All right."

"One more thing—" Mr. Jaff fumbled in his pockets and withdrew a tiny plastic box which he opened carefully, then tipped the contents on to his open palm. A small silver cylinder, not much larger than a pea, rolled out. "Take it," he said, holding his hand forward.

Carson took the object and put it to his mouth. Instantly Mr. Jaff leaned forward and gripped his wrist. "No, no," he declared in sudden alarm. "Not mouth. Ear."

Carson stared at him blankly.

"Put in ear," Mr. Jaff repeated firmly.

Nonplused, Carson did as instructed, inserting the minute cylinder gingerly into his right ear.

"All the way," insisted Mr. Jaff.

Using his little finger, Carson pushed the thing home. Oddly enough the metal seemed to be flexible enough to assume the shape of the inner ear cavity, and there was no discomfort.

"Good," murmured Mr. Jaff, smiling with relief. "Now you and me always in contact."

Carson touched his ear lightly and frowned. "What is it?" he asked.

"Just a little transceiver. Radio contact with government wherever you are. Advice and guidance, you see."

"Mm," Carson grunted doubtfully. "How do I get the thing out?"

Mr. Jaff chuckled in high delight. "Never can. Special biometal case will fuse with skin in a few minutes."

He stood up, gathering his cape about him. "Must go now. Very soon they will come for you. We shall meet again after convalescence. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Carson with a hint of ill grace.

He waited until the other man had left the room, then fumbled in his ear in a halfhearted attempt to retrieve the capsule, but already it had slipped beyond the reach of his little finger. For the first time since his rebirth he felt disgruntled and almost angry. He decided that he didn't like Mr. Jaff very much.

Later, in a more reflective mood, he decided that perhaps the move was justified. The transceiver was obviously a monitoring device by which they could listen to every word he uttered, or that was said to him; at the same time it was a channel of information working the opposite way, enabling authority to pass instructions almost directly into his brain. Such control might prove to be desirable. He knew nothing of his environment and of the people inhabiting this strange world of the future. If, for some unimaginable reason, he was as important as they insisted, then clearly they would feel the need to exercise some control over his conduct and behavior.

And in the long run, he thought, *I can always ignore the radio instructions if I wish, and I can communicate with others by writing, which doesn't make any sound.*

They came for him two hours later.

CHAPTER FOUR

"This is Mars," said the blond, urbane young man, pointing through the side of the transparent dome. Carson surveyed the bleak gray and yellow landscape with its irregular outcroppings of orange-colored rock. In the indigo sky a tiny

sun burned whitely near the horizon, casting long shadows over the uneven ground. The dome curved above like an enormous glass bubble supported by a fine geodetic structure of slender metallic strips; he estimated that it must have been at least a quarter of a mile in diameter. There were other domes—perhaps half a dozen of them—in the immediate vicinity, interlinked by transparent corridors.

In the dome were two rows of small, flat-roofed buildings arranged in concentric circles around a central park area, and here Carson was surprised to see fresh green grass and a variety of cultivated flowers in artistically designed beds. Men and women were walking about, wearing the brief caped costume of the period. The air was warm, and moved gently in a refreshing manner.

"An inhospitable planet," the young man continued smoothly, as if reciting a lecture. "In the early days of colonization there were tremendous problems to be overcome. The land is barren, apart from areas where a simple mosslike vegetation grows seasonally. The atmosphere is thin and contains virtually no oxygen, so you see we have to make our own. There are also frequent electrical storms, and dust storms of extreme violence."

Carson recalled the long ascent in the high-speed elevator that had brought him to the surface of the planet, inside the dome in which he was now standing. He looked around at the people walking near the gardens.

"Do they live up here?" he asked.

"No," said the young man. "Everybody lives underground, where it is easier to control the conditions of living. The basic rock of the planet is honeycombed with cities, each with its own air and water manufacturing plants. In five thousand years of planetary engineering we have accomplished a great deal. Even the spaceports are underground. The launching zones are raised up on nuclear-powered ramps as required."

"I should be interested to see that," Carson remarked.

"You will, in due course. As for this surface settlement, it is purely a relaxation center. There are perhaps a dozen of them sited at convenient points over the planet, all built to the same pattern."

"You mean—they serve as holiday camps?"

The young man smiled amiably. "In a way. It is not good

for humans to spend their lives underground all the time. There are certain undesirable psychological effects. If they choose, they can spend certain rest periods on the surface."

"And the storms you mentioned?"

"The domes are rugged enough to withstand the most violent of storms, though occasionally—" He broke off and touched his chin reminiscently. "A complete settlement was wiped out once, about two hundred years ago. Several thousand people were killed. Since then, however, we have tightened up the specifications, and the domes are stronger. In the event of a really big storm, we have facilities for rapid evacuation to the underground cities."

The young man pointed suddenly to a range of jagged red hills near the horizon. "See," he said. "Low in the sky —a brown cloud."

"Yes," Carson murmured. The cloud, which seemed to be rising up from behind the hills, looked opaque and ominous against the dark blue of the sky; and even at that distance it appeared to writhe slowly within itself.

"That is a fairly typical small dust storm, blowing from the Mestases desert. If it comes this way, you will see some fun. There may even be some electrical activity, too."

Carson nodded silently. They walked away from the edge of the dome toward the gardens.

"It is strange," said the young man, talking idly, "that even after thousands of years humans should never quite be able to adapt themselves to a full life underground. There is a racial memory, going back through evolution. Man was always a surface animal. So they like to come here, from time to time, to look at the landscape and the sun and the stars—and, of course, the two moons of Mars, Phobos and Deimos. Then there are opportunities for exploration, but one has to wear an oxygen helmet, of course. We have land vehicles and small aircraft using atomic propulsion units. In fact—"

He stood still and listened intently for a moment, then looked up into the sky. Carson tried to follow the direction of his eyes. Now he could hear the sound that had caught the other man's attention—a faint multiple whine of power, growing louder. A moment later he saw the aircraft as it swept above the dome, circling and losing altitude. It was small and dart-shaped, gleaming silver in the pallid sun-

light. Presently it disappeared beyond the roof level on the far side of the dome and the whine faded into silence.

"Probably a sight-seer frightened by the approaching storm," remarked the young man. "There is an automatic glide beam which takes over and brings the aircraft in very quickly, in cases of emergency. The hangar is actually underneath the dome, with an airlock outside."

"I should like to go outside the dome sometime," said Carson. "Perhaps I could take a vehicle or a plane and look around."

"Certainly, in a day or two. For the present there are more important things to be done. For example, in less than a minute you are going to enter the apartment which is to be your home for the next three weeks, and you will meet the woman who will live with you and look after you during that time."

The young man looked Carson over with humorous eyes. "You are a lucky man," he observed. "Competence was specially chosen by a government committee for the assignment. She is probably the most beautiful and intelligent woman on Mars."

"Competence?" Carson echoed questioningly.

The young man looked puzzled for an instant. "That is her first name," he explained. "It is the custom to use a first name which expresses in some degree our job or personality or function in society. For example, my name is Aptitude Shenn—I happen to be a rather good vocational psychologist. Your Mr. Jaff is known as Mentor Jaff, because it is his job to supervise and instruct. I have a friend named Excision Horther who is an excellent surgeon. Do you understand?"

"Well, yes," Carson admitted doubtfully.

"Your woman's full name is Miss Competence Cayne," said the young man, with a mischievous smile. "You will certainly find her most competent in every respect."

Carson made no comment. They continued on their way to the gardens and the inner circle of apartment blocks.

Competence Cayne was all that the young man had implied, and more, Carson decided. In the twentieth century, in wide screen and Technicolor, she would have created immense queues at every box office in the Western Hemisphere.

She was the right height, and, whatever one's standards, the right shape, and her bronze hair had a fascinating metallic sheen. Her eyes were a lively green. She possessed an indefinable dignity and poise of bearing, and her smile was warm and welcoming. Her costume and cape were in green and gold, and she wore gold sandals to match.

Carson, who had also been fitted with a brief costume and cape in a pastel blue color, felt confused and embarrassed in her presence. The urbane young man had left after performing a simple introduction, and they were alone in a clinically white room with a long window and metal furniture.

The girl invited him to sit down, which he did awkwardly, then said in a honeyed voice: "Perhaps I ought to explain something of the program planned for you, Mr. Carson. Obviously you must find things rather perplexing."

Carson nodded mutely.

"Basically you are here, under my wing, as it were, for rehabilitation, to enable you to take your place as a normal citizen in our Martian society. There are many things to learn, and one of the most important is language. Inside three weeks we shall teach you to speak as we do."

"You're optimistic," he said sardonically.

"You will find it simple enough," she said, smiling, "and probably much simpler than I find your antiquated English grammar. Our modern language is international and agglutinative. We have syllables derived originally from most of the important languages which were in common use on Earth, and they express specific ideas. All we do is join syllables together to make up more complex ideas. A complete thought—a sentence if you like—is expressed in one word. We think in terms of sentences rather than individual words, just as an architect visualizes the structure rather than the separate bricks."

"You must think of me as naive," Carson said humbly. "Here I am—a man from a past which died eight thousand years ago. Surely you must look on me as some kind of uncivilized prehistoric—well, monster, if you like."

For the first time the tiny transceiver in his ear clicked into active life. Quietly but distinctly the voice of Mr. Jaff spoke into his brain. *Wrong attitude, Mr. Carson. Do not*

denigrate yourself. You are contemporary human and very important. Speak with much assurance.

"You don't look like a monster to me," said the girl.

Carson grinned wryly. "Perhaps I was exaggerating. It's just that I feel a little out of place in this advanced technology. I need time to get used to things."

Better, said the voice of Mr. Jaff.

"You will get used to things very quickly," the girl remarked. "Tomorrow you will meet your instructors who will teach you language, modern sociology, politics, and give you an outline of scientific progress during the last eight thousand years. Today you can relax."

"I'm relaxing as best I can."

She crossed to a cupboard inset into a wall and opened a sliding door. "This will help you," she said, producing a flask of blue liquid and two ornately cut glasses. She poured a quantity of the fluid into each glass, then handed one to him.

"In the old days they used to drink alcohol for its narcotic properties," she explained. "Today we have other uses for alcohol. This is much better, and not so depressing."

Carson held the glass to his nose and sniffed at the blue liquid; the odor was faintly sweet and pungent, reminiscent of chloroform.

"What's it called?" he asked.

"Sonar. Drink it. You will feel better."

Drink it, urged the voice of Mr. Jaff inside his ear.

Carson put the glass to his mouth and tilted it. The blue liquid spread immediately over his tongue like a volatile spirit, and the cloying fumes burned their way into his lungs. He coughed in a sudden spasm. A moment later he was aware of a feeling of warm well-being. He sipped some more, and this time he did not cough.

"Good," he acknowledged. "Very good."

She smiled knowledgeably at him.

His brain spun in search of a topic of conversation; suddenly he felt in a discursive mood. "Tell me about Earth," he suggested. "Are things the same there? And the moon, and Venus—"

"Patience, Mr. Carson. You will learn all in the course of time. Earth has changed considerably since your day. There have been many wars, and for centuries there was universal

radioactivity. Earth is a planet of strange mutants, but there are isolated colonies of normal people, like you and me."

"And the other planets—Venus, Saturn, Neptune—"

"There is a small colony on Venus surviving under almost intolerable conditions of arid heat, and a research team operating in the twilight zone on Mercury, which is the nearest planet to the sun. The other planets are largely uninhabitable because of extremely high gravity and atmospheres of ammonia and methane. There are expeditions on two of the moons of Jupiter—Ganymede and Io."

"Expeditions from where?"

"From Mars, of course," she said, smiling. "Earth has too many domestic problems to concern itself with long range space exploration. Apart from routine freight runs to the moon—which is a kind of export exchange center—Earth has abandoned interplanetary flight."

"Tell me," said Carson, with sudden interest, "who governs this network of planets and moons of planets?"

The voice of Mr. Jaff whispered deep in his ear: *Do not ask political questions. All will be explained later.*

"That is a controversial question," said the girl discreetly. "We are hoping that you will help us to resolve it."

Carson, obeying Mr. Jaff's instructions, did not pursue the point, but he filed it in a pigeonhole of his mind for future reference.

"It seems to me," he said after a pause, "that the Martian colony has to some extent gained ascendancy over Earth so far as spaceflight is concerned."

"In every phase of science," she remarked.

"Are there immortals on Earth?"

"No."

He frowned in bewilderment. "I find it difficult to understand—"

"It is simple enough," she explained. "When the first expeditions landed on Mars to establish a bridgehead through space, the majority of Earth's top scientists were sent to the new planet—in particular the biophysicists and psychoneurologists, whose task it was to make sure that the human system could be adapted to survival under alien conditions. Over the course of two or three centuries, Mars became the rendezvous for the finest scientific minds that Earth could produce. There were plans to launch expeditions to

other planets, and even blueprints for a starship, after Nielsen had developed the photon drive. Then came the big atomic war which devastated the home planet. The scientists stayed on Mars and watched the cobalt bombs exploding through electron telescopes. Miraculously, Earth was not entirely destroyed, and in the course of five thousand years much of the damage was undone. The scientists still stayed on Mars, but a number of reconnaissance flights were made to Earth. The reports were depressing."

"Surely things could never have gone so far."

She smiled ironically. "You are from the twentieth century. You witnessed the beginnings of the ultimate holocaust. You were lucky to be privileged to spend your eight thousand years of death in the sterile vacuum of space. You missed the carnage."

"And now?"

"And now," she echoed. "Life is tenacious. Even during the dark ages after the atomic war the pattern of organized society continued here and there, and the elements of industry and finance survived. Earth is strong again, but it is a very different planet from the one you knew in the long dead past."

"I get the impression," Carson began, but he never completed his sentence. Outside the building, something began to moan and howl with savage intensity; a tremendous echoing crash reverberated in the air. The staccato sound of innumerable tons of gravel rattling on a hollow tin roof assailed his ears. Alarmed, he hurried to the window and stared out, above the skyline, to the great spreading curvature of the dome.

The sky was ebony, but within the darkness beyond the dome something swirled and spun in an incredible dervish dance. Lightning flashed simultaneously in half a dozen places. The sharp thunder of the cascading stones increased to an intolerable pitch. Suddenly he was aware that the girl was holding his arm and smiling at him reassuringly.

"Just a storm," she said quietly, "and a fairly normal one at that. Come outside and watch it."

He followed her out of the building and onto the soft green lawn between the flower beds. Dozens of people were already congregated there, staring upward through the high ceiling of the dome. Carson looked, too.

The storm was an immense area of marbled, undulating blackness, heaving and twisting low in the sky above the dome. From the dark venomous oval, forks of incandescent lightning stabbed angrily at the ground. Like an enormous black beetle prowling the night on legs of crackling fire, the cloud moved forward, hurling unimaginable masses of grit and sand and rock at the smooth surface of the dome. The noise was deafening, and the lightning blinding.

Fear squirmed in his abdomen, and he turned anxiously to the girl, but she was calm and passive, showing only an academic interest in the phenomenon.

"The air spins in a horizontal plane," she shouted above the tumult of the bombardment. "It sucks up the loose top surface of the desert and carries it along, and there's a kind of electrostatic effect, like particles in a vacuum chamber. It will blow itself out within a hundred miles."

The beetle was passing over. Already gray light filtered through the edge of the cloud, and the lightning began to cluster more remotely on the limits of the settlement. Presently the noise and the turmoil began to fade. Carson and the girl went back indoors.

"Impressed?" she inquired, putting her hands on his shoulders.

"Depressed," he countered.

"They are commonplace," she said. "We frequently have two or three minor storms a day, and sometimes we have a really big one that goes on for hours. The lightning is so bright and continuous that it hurts the eyes."

"Give me the green fields of Earth," he murmured nostalgically.

"For what they're worth here and now, you can *have* the green fields of Earth," she retorted.

Later, after a satisfying meal followed by more of the blue Sonar fluid, the girl said, "We are immortal, and there is no longer any need for fertility," she explained. "Consequently the functions of the body, and the nervous reflexes, can be adapted and sharpened in the interests of recreation. When they reconditioned your body, they made certain changes which will please you."

"I'm not sure that I understand," he said hesitantly.

"In a little while, you will understand very well, Mr. Carson."

CHAPTER FIVE

The next morning Carson received his first lesson in language. He was escorted by the pleasant young man known as Aptitude Shenn to a small square building resembling a clinic where he was introduced to Dr. Semantic Groor, a gangling youth with aged eyes.

"The essential thing," said Dr. Groor, after the formal introductions had been made, "is to impress on your brain in the form of memory tracks a basic vocabulary of sounds and syllables and their significance, and also to establish a cerebral relationship between syllabic ideas and concepts amounting to what you might call syntax and grammar. This we do electronically, with the aid of a machine derived originally from the electroencephalograph of your century—but in reverse, if you know what I mean."

Carson nodded dumbly.

"In addition, there are ancillary devices—video display of pictures and abstract patterns, synchronized sounds from a semantic integrator, and techniques involving hypnosis. In three days you will have a working knowledge of the language. In three weeks you will be fluent, without a trace of accent."

The doctor led Carson into a small adjacent room and ushered him into a deep, inclined chair backing onto a console of electronic equipment. The chair was soft and comfortable, almost embracing. Dr. Groor fitted a complicated network of straps and electrodes over Carson's head, pressing home the points of contact so that they pricked his scalp. Carson fidgeted uneasily. Switches clicked behind him, and power surged through the equipment with a faint throbbing hum.

"Language is communication," the doctor announced, speaking as if to himself. "Music is a language, and so is color as employed in art, but they communicate to the senses rather than the intellect. The most perfect language is mathe-

matics. A simple formula can express an abstract idea so complex that it could not be communicated in a million words. I often think it is a pity that humans do not communicate with each other mathematically."

"Yes," Carson agreed politely, "but how would one say good night in mathematics?"

In his ear the tiny transceiver clicked admonishingly. *Do not be facetious,* said the reproving voice of Mr. Jaff. *Dr. Groor important semantic scientist. Heed him.*

Dr. Groor, for his part, had ignored Carson's question. He seemed to be dwelling in some remote inner world, and his deep eyes possessed the glazed fervor of the ascetic.

"However," he went on, "we are limited to the sound waves produced by the human larynx, and restricted to syllabic sound formations which owe their semantic meaning largely to imagery in the visual or aural sense. We have to do the best we can with the material available. In any case, our existing vocabulary was established many centuries ago by usage. However desirable it might be to invent a new, logical language, it would introduce too many practical difficulties."

Carson made vague noises of agreement.

"So," said Dr. Groor, "I am going to teach you our language, however inferior it might be. I could teach you a new, efficient and greatly superior language, but as you would be the only person capable of speaking it, you could hardly communicate, could you?"

"I suppose not," Carson conceded.

The doctor sighed with ennui. "We shall have to be satisfied with second best. That, I fear, is a characteristic of life—the eternal compromise, the reluctance to break with the past, the adaptation of old ideas in preference to the invention of new. You have one consolation, my friend. The language you are about to learn, bad as it is, is infinitely better than the one which you yourself speak."

"It served me very well," Carson pointed out.

"That was eight thousand years ago. Advances in technology demand advances in human communication. Even in your day, a scientist could hardly have written down the specification of a space rocket or an atomic reactor in Egyptian hieroglyphics."

Carson found himself suppressing a smile. Another switch

clicked quietly behind him, and the electronic machinery hummed more insistently. Dr. Groor walked round to the front of his chair and stared down at him intently.

"Are you ready?" he inquired.

Carson inclined his head.

"The first lesson is simple enough. The equipment will impress on your brain the basic five hundred syllables of the language, with their meaning, and will establish elementary relationships between the syllables so that you can build up more complex words. You will feel nothing, but the syllables will emerge into your mind rather in the way that forgotten memories sometimes arise spontaneously."

The doctor disappeared behind the chair, and Carson settled down to his first session of semantic indoctrination.

Carson bent down and pulled up a cluster of tiny green plants. Examining them closely he observed that each consisted of a transparent globular structure, no larger than a pin-head, mounted on a thin stalk of pallid green. Inside each minute globe was a mass of bright fronds, almost microscopic in dimensions. He pressed the stalks between his fingers and found them dry and brittle.

"It's really a plant within a plant," explained the girl named Competence. "The fernlike growth develops inside its own spherical greenhouse, which traps and conserves the warmth of the sun. It also acts as a storage tank for moisture drawn from the deeper levels of subsoil by extremely long roots. Biologists believe that this plant is the final attempt at adaptation to adverse conditions by Martian vegetation. It's the only surviving species."

They were standing on a vast level expanse of Martian plain, on which the green vegetation lay like a thick carpet. A small atom-powered hovercraft waited idly about a hundred yards away. Both Carson and the girl were wearing oxygen helmets and packs, together with a lightweight one-piece suit intended to protect their limbs from the cold bite of the thin Martian air. The sun rode high and white in the dark blue sky, while low on the horizon Phobos gleamed in a three-quarter phase.

Seen from the air, the belt of vegetation had been a strip extending roughly north to south from horizon to hori-

zon, and some fifteen miles wide. Carson had commented on this, using the radio-talk facilities built into his helmet.

Early explorers had been puzzled by this phenomenon, the girl had explained. The vegetation zones formed a criss-cross pattern of intersecting lines, virtually straight, across the face of the planet, fading out at the poles. Between the vegetation belts there was only barren desert. It was not until the geologists and seismologists began to examine the rock strata forming the crust of Mars that the true explanation emerged.

On a planet almost devoid of water, and certainly without seas or oceans, the rocks were of igneous origin, created by fire rather than laid down by sedimentation in water. As the planet cooled slowly through the ages, the brittle shell cracked, breaking up the surface into a kind of patchwork pattern. Along the flaw lines some of the internal heat of the planet was able to escape and diffuse into the soil above, raising the temperature by several degrees and creating the bare conditions necessary to sustain life and survival in a primitive cholorphyll-activated type of vegetation.

"So there never were any canals on Mars," Carson had remarked.

"Neither canals, nor any kind of animal life at all, so far as we have been able to determine. Just this bubble-grass, as it's called."

"And the other planets?"

"Nothing exciting. Several kinds of complex crystalline molecules on Venus that seem to exhibit some of the properties of life, without actually being alive. They're probably DNA activated. And I believe they found a lowly fungus on Ganymede, but we haven't had samples for analysis yet. It may be of terrestrial origin, taken there in spore form on the expedition ship. We take every precaution, but sometimes a spore may slip through the sterilization process."

"It seems strange to me that humans should be able to set up colonies under conditions which are basically hostile to life."

The girl smiled knowledgeably. "The answer is power and planetary engineering. In your century they were able to irrigate and open up the deserts on Earth, build townships in the wastelands, extract minerals and oil. We have done the same kind of thing, but on a much bigger scale, and using

immense power which in your day could hardly have been visualized."

They walked arm in arm across the soft carpet of bubble-grass. Several days had elapsed since the beginning of his vacation on the surface of the planet. Already he was conversing in the concisely blended sentences and phrases of the new language, and he was beginning to feel like a veteran Martian colonist. As time went by he found himself drawn more and more toward the girl; worse, he was increasingly aware of an overpowering feeling of possessiveness toward her. It was a subtle combination of her physical beauty and personality, but he recognized the danger in allowing emotion to gain an ascendancy. There was virtually no emotion among these people; they enjoyed life in a cold-blooded intellectual way, as one might sit down to enjoy a game of chess, and the only apparent motive for seeking pleasure was the gratification that pleasure could provide.

Aptitude Shenn had explained on one occasion that from the point of view of the inner mind, reading and interpreting the data supplied by the nervous system of the body, there were basically two types of experience: sensory stimuli conveying information about the environment, and sensual stimuli recording the body's reactions to the environment in terms of pleasure and pain. Better living, he had suggested, was a simple matter of mechanics: improving the environment, and modifying the bodily response to it—intensifying pleasure and attenuating pain by means of psychoneural surgery.

It seemed to work well enough in practice, but Carson had reservations about the ethics and morality of interfering with nature in that way.

"What happens after the end of this holiday?" he asked the girl.

She eyed him archly as they walked along. "You will return to the city beneath the surface, and I shall return to my duty elsewhere."

"That's the point," Carson said glumly. "It seems so futile that we should come together, then separate. Surely we can continue to meet—"

"You must get used to the fact that people come and go," she advised solemnly. "It is important to avoid affinity

and interdependence. We are each of us individual citizens, and in so far as we allow ourselves to become dependent on others, so we fail to give the State the services of a full individual."

"Is the State more important than the individual?"

She smiled reprovingly at him. "The State *is* the individual, and the individual is the State. Our first loyalty is to the society which has given us immortality."

"That sounds suspiciously like a doctrine," he observed. "Just forget for a moment that you are the State. As a normal woman, haven't you ever been in love?"

She stopped smiling, but amusement lingered in her green eyes. "As a *normal* woman, the answer is no. What you call love is an obsessive form of compulsion neurosis. It used to be a fairly common disease of adolescents in the days when there *were* adolescents. Now that we have achieved immortality, we have the time to develop into balanced adults. No, Mr. Carson, we do not fall in love, and I strongly advise you to guard against emotional feeling. There are surgical techniques in psychoneurology for curing conditions of emotional distortion."

Presently they returned to the hover aircraft. The girl took over the controls and flew at high speed toward the surface settlement in its transparent dome. During the return journey the voice of Mr. Jaff spoke quietly into Carson's ear, no longer jerky and staccato, but using the blended fluency of his natural tongue.

Be careful, Mr. Carson. Do not allow the emotional pattern of a dead age to twist your life in this new era. The Cayne woman is merely a part of your rehabilitation procedure. Do not pursue useless affinities. There will be other women in the thousands of years that lie ahead of you. Emotion is for the mortal animal, living under the shadow of approaching death; it has no place among immortals. From the vantage point of eternity, one takes a more remote and objective view.

Carson made no reply, but simply studied the girl's enchanting profile as the aircraft sped swiftly through the thin Martian atmosphere toward the settlement.

The spaceport was an enormous cavern buried deep below the surface of Mars. From the entrance it was impossible

to see the far wall; and the ceiling, perhaps a quarter of a mile high, was a vast area of liquid light, as if a molten sun had been spread over the solid rock. The air, cool and refreshing, was generated and circulated by an atmosphere plant beneath the floor on which he stood.

Carson was accompanied by a tall, leather-skinned astronaut named Trajectory Brince, who had been assigned by authority to show him how the Martian colony dealt with the simple matter of spaceflight. One look at the line of giant spaceships poised on their ramps along the length of the cavern convinced Carson that if spaceflight was simple, as Brince had implied, then it was only so because of the tremendous complexity of the space vehicles. Alongside any one of these ships the old, ill-fated *Wanderer II* would have been a mere cigar.

"These are freighters," said Brince as they walked toward the nearest ship. "They operate a regular schedule to the Moon, where they pick up raw materials and synthetics which we lack on Mars. In return we export finished products and equipment which they can't make on Earth. There is also a periodic run to Venus, and occasional provisioning runs to the expeditions on Mercury and Ganymede."

"Why doesn't Earth send freight ships to Mars?" Carson inquired.

"Because they haven't got any big enough or powerful enough. It takes them all their time to run a shuttle service to the Moon. Also, politics are involved. We can no more land on Earth than they can land on Mars."

"Why not?"

Brince glanced wryly at Carson. "Haven't you been told? Earth and Mars are in a state of war. Quiescent, of course. There hasn't been any actual fighting for more than two thousand years, but the situation has produced a fine crop of restrictions and prohibitions and do's and don't's—mainly don't's."

Carson expressed his surprise, and Brince merely grinned.

"It all started when we tried to re-establish contact with Earth after a particularly vicious series of nuclear wars. They were busy trying to rebuild their industries. They wanted equipment and scientists in exchange for raw materials, and they also asked for genetically screened immigrants—men and women, from Mars—in order to introduce unmutated

strains into terrestrial human breeding. You've no idea how much trouble mutation caused, and is still causing. If you'd seen some of the monsters that were produced by genetic damage in the atomic wars—"

"Naturally you refused," Carson put in.

"Not immediately. We were prepared to be reasonable. The fact was that not a single man or woman or scientist was willing to return to Earth to live. They didn't care for all that radiation and the rationing and the disease. So we had to decline. The military government on Earth immediately cut off all supply of raw materials, which left us in difficulties. That was the start of the first interplanetary war."

They had reached the enormous spaceship now, and were walking among the vertical girders of the service gantry. Engineers were swarming over the hull, moving equipment into open ports. The ship was streamlined in the manner of a swallow, with slender swept-back wings. It reared up on its tilted ramp as if ready at any instant to soar through the ceiling and into the vacuum of space.

"Atomic propulsion-up to escape velocity," said Brince, "then gravity reactors and photon drive. It's possible to reach speeds in excess of five hundred miles a second, though we seldom do, because of the high acceleration involved. No human could withstand it. Sometimes we cruise at around two hundred miles a second."

"Who started the war?" asked Carson, unwilling to change the subject.

"We did," Brince stated blandly. "We spent about two hundred years building an armed invasion fleet, then we blasted off from Mars and established a beachhead on Earth, in the Mediterranean area. Took the terrestrials completely by surprise, I can tell you, and held them at bay for half a century. But we had our problems, too—mainly logistics. The supply lines from Mars to Earth were too vulnerable, and we lost a lot of ships. And we didn't get much in the way of raw material because of systematic sabotage. With the aid of superior weapons and good communications we managed to hold all the territory surrounding the Mediterranean, but we failed to get a footing in America or Russia, as they were called in your age."

"I doubt if the Mediterranean area would be much good to anyone," Carson remarked, "particularly from an indus-

trial point of view. Oil, perhaps, in Africa and the Near East, and some minerals, but not much else."

"True," Brince admitted, "but we had to hold on. Withdrawal would have meant defeat and loss of prestige. In the end, both sides came to terms. There was a cease-fire and a trade agreement. Several hundred years of uneasy peace followed. Then there was another war, and after that a third. They all ended in stalemate."

"Did they get their men and women and scientists?"

"No," said Brince, shaking his head vigorously. "We compromised by offering a scientific and technological advisory service to help them rebuild their civilization. We have teams of scientists on Mars who try to solve Earth's problems by remote control, as it were. Trade channels were set up, using the Moon as a kind of exchange warehouse. Our ships are not allowed to go nearer to the Earth than the lunar orbit—otherwise they might get shot down by a nuclear homing missile."

"It all sounds very unsatisfactory to me," Carson observed sadly. "Why can't human beings get together to solve their problems instead of attempting to destroy each other?"

"They never have done so throughout history. Earth is governed by a ruthless military dictatorship, and although we exchange commodities and materials, we are still officially at war. The next invasion will be the final one. We have learned a great deal in earlier campaigns, and we shall make no mistakes. We have the strength, the ships and the weapons —and we have you."

"Me?" Carson echoed, aghast.

Brince laughed tersely. "You are our principal weapon, Carson. Don't ask me how or why. You'll find out all in the course of time."

After that, Brince became relatively uninformative, as if aware that he might already have said too much. He confined himself to conversation about the rocket fleet, answering Carson's technical questions in a facile, expert manner. They watched as one of the freighters, ready for launching, was towed on its ramp by a powerful squat tractor (an iron mule, Brince pointed out) which pulled it on to a huge metal platform level with the floor of the cavern. From afar came the thunder of power generators, and slowly

the platform began to ascend toward the distant roof, without support, like a steel magic carpet.

"Gravity reactors," Brince explained. "A controlled version of anti-matter. Expensive to operate, but it saves having to use a lot of even more expensive elevating machinery."

They waited until the spaceship on its platform seemed to disappear into the haze of incandescent light obscuring the ceiling. "There is actually a cavity, but the light conceals it," said Brince. "It's like trying to see a sunspot without a neutral filter. The ship will go right up through the ceiling, then through an airlock, and out onto the surface. We can go up and watch from an observation dome if you wish."

Carson indicated his agreement. They walked back across the floor of the cavern to the main entrance, where Brince ushered him into a small elevator compartment and pressed a wall button. Wind sighed softly around them, and suddenly the elevator was whining upward through a long vertical shaft.

"Compressed air this time," said Brince. "It's cheaper than anti-gravity for small loads."

The elevator stopped quickly so that Carson's stomach turned over in a way that reminded him of free fall in space. They stepped out into a narrow corridor and emerged, beyond an airlock, into a small transparent dome housing control equipment of unimaginable function. Two men were adjusting knobs and switches. Beyond the dome the spaceship rested silently on its sloping ramp, awaiting the moment of take-off.

As he watched, the ramp tilted slowly toward the vertical, pushing the nose of the spacecraft high into the dark blue sky. A chronometer impassively ticked off the seconds. Abruptly the jets at the base of the ship exploded into yellow cascading flame. The great rocket rose tumultuously on its pedestal of fire, gathering speed, then veered off into the darkness of space like an enormous bird.

"The Moon in four days," Brince commented, "or perhaps less if the pilot feels inclined to give her the full boost."

Carson nodded appreciatively. "It's not so very different, after all—from my own day, I mean. One can still sense a feeling of nostalgia. The basic procedures don't change."

Brince regarded him shrewdly. "There's more to it than

basic procedure, Carson. And watch out for that feeling of nostalgia you mentioned. It can be a dangerous thing."

Carson fully expected a lecture from Mr. Jaff on his indiscretion, but the tiny transceiver in his ear remained silent. Perhaps Mr. Jaff didn't feel quite so strongly about nostalgia as he did about love.

CHAPTER SIX

It was with a feeling of utter desolation that Carson said good-bye to Competence Cayne at the end of his three weeks' stay in the surface settlement. He knew only too well that he had allowed himself to become emotionally attached to her to an undesirable extent, and he could not avoid an overwhelming sense of personal loss when the moment for parting came. There was nothing he could say to her; Mr. Jaff would undoubtedly be listening—and in any case he was forced to admit to himself the futility of attempting to appeal to her on an emotional level. *Love is an obsessive form of compulsion neurosis,* she had once said, and there was certainly nothing obsessive or compulsive or neurotic about Competence Cayne.

They said their good-byes quite formally in the apartment. In a few minutes two official guides were scheduled to take him back to the underground city. He held her in his arms for a while, kissing her lightly. She remained passive but amiable, as if already relaxing now that her tour of duty was almost over. Presently she withdrew herself gently from his embrace.

"Well, you are now rehabilitated, to all intents and purposes," she said. "I wish you success in whatever assignments you may be elected to carry out."

"Thank you," he replied solemnly. "Personally, I think I would prefer to stay on the surface. I was just beginning to settle down."

"One cannot remain convalescent for ever. You have learned a great deal about our society, and you have learned to speak our language fluently. You must take your place in the scheme of things."

"What do you imagine will happen to me?"

She shook her head slowly. "Even if I knew, I would not be permitted to say. In time you will know everything, so do not be impatient. Remember you are immortal, too."

Through the window he could see the guides approaching across the green lawn. He kissed her for the last time and said, "Will we ever meet again?"

"Perhaps, in the course of centuries," she answered.

A few minutes later he accompanied the guides to the elevator shaft that led to the city buried deep in the bedrock of Mars. In a sense this was a new adventure, for he had seen practically nothing of the underground city even though he had spent years in the antimortic clinic.

The city, he found, was built in levels, the top level being located about a mile and a half below the surface. This was primarily a residential zone, housing some twenty thousand inhabitants of the city. There were three other levels, one below the other, accommodating the administrative, commercial, industrial and scientific centers. Each level was an immense horizontal chamber having an area of some four square miles, and cut out of the basic rock strata by the controlled use of atomic explosives. Within the chambers, buildings and avenues were laid out spaciously in a conventional way, but the buildings extended from floor to ceiling, an expanse of some ten stories. The avenues were lined with miniature flowering shrubs in a variety of bright, cheerful colors, and at road intersections ornamental gardens provided a touch of gaiety. Quaint, streamlined vehicles without wheels glided noiselessly along the roads, suspended inexplicably about twelve inches above the surface. Probably antigravity, Carson thought. Warm even light came from large luminescent panels mounted on the roof. As always, the air was cool, fresh and invigorating.

The guides took him direct to the second level and delivered him to an official in a massive block of offices. He was then escorted along corridors to a translucent door with a small metallic panel bearing the inscription: *Mentor Jaff —Department of Co-ordination.* The official pressed a tiny button set in the wall, at which an electronic tone echoed hollowly in the corridor. The door slid quietly open, disappearing into the wall. Carson entered the room alone.

Tubby Mr. Jaff, his red hair slightly awry, was sitting at a

desk of futuristic aspect, watching images on a stacked bank of video screens mounted in the adjacent wall. The office resembled a laboratory, and contained, so far as Carson could judge, more electronic equipment than furniture. He remembered the aural transceiver and decided that this must be Mr. Jaff's monitoring center; at the same time he found himself wondering just how many citizens of Mars were subjected to radio eavesdropping—and video surveillance, too, from the appearance of the active screens.

Mr. Jaff clicked five switches, one after the other, swung round in his chair, stood up and came round his desk to greet Carson.

"You're looking well," he observed affably. "Fit and relaxed. I can see that you made the most of your three weeks on the surface. Sit down, Mr. Carson."

Carson sat down on one of the slender metal chairs. Mr. Jaff hovered around portentously.

"Say something," he went on. "Say 'The optimistic inhabitants of the refulgent satellite were dedicated to the aesthetic principles of technocracy.' Say it in one semantic blended sound."

Carson thought for a moment, then said it. Mr. Jaff beamed in genuine pleasure.

"I can see that Dr. Groor has excelled himself," he remarked. "The accent is perfect—the blending, too, though perhaps just a little premeditated. However, given time—" He waved his hands airily toward Carson. "Now for practical details. We have an apartment for you on the first level—a luxurious apartment, I might say, where you will be well looked after. Anything you need, just ask for. The adjacent apartments will be occupied by very attractive women."

Carson made a wry smile. "I've already met the woman I would choose to be with—" he began, but Mr. Jaff shook his head vehemently.

"Impossible, Mr. Carson; *she* is a very important member of a government research team."

"I see," said Carson reflectively.

Mr. Jaff's eyes twinkled merrily. "You will have no cause for complaint. The majority of our citizens would wish to be in your privileged position."

"But why should I be privileged? I don't fully understand my place in the pattern of your society."

"At the very top, Mr. Carson," said the other man genially.

"But why?" Carson repeated.

"Because you are Robert Carson—the man who sacrificed his life in the first attempt to orbit the Moon, using a primitive liquid-fuel rocket. You died in that childish, suicidal gadget called the *Wanderer II*. You were dead for eight thousand years, and then we gave you back your life. Isn't that a good enough reason?"

"No," said Carson firmly, beginning to feel vaguely irritated by Mr. Jaff's faintly patronizing manner. "You're trying to advance sentimentality as a motive, but I know that sentiment plays no part in Martian society."

Mr. Jaff raised one amused eyebrow and eyed him shrewdly but said nothing.

"I don't believe this revitalized hero angle at all," Carson continued. "If there's a motive, it has to be a good solid motive based on reason rather than sentiment. Hero worship is plainly false."

"How right you are," commented Mr. Jaff, pursing his lips. "Perhaps I was simply indulging in a little harmless flattery. At the same time, I merely recited fact. In your own day you were a very great hero."

"This is not my own day. Heroism rarely survives a period of eight thousand years. I'll admit that perhaps I have what you might call an interesting case history, and I'm grateful to your scientists for having restored my life. But what I really want to know is, What do you intend to do with me, Mr. Jaff?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Jaff. "Absolutely nothing."

"Meaning?"

"We have no plans for you, Mr. Carson, other than to make life as pleasant as possible for you. Of course, there may be minor matters of publicity to attend to. Video recordings, interviews, and so on. People will be interested in you, particularly on Earth."

"Earth?" Carson echoed suspiciously.

"Why not? Your point of origin."

Carson sighed impatiently. "I still don't understand. Are you trying to tell me that I am to be kept like some kind of animal in a zoo—as a kind of interesting specimen for the inhabitants of two planets to talk about?"

"Not at all. By merely being alive you are already fulfilling

a most important function. Frankly, it would take too long to explain here and now, and there are a number of policy matters to be decided. Military matters, too, I might add. You, Mr. Carson, may well prove to be the means of saving Earth from itself. As you know, the Martian colony has on three occasions attempted to take over control of Earth in its own interests—but war across millions of miles of space is an extremely difficult and hazardous operation. More than anything, we have needed a symbol, a figurehead to apply a strong psychological thrust to any projected military campaign. It is our belief that you are that symbol."

Carson spread out his hands helplessly. "But I still don't understand why?"

Mr. Jaff chuckled. "Of course you don't, but you will. You must have patience. It is all a simple matter of economics. You, Mr. Carson, own the Earth. Just take my word for it. The Earth is yours, and that is why you are so important to us. While we possess you, we also possess Earth in law. That is why we must take good care of you."

He crossed to the desk and pressed a button. "Meanwhile, forget about it. Relax, and amuse yourself. Learn as much as you can about our Martian society and technology—it will help you to orientate yourself, and when the time comes for explanations you will understand things more easily."

"I'll try," said Carson wearily.

The door slid open and a smooth, dark-haired young man entered the room.

"Take Mr. Carson to his apartment on the first level," Mr. Jaff ordered. "Introduce him to the women and show him the facilities available."

The young man smiled and inclined his head obediently. Carson pushed himself out of his chair and made his way to the door.

The apartment was certainly luxurious, as Mr. Jaff had stated, and it was also novel. The main room was circular in shape, about twenty feet in diameter, with one oval window overlooking a broad avenue with a central garden. The decor was, if anything, effeminate, as opposed to the usual clinically cold color schemes in general favor. The furniture was bigger and more comfortable. The floor was covered with a green carpet which, on close inspection, proved to be

a miniature and perfectly accurate facsimile of an area of Martian bubble-grass. Three doors in the room opened into a circular passage in which further doors gave access to other rooms. One was a library, but in place of books on the wall shelves there were metallic plaques bearing finely engraved patterns, and there was an electronic reproducing device fitted with an attachment which appeared to be designed to cover the head. Like the language indoctrinator, this was a machine for injecting visual images directly into the mind, so that one lived the story and, in a dreamlike way, the characters and situations became real.

There was a restfully designed bedroom, an all electronic kitchen, a cold-store room with frost on the walls, and a bathroom with a huge bath in which one could easily swim. Other doors opened into further corridors which connected with other apartments sited concentrically around his own. There were four in all, occupied by the women who had been assigned to look after him.

The women! To meet them all at once was an ordeal, particularly when the memory of Competence Cayne still obsessed his mind. They were all young, within an apparent age group of twenty to thirty, though, as Carson realized only too well, physical appearance was no guide to their real ages as immortals. The prettiest had auburn hair and the pinkest complexion he had seen on Mars; another was a blonde, almost a platinum blonde, with an attractive piquancy of features; the third had long jet black hair and sultry eyes; and the fourth was an ordinary girl with brown hair and blue eyes, but, in some subtle way, the most feminine and beautiful of them all.

Despite the quadruple charm which they exerted on him, Carson dismissed them at the earliest possible moment, with as much decorum as he could muster, and retired to the circular room, where he sat by the window for a long time watching the hover-cars flash by on the highway below, lost in his own private world of confused thought.

"I'm important," he told himself, "and yet all I'm required to do is precisely nothing—just lounge about and amuse myself. Jaff has hinted that I own the Earth, but I don't really know whether he means it or not. It's an impossible concept, anyway. How can anyone own a planet? Particularly a planet ravaged by atomic wars and peopled by mutants—

a planet with which we are in a state of suspended war. Jaff is talking nonsense for some obscure purpose of his own. On the other hand, why should I be brought back to life in order to lead a reclusive lotus-eating existence in a compact, highly organized society in which every individual must surely have an allotted duty to perform?"

Let's add up the facts, he thought. *I'm Robert Carson from the twentieth century, an ordinary sort of character, certainly not a hero. When it came to the point I was terrified of death. Eight thousand years have gone by. Somehow or other they found* Wanderer II *orbiting round the sun and took my dead body from the rocket and brought me back to Mars. They gave me the full antimortic treatment, and here I am alive. So what happens? I'm sent off on a three-week vacation with a beautiful woman to learn the language and pick up snippets of information about Mars and Earth. Then I'm shut away in an apartment with four more women and told to do nothing. It doesn't add up.*

Suddenly he remembered the miniature transceiver in his ear. "Mr. Jaff," he said aloud. "Mr. Jaff, this is Carson."

The transceiver clicked faintly. *Yes,* said the resonant voice of Mr. Jaff.

"I want to know what it's all about," Carson said aggressively. "I want to know why I'm being treated like a stuffed specimen in a museum."

Mr. Jaff said smoothly, *Nonsense. You are being treated as if you were a millionaire—which is precisely what you are.*

"Why, am I a millionaire?"

Because you own Earth.

"Then if I own Earth, I shall go there. After all, Earth is my point of origin, as you yourself said."

Mr. Jaff's voice became cold and incisive. *You will go where you are told to go, Mr. Carson. Your orders are to relax and enjoy yourself, and that you will do, even if it means using force. Do not be ungrateful. We have given you your life, and now your life belongs to us.*

The transceiver clicked into silence.

"Hello," Carson shouted, as if he were using a telephone. "Hello, Mr. Jaff."

Silence mocked him. He stared sullenly out of the oval window at the wide road below and surrendered to a mood of stubborn independence. *I'll roam the city,* he thought.

I'll find something to do somewhere. Not even Jaff can force me to relax and enjoy myself if I don't want to.

Angrily he walked out of the room and made his way down to the highways of the first level.

Within a few minutes he had lost all sense of direction in the city, for the rectangular pattern of the residential blocks was always the same, and the highways were alike enough to make recognition difficult. Each road bore a number, but that did not help, for he had already forgotten the route number of the road in which his own apartment was situated.

He was glad to be lost, and walked on buoyantly, making good speed in the lesser gravity of Mars. Occasionally he passed other men and women, but they took no notice of him apart from a random curious glance here and there. The hovercars fascinated him. Coming suddenly upon a line of them parked at the side of the highway, he felt tempted to borrow one for an experimental attempt at driving, but quickly abandoned the idea as too risky. For the present it was enough to remain anonymous and free.

After walking about a mile and a half in a direction which he judged to be roughly diagonally across the city, he found himself in front of a small building resembling, in certain respects, the Underground railway stations in the London of his own age. A sign, flashing alternately on either side of the entrance, announced in big, bright letters: UP—DOWN. He recognized the place as the vertical elevator shaft in which he had traveled from the second level after his interview with Mr. Jaff—perhaps even the same one in which he had made the long descent from the surface settlement. Suddenly he saw the elevator as a further medium of escape: he could descend to the third and fourth levels and roam around the industrial and scientific zones, and . . . A fantastic idea seemed to explode in his mind. He might even find his way to one of the big spaceports and conceal himself in a rocket bound for the Moon, and from there find his way to Earth.

So staggered was he by this thought that he spent fully five minutes walking in circles around the elevator building, trying to see the plan from all angles, realizing the sheer impracticability of it, but fascinated by the possibility of revisiting his home planet. "I need time to think and make

plans," he told himself. "One can't do this kind of thing on impulse. In any case, I don't yet know where any of the spaceports are located. The one I visited is close to the surface settlement, and the settlement is vertically above the city. It's a question of direction rather than distance, but I can't reasonably make inquiries, because Mr. Jaff would overhear. It may be possible to get hold of a map, if they have such things outside government offices. At all events, the best thing to do for the moment is to explore the other levels and gain a sense of orientation in this strange anthill society."

Men and women were walking in and out of the entrance to the elevator station. He waited until a group of commuters entered in a solid mass, and tagged on behind them, following them into the building toward a barrier rail adjoining a small office. At that point he knew he had blundered.

An official at a gate in the barrier, wearing a black cape with a gold insignia across the shoulders, was inspecting cards which the travelers were producing. Carson stopped dead, then turned round and began to walk away. An instant later he was intercepted by another black-caped official.

"Can I help you?" asked the official pleasantly.

"No, no," Carson said quickly. "I've changed my mind."

The official raised his eyebrows in surprise, as if people of the Martian colony seldom if ever changed their minds.

"Which level do you want?" he demanded.

Carson said nothing, but looked around desperately, knowing that Mr. Jaff would be monitoring the unexpected conversation.

"Perhaps I'd better see your social zone assignment card," the official suggested.

"That's the trouble," Carson said, with sudden inspiration. "I forgot to bring it. I'll have to go back to my apartment to fetch it."

Without bothering to argue further he walked straight out of the elevator station and lost himself on the highway. *Perhaps Jaff didn't hear,* he thought. He couldn't eavesdrop all the time, and there must be moments when he had other things to do. But even as Carson consoled himself, the transceiver clicked ominously in his ear.

Where are you, Mr. Carson? said the voice of Mr. Jaff.

Carson made no reply, but hurried on his way.

Why did you go to the elevator station? asked the voice.

Silence from Carson.

I'm afraid you are being disobedient, even defiant. You had better return to your apartment.

Carson ignored the instruction and continued to walk on.

I'm ordering you to return to your quarters. Block fourteen on Highway seven.

A further interval of silence.

Mr. Jaff sighed audibly in Carson's ear. *Very well, Mr. Carson. There are ways and means. I'm sorry to have to do this, but you are, after all, being antisocial.*

Seconds passed by slowly. *He's given up,* Carson thought. *He's realized that even a permanent radio link can't force one to obey orders. All he can do is try to hunt me down with security officials—*

It happened so suddenly that he was taken by surprise. The transceiver in his ear burst abruptly into a nightmarish high-pitched whistle of painful intensity—a warbling discordant whistle way up in the supersonic spectrum. He stopped in his tracks, frantically clutching his head.

Go back, urged a strange new mechanical voice, speaking in metallic tones above the deafening hiss of the whistle. *Go back. Go back. Go back. Block fourteen. Highway seven. Go back. Go back.*

For minutes Carson stood motionless, biting his lips and beating his head with his fists, forcing himself to fight the noise that was boring into his brain like a high-speed drill.

Go back. Go back. Block fourteen. Highway seven. Go back.

Passers-by eyed him inquisitively, but did not stop. They knew, he realized suddenly; this was a routine, and they were familiar with it.

The whistle increased in pitch and intensity, and always there was the cold, remote voice: *Go back. Go back. Go back.*

"All right," he shouted suddenly, unable to stand the torment any longer. "I'll go back."

The whistle stopped, and the voice of Mr. Jaff whispered gently into his ear.

Now you're being sensible, Mr. Carson. You see, orders must be obeyed, and we have the means to enforce them. Go back, and do not leave the apartment again without permission.

Humbly, all defiance gone, Carson did as he was told.

CHAPTER SEVEN

For several days Carson remained in his apartment, immersed in a bitter, sullen mood. The women fed him and did their best to amuse him, but he resented their presence and made it quite clear that he preferred to be left alone. He found it difficult to sleep, for his brain was obsessed with the problem of escape. At this stage, although he knew little about the Martian social organization, he recognized the pattern of ruthless dictatorship, the subordination of the individual to the State, and the control of the mind and will by the application of scientific method. It could be, he thought ironically, that this was the ultimate destiny of the human race, to be welded into rigid social and national units by authoritarian power—the anthill society, typified physically by the underground honeycomb of highways and buildings that comprised the city. He had witnessed the beginnings of it on Earth in the twentieth century: the gradual absorption of the individual into the machinery of the State, and the establishment of totalitarian rule, as if, in some incomprehensible way, this was destined to be the next step in the communal organization of the human species. First the family, then the tribe, then the political party, and with the abolition of parties the nation, personified in a single leader; and finally the entire planetary population, directed and controlled and governed by an impersonal authority possessing the power to compel obedience.

He was eager for knowledge, but with the absence of books there was only frustration, for he could not ask questions without alerting the ever listening Mr. Jaff. However, he remembered his earlier thoughts on the subject of communication by writing, and decided to make an experiment. One afternoon he rang for the brown-haired girl who, it seemed to him, possessed more intrinsic sincerity than the others. He motioned her into a chair, then, with the aid of a

graphomatic stylus and a pad of paper, contrived to carry on a written conversation.

I want to ask you some questions, he wrote. *I can't talk because I am being monitored by the government. Will you help me?*

She took the stylus and the pad, and wrote her reply: *I'll try.*

How long have you lived on Mars?

You mean how old am I?

Yes.

Six hundred and forty-three years.

Is the government a dictatorship?

I don't know what you mean. We have a technocratic government.

Who is the leader—the president?

The words are meaningless. We have no leader.

But who decides the important issues—life and death, or war and peace?

Nobody. The issues decide themselves. The government is well aware of the climate of public opinion.

Carson sighed, and wondered for a moment whether he should abandon his quest. He made one more attempt.

People are forced by scientific means to do things that they do not wish to do. Is that democracy?

How many people really know what they want to do, anyway? They need guidance. And what is democracy?

In your technocracy, who is the leader, the most important man, the one who exercises ultimate control?

She regarded him archly before writing her reply. *You are, Robert Carson.*

Why?

Because you own the Earth.

Carson gave up at that point. It was the same old pointless circle, leading nowhere and merely adding to the confusion. The girl had obviously been well briefed, indoctrinated, brainwashed, or whatever you liked to call it. He put the stylus and pad to one side.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "I selected you because I like you most of all."

She smiled appreciatively.

"You have intelligence and you have beauty," he went on. "What is your name?" he asked.

"Zenna. Sublimity Zenna."

"Sublimity?" he queried.

"Of course," she whispered. "Would you like me to prove it?"

He thought briefly of Compentence Cayne—somehow it seemed like an eternity since he had last seen her—and then he thought of plump, devious Mr. Jaff, and on the balance he felt himself to be utterly dispassionate and cold-blooded. *They are using me,* he thought, *and therefore I am entitled to use them. They gave me my life, then took it back: now I am entitled to use it as I wish. If it comes to the point, immortal though I may be I can always seek death. For the present I shall cut my losses and console myself.*

After nearly a week of frustrating inactivity, during which Carson was confined to his apartment with no news of events in the outside world, and was confronted with the discreet reticence of the women, he received two visitors. They were tall, athletic men, wearing the black capes and gold insignia of officialdom.

"Are you the man who claims to be Robert Carson?" asked one, looking him over with cold, expressionless eyes.

"I *am* Robert Carson," he insisted.

"Then I must ask you to accompany us to the headquarters of the Internal Security Division of the Martian Executive Council."

Carson backed away in sudden apprehension. "Now wait a minute—"

"It is a State order," said the official curtly. "You must obey."

"But—is anything wrong?"

"There are a number of questions which you are required to answer."

Carson wondered whether he ought to appeal to Mr. Jaff, but decided that Jaff was probably behind the move, anyway. He made no further protest, but accompanied the men to street level and sat beside one of them in a small black hovercar while the other took the controls. The car moved forward gently, lifting itself inch by inch from the surface of the road, then suddenly hurtled forward in a burst of high acceleration. Buildings flashed past on either side, and in less than a minute they were swooping into a wide circular

tunnel that curved downward in a long spiral to the second level. He recognized the more massive buildings of the governmental administration zone. Presently the car stopped outside an imposing porch above which a large illuminated sign spelled out the words: *Internal Security Division.*

He got out of the car and was conducted into the building, along a spacious corridor and via an elevator to a room on the tenth story. Walking between the guards he entered the room, to find himself facing a group of four bleak-faced men spaced around a long table curved in the shape of a horseshoe. In the center space of the horseshoe was a swivel chair. He was invited to sit down. The officials who had brought him in retired to the end of the room near the door, where they remained standing, taut and erect.

On the table in front of each man was a white plaque bearing a number, and beyond the table, set high in the wall was a rectangular translucent panel behind which he thought he could detect shadowy movement. The men were numbered one, two, three and four, in sequence, and it soon became apparent that number one was the leader of the tribunal, for he took the initiative and did most of the talking.

"You are the man who claims to be Robert Carson," said Number One flatly, referring to a document on the table.

"I *am* Robert Carson," said Carson a little wearily.

"Whether you are, or are not, is the subject of this inquiry. At present it is a claim. There is a further claim on record—namely, that you own the Earth."

"I have never claimed that," Carson protested.

"The claim was registered on your behalf."

"Mr. Jaff suggested it. There never was any explanation, and it never made sense to me."

"If you *are* Robert Carson, then it makes excellent sense. However, your Mr. Jaff is under arrest for subversive activity contrary to the interests of the State, and you are implicated. That is why we have asked you here to answer questions."

Carson remained silent while his mind spun, trying to reconstruct his knowledge of Martian affairs from an entirely new angle. Finally he said, "I understood that Mr. Jaff was a responsible government official."

"He was," put in Number Three ominously. "Subversion is a cancer which can strike at all levels of society."

"For the purposes of this investigation," Number One went on, "you will be known as Mr. Zero—a nonentity. If you are indeed Robert Carson, then it is for you to prove it."

"So I'm guilty until proven innocent," said Carson with irony.

Number One smiled fractionally. "It is often as necessary to prove innocence as it is to prove guilt. Tell me, Mr. Zero, what makes you think that you are Robert Carson?"

"The same thing that gives anyone a sense of personal identity. I know who I am. Is that unreasonable?"

"Yes—most unreasonable. Identities can easily be changed with the aid of modern techniques in psychoneural indoctrination. You were in a clinic for a long time, and your treatment was supervised by Mr. Jaff."

"Then whom do you imagine I am?" Carson asked irritably.

"We think we know. Some years ago, a member of one of our astronautical development groups disappeared without trace. Later it was learned that he was associated with a subversive organization."

Number Two opened a file and produced a photograph, which he handed to Carson. "This is the man."

It was a color photograph, in some odd way three-dimensional, and, as Carson had anticipated, it was a picture of himself.

"I'll agree it looks like me," he commented, handing it back, "but in fact it can't be me, because a few years ago I was dead."

Number One smiled thinly. "How does one know when one is dead—particularly in retrospect? Perhaps you were merely unconscious. Perhaps they erased all memory of your former life and substituted the synthetic memory of this Robert Carson."

Carson took time off to think carefully. His initial anxiety and apprehension had given way to something more positive, and now he recognized the subtle intrigue behind the threat, even though he could not understand the motive. The tribunal might be sincere in their attitude, and they might have evidence of a plot to create a substitute Robert Carson by using brainwashing techniques; but he was equally sincere, and absolutely certain of his true identity. Unless . . .

For a frightening instant the idea entered his mind that they could be right, that he was in fact an ordinary member

of the Martian community brainwashed into believing that he was Robert Carson. There was no real evidence that he had been revived from the dead, and no proof that his internal organs had been replaced or reinforced. The electronic panel of colored lights which purported to indicate the increasing flow of his returning life might just have been a simple visual gimmick to deceive him while psychoneural indoctrination was effected under the influence of drugs. Dr. Wier, the antimortic specialist, could have been a fake, and perhaps there was no such science as antimortics, after all.

A moment later reason returned. There had to be a starting point in all human knowledge, and the point of origin was the self, the intuitive awareness of personal identity. Next came memory, in particular the intimate memories of his early life before the fatal launching of the *Wanderer II*. No amount of brainwashing could imprint in his mind the vivid, living images of his mother and father which were already indelibly there, and the others—Valerie with her dark hair and shining eyes, and friends such as Keegan and Brown. Then there were all the little trivial incidents of living that so often assumed a sentimental and nostalgic quality in later years. And there were the crowded memories of Earth itself, the blue skies and the white clouds, the rain and the snow, the green fields and the gray buildings, and the people—millions of people, living out their brief lives with their loves and hates and ambitions and disillusionments.

I can prove I'm Robert Carson, he thought, *to the satisfaction of any tribunal, however hostile and prejudiced.*

He turned to Number One with more optimism and said, "My memory is not synthetic. If you want proof, I can give you proof. I can tell you about my life on Earth in the twentieth century. I can give you details which no Martian colonist could possibly know, and which go far beyond the scope of indoctrination."

"Very well," Number One agreed. "Say what you have to say, and take as long as you like. We have the whole day before us."

Carson marshalled his thoughts and began talking.

Carson talked for more than four hours, reminiscing fluently, and as time went on he became more and more absorbed in his recollections. Melancholy crept quietly into his mind

At intervals, he was interrupted by staccato questions from members of the tribunal, but he was able to answer without hesitation. He was speaking in the sure knowledge of things remembered, and identifying himself increasingly with the past. The more he talked, the more he wanted to continue talking; but in the end fatigue overtook him. He finished the outline of his early life, and said his final words.

Number One stared at him profoundly for a while, then murmured, "Thank you, Mr. Zero. I think now we had better break off for a meal."

The black-caped officials strode forward and escorted him to a room on a lower floor where he ate alone, served by an attractive girl with an impassive face. The food was to formula: rainbow fragments possessing a savory flavor, and a black, hot fluid, neither coffee nor tea, but slightly piquant and not unpalatable.

Almost an hour later he returned to the conference room and faced the tribunal again. There was a subtle difference in the atmosphere; their manner had changed from discerning interest to mild skepticism.

"You have told us a plausible story, Mr. Zero," said Number One, opening the proceedings, "and it is fairly evident that you have a remarkable memory for detail. Perhaps, in the ordinary way, we might be convinced, but there are a number of factors which require explanation. We have allowed you to have your say, and you have talked of Earth in the twentieth century and the people you claim to have known. Now, perhaps, you will reasonably let us have our say."

"Of course," Carson said.

"Very well. First, a question. Where is the rocket known as *Wanderer II*?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. Presumably it was brought back to Mars, or left wandering in space."

"Would you recognize the rocket if you saw it?"

"I think so."

Number One turned toward Number Two, who produced a number of photographs from a plastic folder. Carson leaned forward to take them. They were color pictures, three dimensional as before, and he inspected them carefully. The first showed a stone plateau centered in a restrained garden against a background of tall buildings, and poised on the plateau

was a rocket, slender and cigar-shaped, which he was able to identify because of certain markings on the stabilizing fins. Superficially it was the *Wanderer II*, apparently erected on its stone plinth as some kind of monument or monolith. The sky in the picture was blue, with striations of white cloud.

The next photograph depicted the interior of the control cabin of the rocket. Carson ran his eyes over the familiar array of instruments, each one in its exact place. The definition was so good that it was even possible to read the titles of some of the books on the small shelf which housed the library. They were the same books, undeniably.

The remaining four pictures showed interior detail of the rocket's propulsion and servo equipment, including one close-up of the dislodged and damaged fuel pump which had been responsible for the failure of the transverse jets, but there was something wrong in the fine detail of the photograph, though he was not able to pinpoint it immediately.

He returned the photographs to Number Two.

"It certainly looks like *Wanderer II*," he admitted reluctantly, "but photographs are deceptive. They can be faked."

"These are not faked," Number Two said petulantly.

"The pictures you have just seen were taken quite recently," Number One explained. "Within the last hundred years, to be precise. They show the *Wanderer II* mounted as a memorial on a stone platform in a park in London, Earth. The platform is actually a tomb, and in the tomb is the body of Robert Carson, enclosed in a transparent coffin. On the tomb is an inscription which reads: *In memory of Robert Carson, the first pioneer of space. Born 1932. Died 1966. Posthumous beneficiary of the International Carson Trust, foundation of modern civilization.*" He paused for a moment, eying Carson keenly. "Does that mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing. I don't understand your references to tombs and coffins. I'm alive, and I am Robert Carson."

"Incorrect," snapped Number One. "*Wanderer II* was recovered from its solar orbit more than two thousand years ago by a terrestrial expedition. It was erected as a monument to a brave man, and his body is in its coffin on Earth at this very moment, underneath the very rocket in which he gave his life. Great care has been taken to preserve both body and rocket in perfect condition throughout the centuries. Robert

Carson is a national hero—has been for eight thousand years —and the Carson Trust is a functioning reality."

"I still don't understand," said Carson dejectedly.

Number One explained. It seemed that the spectacular death of Robert Carson in the twentieth century had aroused worldwide interest and sympathy. Public imagination, already space-minded as the result of competing satellite projects between the East and the West, had seized on the human interest aspect of the tragedy. Here was a man, doomed to a slow relentless death, speeding on an eternal orbit around the sun, destined to return to Earth, but never closer than some seventy-five million miles, once every three and a half years. Carson's fate supplied newspapers all over the world with headline copy for many months, and there were interviews with his relations and friends, and people who had known him only casually but had an interesting anecdote to tell.

Suddenly a leading American newspaper, with an eye, no doubt, to its circulation figure, had launched an enterprising campaign. *Bring Carson Back,* the headlines had urged. *This man typifies the human being at the peak of his courage and enterprise. Let him be brought back, together with the rocket in which he sacrificed his life for the cause of progress, so that he may be enshrined as an international symbol of peaceful endeavor, and help to bring about the ultimate brotherhood of man working in harmony for the common good.*

The newspaper proposed that a fund should be established to finance a space rescue project timed to take place when the orbit of *Wanderer II* next brought it close to Earth, and as a gesture of good will the proprietor of the paper donated half a million dollars. American industry was quick to follow this shining and altruistic example; in a short space of time the fund had swollen to something more than five million dollars—and then it began to snowball. World opinion favored the idea, with its sentimental "bring him back to his own planet for burial" appeal, and contributions began to pour in from all nations. A Carson Trust commission was appointed to supervise the project, and the members of the commission spent their first year of office in merely counting the dollars, and vaguely wondering what to do with them. In less than two years after Carson's death the fund had ac-

cumulated more than fifty million dollars in every conceivable kind of currency.

Meanwhile, the Soviets had successfully flown two dogs, a monkey and a man round the Moon, and the Americans had countered with seven mice, a score of fruit flies and—in a kind of grand slam—three men, all of whom returned alive. But such proved to be human psychology that the living men returning from space did not capture the popular imagination to the extent that the dead one did, and newspaper headlines still gave precedence to the Carson Trust, and made innumerable suggestions of how the money should be used. All were agreed that a super-rocket should be constructed, equipped with various science-fictional devices designed to home on *Wanderer II,* secure it, and bring it back to Earth.

In fact, the problem was not nearly so simple. Back-room boys realized that it is one thing to control a single powered rocket, but quite another thing to control two when linked together by grapples. The project, they announced, was certainly feasible, but in the present state of astronautical know-how, faintly impractical. It could hardly be accomplished before the *Wanderer*'s third orbit, in about ten years' time. Meanwhile, the obviously sensible thing to do was to invest the money of the Carson Trust in industry, on an international basis, so that it might increase over the years. The preferred industries were those concerned with atomic power, metallurgy and astronautics—and, inevitably, armaments.

War broke out three years later—the first of a series of skirmishing wars between East and West, involving buffer territories. It was not an atomic war, for both sides were wary of committing themselves to the ultimate weapon, and were suitably deterred, for the time being, by the ultimate deterrent; but rockets and missiles carrying high-explosive warheads were employed in immense numbers. Meanwhile the industries concerned with the manufacture of nuclear weapons were busily stockpiling their wares against future necessity. Atomics and astronautics boomed; share values rocketed; capital appreciated phenomenally. The Carson Trust, financing these projects throughout the world, doubled, then trebled, its value. Fifty million dollars rapidly bloomed into a hundred and fifty million.

The tempo of the war increased, and its boundaries spread until there was hardly a nation anywhere on the planet that

was not involved. From the Arctic to the Antarctic, industry became inextricably meshed in the ruthless machinery of warfare, and abstract research projects were shelved. Rockets streaked from continent to continent, and low-flying satellites peered through television eyes at enemy installations, but nobody bothered to take a shot at the Moon any more. Carson was remembered for a while, but gradually the memory faded. *Wanderer II* continued to orbit the sun unheeded.

Peace came and went like pale sunshine through a rift in heavy storm clouds. The war continued into its second phase, and then the third and the fourth, always becoming more technical and impersonal. With improvements in ballistic techniques, the deployment of armies in the field became a secondary and rather superfluous operation. The true military men were the technicians and scientists, working to governmental specification, and nations became personified individually, as it were, simply sitting back and hurling missiles at each other.

As damage to property began to add up to a formidable total, so the vital industries were evacuated from likely target areas and dispersed to improbable sites in open country. The Carson Trust, under the stimulus of attack and defense, continued to flourish.

The series of wars dragged on for about two hundred years, with neither side gaining any real ascendancy. In the end it was decided, almost by mutual agreement, to call a halt to hostilities while the war-weary nations licked their wounds and rebuilt their shattered cities. The executors of the trust fund, conscientiously applying themselves to their task, began to spread their investments into industries which would thrive most under conditions of peaceful reconstruction: building, road-making, and, fortuitously, mining. They gambled on mining because of a leakage of information from government circles which hinted that, while the peace lasted, there would be an all-out effort to build factories, essential offices, and emergency accommodation for important people deep underground, where they would be safe in the event of atomic war breaking out.

The information was accurate. Deep cavities were mined in the Earth's solid bedrock, and the basic techniques of underground engineering and construction, which were to play a vital part in the colonization of other planets in the

centuries to come, were established. Vast caverns were excavated below ground—first in America, then in the countries of the Eastern Federation, and finally in Europe. Factories, offices and homes began to move below the surface of the Earth, although the mass of the population still lived, as before, under the sun and the stars.

The age of the automatic factory was well under way, of course. Automation in all phases of industry had taken most of the responsibility out of the hands of the worker, while in the commercial and administrative spheres staffs had been replaced to a large extent by machines and computors. Underground hydroponic farms were started, followed by underwater fisheries, into which fish were attracted in their shoals by the use of trace chemicals released into the seas and oceans at predetermined points. Other underground caverns were converted into enormous deep-freeze stores where food supplies could be preserved for centuries, if necessary.

The nations of the world were, although they did not fully realize it, digging in and consolidating their defenses for what was to come. Beneath the surface of the Earth a selected survival group could continue the fight, with the full potential of a highly industrialized society, even if the mass of the population were wiped out in an atomic massacre. The people of the world, slowly and subtly, began to divide into two groups: the few who worked underground, and the many who spent their lives on the surface. It was a division that was later to become permanent.

Defense often provokes attack. Secure in their underground fortresses, the political and military leaders of Earth's opposing hemispheres looked anew at the delicate balance of power in the world, and began to feel optimistic about shifting it in their favor. A cold war began, slowly at first, but building up over the decades into the inevitable succession of conferences, deadlocks and threats.

And then, unexpectedly, using the latest techniques and advances in astronautics and atomic propulsion, the Western Federation shot eight manned rockets to the Moon and set up an airlocked base in a lunar crater. This was, they claimed, a purely scientific expedition, but the Eastern Federation denounced the move as an act of military aggression. The political atmosphere became choked with venom.

Nobody was ever quite certain who launched the first

H-missile; each side claimed that having detected by radar the launching of an intercontinental rocket carrying a nuclear warhead into low orbit terminating on a home target, they had promptly taken the only possible reprisal action. The two missiles exploded within seconds of each other, one in the East and one in the West.

The first atomic war had begun.

CHAPTER EIGHT

There was an interval of five minutes for refreshment, during which Carson and the members of the tribunal sipped the black coffee-like liquid and nibbled tasteless brown biscuits. Carson reviewed the essentials of Number One's narrative, recognizing the familiar pattern of history. *That is how it would have happened,* he thought, *in just that irresponsible way. What is wrong with mankind that his genius should always be channeled into aggression and war?*

When the cups had been removed, Number One said, "I have told you all this because I want you to see things in the correct perspective. Robert Carson was still orbiting in space while the East and the West were fighting out their differences. The first successful landing on the moon had been accomplished."

"What happened to those lunar pioneers?" Carson asked.

"They survived. Despite the atomic war, the Western Federation continued to send more rockets to the Moon carrying men and supplies. And, in the course of time, so did the Eastern Federation."

"That must have created a difficult situation on the Moon."

"Not at all. The Moon Project was, in fact, a scientific expedition, and the explorers from the East and West simply combined forces, although they were technically at war. They had sense enough to unite against the common enemy—the vacuum and cold hostility of the lunar terrain. In a sense they also united against Earth, but at that time they were not independent enough to set up an autonomous colony. They had to rely on the continuing supply of food, oxygen and materials from the home planet."

"How long did the atomic war last?"

"You mean the *first* atomic war? Long enough to destroy about half the population of the world—those on the surface, of course. The underground people remained underground, safe from radiation hazards. But there were more atomic wars. It became a kind of game in which the opposing forces, secure in their underground caverns, threw an occasional H-missile at each other to register disapproval of their respective political systems. The surface people abandoned the towns and cities and took to the caves and mountains, where they reverted to a primitive tribal life. Then, after a while, they began to give birth to mutants, and the real horror started."

"I can imagine," Carson said solemnly. "But the wars dragged on, just the same."

"Yes—for generation after generation, with the normal people living comfortably in their underground fortresses, and the mutated monsters struggling for survival on what was left of the radioactive surface of what had once been a green and pleasant Earth."

"But surely, there had to be an end—"

"The end came when the Carson Trust commission finally intervened. War is, after all, an industry, and a nonproductive industry at that. Industries have to be financed. There came a point when the economic situation of the world was such that the war would have to cease—if only temporarily—in order to permit financial losses to be recouped. The truth was that the commission, having made a long and detailed assessment of Carson Trust assets throughout the world, realized suddenly that they were the legal owners of virtually every industry and property on the entire planet—particularly the underground installations, which had largely been financed by trust investments. The world belonged, in fact, to the dead Robert Carson, and it was his money that was being expended in a futile and expensive war that could obviously never achieve anything other than stalemate. Clearly it had to end."

"I can't quite see how the Carson Trust could exercise what amounts to political influence over two opposing military governments," Carson said.

"They used economic influence," Number One pointed out. "A government derives its revenue basically from industry

and commerce, and the key factor is productivity. The Carson Trust in effect controlled about ninety per cent of Earth's productivity, and had become a kind of international monetary fund acting as bankers to practically every country in the world. The commission simply withdrew credit facilities, and the wars came to an end."

"I see," Carson murmured. "The commission was, in fact, acting as a world government."

"Precisely. It was a short step from pulling economic strings to pulling political strings. Within a few years the federations of the East and West were united into a world state, with a combined government made up of delegates from all nations. But the real power, which determined policy and economics, was the Carson Trust commission. Robert Carson, dead as he was, had become ruler of the world."

Number One put the tips of his fingers together and paused to consider. "The members of the commission," he continued, "were shrewd, intelligent men, with a profound understanding of human psychology. They realized the importance of a symbol to maintain the stability of a social system. The obvious symbol was Robert Carson himself (still orbiting the sun), whose death so long ago had finally saved the Earth from self-destruction, through the medium of the Carson Trust. So they resurrected the legend of Robert Carson, launching what must have been the biggest publicity campaign in all history. Then they announced that the trust would carry out the terms of its original assignment—namely, to bring back the body of Carson, and also the rocket in which he had died. Fabulous sums of money were poured into the science of astronautics, and over the decades space travel became Earth's biggest industry. That was the beginning of true interplanetary exploration, and the beginning of the colonization of Mars."

"And Robert Carson?"

"In due course they recovered *Wanderer II,* with Carson inside, and brought it back to Earth. At this time, the surface cities of the planet were being rebuilt, and a national monument was erected in a London park, using the rocket as a kind of obelisk, with the body of Robert Carson entombed in a transparent coffin in the plinth. They had their symbol at last, and the world had a mystical leader—a second Messiah, whose body was on view for all to see."

"Interesting," Carson commented, "but there's one detail which is wrong. I am Robert Carson, and I am alive."

"There obviously cannot be *two* Robert Carsons," Number One stated impatiently. "You have heard the facts of history and you have seen the photographic evidence."

"I also have the evidence of my own mind and memories."

"Your mind and memories could have been changed to make you a plausible impostor."

"But why? What would be the point?"

Number One smiled sardonically. "There could be several points. One would be to produce a living Robert Carson who could legitimately claim to own the Earth, through the trust fund. Another might be to seize power on Mars, using Carson as a symbol—an extension, as it were, of the terrestrial system of rule. After all, if he owned the Earth, he could logically employ the economic resources of that planet to precipitate a crisis on this."

"I know nothing about the politics of the matter," Carson protested. "I died in *Wanderer II* and I was brought back to life eight thousand years later. If there are ulterior motives and intrigues, I am ignorant of them. I don't want to own the Earth. All I ask is to be left alone to be myself."

"Tell me," said Number Two, inspecting the color photographs, "if *you* are Robert Carson, then who is the man in the transparent coffin?"

"I don't know. An impostor, perhaps."

"And the rocket mounted on the plinth?"

"A fake, made to look exactly the same, even to the damaged fuel pump—" Carson broke off abruptly as a memory stirred faintly in his mind. "May I see those pictures again, please?" he asked.

Number Two pushed the photographs across the table to him. Carefully he went through them, one by one, trying to pinpoint the odd twist in his memory. The full realization came to him as he reached the close-up of the wrecked fuel pump.

"This is wrong," he announced, hardly able to suppress his excitement. "According to this photograph, the fuel pump was pierced through the side by the meteorite. It didn't happen that way. The damage was at the bottom, underneath the main cylindrical structure, and the hole was much bigger. The meteorite had come up at an angle."

"In that case," said Number One calmly, "will you draw, to the best of your ability, exactly what the damage to the fuel pump looked like, in your opinion."

"Yes," said Carson.

Number Four motioned him to the end of the table and gave him a pad of paper and a stylus. Carson then spent some ten minutes making a variety of sketches in diagrammatic form, showing the fuel pump from various angles, and outlining accurately the shape and size of the hole where the meteorite had penetrated. Finally, pleased with his draftsmanship, he returned the pad to Number Four, who, after examining the drawings, passed it via his colleagues to Number One.

Number One studied the diagrams for a considerable time. When he spoke his voice was quiet and noncommittal. "In your view, then, Mr. Zero, the rocket in the national monument on Earth is a fake, and if one could find the real *Wanderer II,* the damage to the fuel pump would be exactly as you have drawn it."

"Yes," said Carson positively.

"And you have no idea where the rocket may be?"

"I regained life and consciousness on Mars. I was not told about the rocket."

"But if it were possible to locate it, and the fuel pump proved to be damaged in the manner illustrated in your diagrams, you would, presumably, consider that as proof of the identity you claim, namely, Robert Carson."

"You are the one who requires proof, not I," Carson pointed out.

"Very well," said Number One, with an air of finality. "You may go."

The black-caped officials escorted him from the room and down to street level, where they took him in the hovercar to another building in the administrative zone. During the short journey, Carson found himself reviewing the details of the strange interview, unable to reconcile the manner of the tribunal with the charge of subversive activity which had, in effect, been leveled against him. He was curious, also, about the mysterious, silent movements which he had observed from time to time behind the translucent panel in the wall behind the horseshoe table. Certain aspects of the interroga-

tion seemed inconsistent and out of key, particularly the arbitrary way he had been released at the end—if, in fact, he was released. As the hovercar stopped outside a gray office block, he did not feel so sure.

He followed his guides into the building and along corridors until he came to a translucent door bearing a familiar label: *Mentor Jaff—Department of Co-Ordination.* Surprised and confused, he went inside the room to find himself face to face with plump, red-haired Mr. Jaff, surrounded by his video screens and electronic equipment.

Mr. Jaff smiled in high humor and offered him a chair with a cordial wave of his hand. Carson sat down.

"Congratulations," said Mr. Jaff amiably. "You did very well."

Carson frowned. "I don't understand. I was told you had been arrested."

Mr. Jaff chuckled with delight. "What was the charge?" he demanded.

"Subversion."

"Excellent!" said Mr. Jaff, shaking with suppressed laughter. "I'm disappointed in you, Mr. Carson, that you should believe such an accusation. You obviously don't know me very well."

"Perhaps I don't," Carson conceded. "For the present I would appreciate an explanation."

The laughter ceased, and Mr. Jaff became very serious. "We had to anticipate the kind of interrogation you might receive if you were questioned by skeptical people, or even by the enemy. They would assume that you were an impostor, and it would be for you to prove your true identity. Proof of innocence, Mr. Carson, you understand. You were extremely convincing, and the business of the damaged fuel pump clinched the matter."

"But why all the subterfuge—the security tribunal, and so on?"

"Behind a panel on the wall was a battery of video cameras and microphones recording every detail of the inquiry. Later we shall add a final section showing expert astronauts examining the interior of *Wanderer II* and confirming that the fuel pump was damaged in the way you described."

"So you *have* got the rocket," Carson exclaimed.

"Of course. It is in a guarded hangar not five miles from

this office. And we also have visual records of the entire rescue operation, when a fleet of four Martian space ships spent nearly two years tracking down the *Wanderer*, and finally located it and brought it back, with you inside, of course. There are complete video recordings of the antimortic procedure, the operations to reinforce your internal organs, your first moments of new life—everything. We can prove that you are Robert Carson to the satisfaction of even the most hostile critic. We had to be satisfied that you could do the same, so we appointed a tribunal to conduct an investigation."

"Which means," Carson said pensively, "that the rocket and the body on show in London are fakes."

"Precisely."

"But—didn't the trust commission ever attempt to recover the real *Wanderer?*"

"Yes, but it isn't so easy to trace a very small rocket in a vast amount of empty space. There used to be an old saying about a needle in a haystack. Small discrepancies in the predicted orbit added up to a considerable error over a long period of time, and even the best radar devices hadn't adequate range.

"At its furthermost point from Earth, the rocket was some two hundred and fifty million miles away. The cyclic period turned out to be more like four and a half years. So all in all, the chances at that time were remote. The commission did the next best thing: they had an identical rocket constructed and found a man bearing a strong physical resemblance to Robert Carson. How the man came to die is a matter for conjecture—it could even be that the body isn't human at all, but just a synthetic likeness. However, the commission had their symbol, and they were able to abandon the futile and expensive quests for the real *Wanderer*. The population of Earth believes that the fake rocket and body were retrieved from space."

"How do you know all this?" Carson inquired.

Mr. Jaff shrugged. "Partly intelligent guesswork. Partly information received from secret agents operating on Earth. Once we suspected that *Wanderer II* was still in orbit, despite the obelisk in London, we organized an expedition to find it. We were only too successful—and here you are, the original Robert Carson, owner of Earth, alive and well."

"Thank you for my life," Carson murmured, with a hint of irony. "What interests me is—the next step."

Mr. Jaff smiled knowledgeably. "The next step has already taken place," he announced. "Three days ago a fleet of two hundred of our biggest and most strongly armed spaceships took off for Earth. By this time tomorrow, the final invasion will have already begun.

"We are at war with Earth," breathed Mr. Jaff, savoring his words. "We have been at war before, but this is the final war. We shall restore Robert Carson to his rightful place, as owner of the planet." His eyes began to gleam with ascetic fervor. "We shall dissolve the trust commission and set up a Martian military council to govern the planet, and we shall take over the entire terrestrial economic structure. And you will be the leader, Carson. Ruler of Earth—does the idea appeal to you?"

"No," said Carson tersely. "I don't want to rule Earth, and I don't want to be implicated in war. Nor do I propose to be set up as a puppet dictator as a cover for what you call the Martian military council. I don't want any of it."

"I'm afraid you have no alternative," Mr. Jaff stated coolly. "At all times you must do as you are told. So far you have behaved reasonably well, apart from one small indiscretion at the first-level elevator station. Please do not spoil your record, Mr. Carson."

Carson sighed wearily. "You can obviously force me to be obedient if you wish. If that is enough, then you will be well served."

"It is enough," said Mr. Jaff, with a brisk nod of his head. "Let me outline briefly what will happen in the forseeable future, so that you may be prepared. The invasion forces will go in and seize key centers, particularly the major underground fortresses. Reinforcements will arrive hourly for the next six weeks. We shall seize the Moon as a military base, and in due course you, Mr. Carson, will be sent to the Moon so that you may be ready, at short notice, to take up your rightful heritage on Earth. Once the civil population is under control, we shall exploit the video recordings as propaganda to destroy any vestige of authority which the trust commission might possess. We shall expose the fake Carson, and substitute the real, living legend. With the mass of the people

behind us, we shall rebuild Earth as a fertile and virile colony of Mars."

Carson laughed. "This man's father is my father's son," he murmured, recalling inconsequentially an old, half-forgotten paradox. Mr. Jaff eyed him questioningly. "It's nothing," he added. "Just a private thought."

"Go back to your apartment," said Mr. Jaff. "You will receive instructions in the course of time. One more thing—during your absence engineers have been installing a video screen in your apartment. You will now be able to keep abreast of the latest news and developments in the interplanetary situation. Previously, of course, it was necessary to keep you in ignorance, for the purposes of the tribunal. Now, however, you can be accorded the privileges of a full citizen."

"Well, thank you," Carson remarked cynically, standing up.

"And don't forget," added Mr. Jaff, "that if you should be possessed by a foolish, stubborn mood, I can always do this." He leaned across the desk and pressed a switch on a narrow panel. Instantly Carson's head exploded into an agonizingly shrill supersonic whistle, which lasted for a fraction of a second. He swayed unsteadily, clutching the desk for support, glaring sullenly at Mr. Jaff.

"Good-bye for now," said Mr. Jaff affably.

Carson made no reply, but walked quickly from the room. In the corridor he was picked up by the black-caped officials and escorted to the hovercar. He returned to his apartment in absolute silence.

CHAPTER NINE

The video screen was large and rectangular, about eight feet across, and followed the curvature of the wall in the circular living room. The material was opalescent, and not more than a half-inch thick, but as it was not connected to any external unit, Carson assumed that the electronic parts were self-contained. One of the women showed him how to operate it, by means of a scarcely visible switch on one edge. The picture came on instantly, in full color and three dimensions; he was amazed at its solid reality.

He watched it for a while in a desultory fashion, realizing that he had evidently switched on in the middle of a play concerning frivolously amorous relationships between two men and two women against a background of a biophysical research laboratory. It occurred to him that the pattern of entertainment had not changed much in eight thousand years, although the electronic techniques of presentation had improved beyond imagination.

At the end of the play the screen darkened for a few seconds, and then, to the accompaniment of lively music, animated letters flashed across the screen spelling the title *News Digest* against a silver speckled dark blue background resembling a formalized Milky Way.

The music faded and the picture dissolved, giving way to a curious scene which Carson found difficult to identify at first. Recognition came suddenly: he was looking at an enormous fleet of spacecraft, glinting metallically in the hard light of an unseen sun, apparently poised motionless against a backdrop of stars.

As advance units of the first Martian invasion fleet draw near to Earth, said the formal voice of a commentator, *crews are standing by to carry out emergency landing procedure.* A series of quick shots of uniformed men performing various obscure tasks inside the ships followed. Carson was astonished at the quantity of equipment visible in the background, and at the amount of space available for the men to move around in.

New anti-missile deflectors are being used for the first time, together with black light projectors to give our forces the advantages of initiative and surprise.

Pictures of Earth and its moon taken from a point in space. An animated arrow moving across the screen, splitting into two prongs—the smaller aimed at the Moon, and the larger toward Earth.

A specially equipped detachment will occupy all lunar bases and set up a missile launching site trained on Earth as a deterrent to counterattack.

Close-up of Earth, with the big arrow subdividing into a dozen or more tiny arrows curving round to impinge on various points over the globe.

The main body of the fleet will attack selected targets in strategic areas of the planet and will then land. Lorentz heat

barriers will be set up as a defensive measure. Ultrasonic beams and paralyzing gas are expected to break down all opposition, particularly in the underground cities, within a few hours.

Now a picture of a Martian spaceport, with another vast fleet of spacecraft being raised to the surface on anti-gravity elevators.

Meanwhile the second invasion fleet prepares for take-off. These ships will carry men trained in the administration of occupied territories. Among them may be future members of the terrestrial military government which will be set up as soon as hostilities are under control.

There followed a series of short interviews with military and political spokesmen, commenting on the war and its implications. All were optimistic, Carson noted, and all seemed to hold the opinion that the war would end almost before it had begun. It was to be a short, sharp campaign, using the very latest humane techniques for subjugating the mass of the enemy. Atomic weapons would not be employed unless provoked by the enemy, or unless the circumstances warranted their use (a flexible enough justification, Carson thought). Once the situation had quietened and settled down, Robert Carson, owner of the Earth, would arrive and assume his rightful leadership.

Meanwhile, the commentator went on, *Robert Carson, quietly awaiting the moment of his destiny here on Mars, today voluntarily submitted himself to a searching identity test before a specially selected tribunal of security officials, and produced new and spontaneous evidence corroborating beyond all possible doubt the truth of his claim. This was the scene in security court number five as Mr. Carson faced his interrogators.*

Carson stared in fascination at a picture of himself answering questions at the interview. The video recording had been greatly shortened but skillfully edited, retaining the hard essence of the proceedings. At the end they had tacked on a sequence showing three experts examining the fuel pump in what was, to all appearances, the original *Wanderer II,* and comparing the damage with that depicted in Carson's drawings. Close-ups of both clinched the argument.

The war news ended, and gave way to another item dealing with the construction of a new underground city in some

remote region of Mars. Carson switched off the video screen, then turning round, discovered that he was not alone in the room. The auburn-haired woman was sitting on a chair close to the window.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"A few minutes. I am interested in the war."

He smiled sourly. "According to them"—he hooked a thumb at the screen—"it will be over in five minutes."

"It will probably take longer," she observed, "but one must be optimistic."

"All this guff about restoring Robert Carson's rightful destiny—" He looked at her resentfully. "It's simply a cover for a pretty ordinary act of military aggression."

The stern voice of Mr. Jaff spoke inside his ear. *Those are treasonable words, Mr. Carson. Be discreet. Do not involve innocent people in your private opinions, or they may suffer more than you.*

He was about to make a defiant remark, but remembered the torture of the high-pitched whistle, and remained silent. Looking at the woman he realized the significance of the implied threat in Mr. Jaff's words. Why, indeed, should he involve her, probably against her will, in conversation that might well be regarded as seditious and subversive?

"If you knew the full history of Earth, Mr. Carson," she said, "you would realize just how much they need a strong, rational government. It isn't a question of aggression so much as—how can I put it? Compulsory assistance, perhaps."

He suppressed an acid laugh.

"After all," she continued, "we have developed a superior technology while the terrestrials have been occupied with internal problems—surface reconstruction, the mutants, and so on. They were set back a great deal during the earlier interplanetary wars. What they need more than anything is help and guidance."

"No doubt," he remarked drily.

"And there is, of course, the practical point of basic economics—the Carson Trust. And you are Robert Carson, alive. Sooner or later you would inevitably have to take possession of what is yours by right."

"Posthumously," he commented. "The Carson Trust was set up after my death—does that make Earth mine by right?"

"Of course," she said brightly. "Even the mutants on

Earth breathe your name in awe. They regard you as their savior."

"Me—or the body in the glass coffin?"

"Both, for you are one and the same. For them you will simply have come alive."

"Well," he said with resignation, "I never dreamed, when I took off in *Wanderer II* eight thousand years ago, that one day I should be hailed as ruler of Earth. I suppose it could have happened to anybody."

"Anybody at all," she remarked, smiling. "It is all a matter of economics."

Carson followed the war news during the next few weeks with morbid interest, trying to filter fact from fiction and assess the true situation through the screen of cleverly contrived propaganda. Everything was going well, they said, but terrestrial defenses were proving more difficult to break down than had been anticipated. Furthermore, the Earthmen had developed certain new weapons, which had complicated matters, and there was evidence to suggest that there had been a leakage of information so that they had not been taken entirely by surprise.

A number of Martian ships had landed, and a number had been destroyed; a few beachheads had been opened up, and the fleet were supporting the landings in every possible way. Severe fighting was in progress on the Moon, but things were going well, and the unconditional surrender of the lunar bases was expected almost any day. Meanwhile, the second and third invasion fleets had reinforced the first, and mass landings were imminent.

In fact, Carson realized, things were undoubtedly going rather badly for the Martian expeditionary force. Reading between the bland, optimistic words of the official communiques made it obvious that no major landing had yet been effected; the invasion so far seemed to consist of sporadic raids, with perhaps a negligible piece of territory held here and there. There was nothing to suggest that Martian advance forces had succeeded in penetrating any of the underground cities. *It will be another of those futile wars,* he thought. *There will be great destruction and heavy losses on both sides, and nothing will be accomplished.*

Carson had underestimated the ruthless striking power of

the Martian forces. After the initial setback, the three fleets had hovered in orbit around Earth, carrying out long-range reconnaissance, and making frequent raids on the ground to keep the enemy occupied. Meanwhile, every effort had been made to bring the lunar campaign to a swift, triumphant conclusion.

The Moon surrendered after five weeks of siege, and the Martian colonists moved in and took over. They built their heavy missile launching zones and assembled their big rockets with nuclear warheads. The stage was set for intensive bombardment of Earth.

The bombardment was in the nature of covering fire while the ships went about their business of landing invasion forces and equipment; it served to keep the defenders underground or in hiding while the insurgent forces consolidated their grip on the surface. Here the superior Martian knowledge of antimortic surgery tipped the psychological balance in favor of the invaders. Specially equipped hospital ships in the attacking fleets were able to perform miracles of surgical science replacing organs of those who had been wounded, and canceling out the effects of overexposure to radiation. The immortals remained immortal, though there were inevitably a few casualties damaged beyond all repair.

The defenders of Earth were far from immortal, however, and so lacked the elementary self-assurance that goes hand in hand with courage. In the face of an all-out atomic bombardment from lunar missile bases, followed by mass landings from the three invasion fleets at the principal civilized centers on the surface world, the terrestrials sealed themselves in their underground cities, leaving the unfortunate mutants to face up to the horrors of atomic war once again.

It took approximately three months to establish a tenuous occupation of the Earth's surface, and in the meantime further invasion fleets had set off from Mars to supply additional man power and equipment. The terrestrials, secure in their subterranean caverns, launched a variety of rocket-borne weapons through funnels leading to the surface; the occupying forces, and the mutants, too, had to contend with nuclear bombs, poison gases, germ cultures and self-propagating incendiary chemicals which were exceedingly difficult to extinguish.

The occupation of Earth in its early stages was difficult

and dangerous, but the men from Mars held their ground and slowly built up supplies as they were freighted in by huge cargo rockets. The Moon, apart from its primary function as an orbiting missile base, was developed as an equipment and provisions store, and later, when airtight domes had been set up in profusion, as a transit camp and reserve headquarters for military personnel.

Carson, studying the progress of the war, was astonished at the scale of the campaign. For one nation to attack another was a big enough project, involving immense co-ordination of men and materials, but the invasion of one planet by another was an operation which almost staggered his imagination. The science of logistics across millions of miles of empty space offered problems which would have baffled the best military minds of the twentieth century. And yet it was happening, here and now, in a cold, matter-of-fact way, at unguessable cost. Thanks to the power of the atom and the power of technology in general, Earth was on the verge of becoming a colony of Mars.

Meanwhile, life for him continued in a leisurely if rather dull fashion. He was allowed a certain freedom of movement around the city, provided he was escorted by a black-caped official, and in this way he was able to tour some of the big factories and research laboratories on the third and fourth levels. There were occasional vocal interchanges with Mr. Jaff over the aural radio device, but he had given up resisting, and during the early months of the war he remained strictly obedient.

There came a day when a war communique tersely announced that the Martian invaders had occupied their first underground city. The operation had been lengthy and costly in terms of casualties, for the attacking forces had tried to avoid damage to property and equipment in order that normal urban life might be resumed as soon as possible after the battle. The defenders, on the other hand, had been prepared to destroy everything as they retreated. The attack had been successfully accomplished by drilling deep shafts to pierce the upper level of the city at several dispersed points and pumping coma gas into the cavern. Troops wearing gravity reactor packs had then leaped down the shafts in their thousands to take control. Despite the coma gas there had been severe fighting, even hand-to-hand, but after three days the

defenders surrendered. The city, located near the eastern seaboard of America, was immediately proclaimed capital of the occupied territories on Earth, and a provisional military government was set up. The Martians then concentrated on their next city, so that, step by step, the civilized centers of Earth would surrender to the new ruling authority. The war, it was felt, was virtually over.

On the day the news was announced, Mr. Jaff spoke quietly into Carson's ear. *The time has come for you to assume your full responsibility as ruler of the planet Earth, Mr. Carson. A ship is ready to take you to the Moon, where you will await the final call from the terrestrial military government. Are you ready?*

"I'm ready," Carson answered laconically.

Take-off is scheduled in a hundred hours, but we shall come for you before then.

"Whenever you like," Carson murmured.

They came for him the next day.

CHAPTER TEN

The journey to the Moon was swift and without incident. Carson's main reaction, looking out of the observation port of the spaceship as it settled gently upon the level surface of a lunar crater adjacent to a group of airlocked domes, was one of irony. Eight thousand years earlier he had lost his life in an attempt merely to orbit the Moon; and now, here he was, without effort or fatigue, about to set foot on its dusty surface.

The journey from Mars had taken three and a half days. He had been dismayed to learn that Mr. Jaff was to accompany him on his mission. In fact, the full complement of civilian passengers included some five hundred government officials, all eager to play their part in the political and economic reorientation of Earth. In addition there were some two thousand troops bound for the lunar transit camps. The ship, which was enormous by twentieth century standards, had literally navigated itself across the millions of miles of space, guided by radar and electronic devices. To assist the

passengers in idling away their time there was blue Sonar to drink and television to watch, presumably relayed from video recordings somewhere on the ship. But it had proved impossible to relax and settle down. Everyone was excited, and everyone knew that Robert Carson was aboard, which gave added zest to the trip. Carson, however, had spent most of his time in his private cabin, deliberately remaining elusive so as not to be drawn into conversation. Occasionally he talked with Mr. Jaff and a few other officials, but on the whole he was regarded as a rather mysterious figure.

The Moon, viewed at close quarters, was a desolate wilderness of black and white, with harsh splashes of gray. The tops of the jagged mountains surrounding the crater glowed incandescently in the glaring sunlight, but the sun was low on the horizon and most of the crater was enveloped in ebony shadow. The sky was jet black and peppered with silver stars. At zenith hung the great globe that was Earth, in a three-quarter phase, largely obscured by striations of white cloud. The land masses were dark against the phosphorescent glow of the oceans reflecting the sunlight; he thought he recognized the African continent, and the elongated blob that might have been Europe, but the cloud concealed detail. Only the poles were clearly identifiable in their dazzling white ice caps.

They had linked the ship to the nearest dome by means of a flexible tunnel with airlocks at either end. Carson was the first to disembark, closely followed by Mr. Jaff and the rest of the government contingent. Unaccustomed to the weak lunar gravity, he walked warily, keeping his movements under careful control. The domes, he learned, were in the nature of a temporary encampment. The existing underground caverns on the Moon were inadequate to house the large influx of personnel from Mars, having been designed to accommodate a normal staff of about five hundred.

They were welcomed by a group of top brass, including, so far as Carson could judge, high-ranking military officers and administrative executives. There was talk of the progress of the war, with much enthusiasm and optimism. Another city had fallen—this time on the west side of Europe, less than two hundred miles from London—and there was reason to believe that the next assault would be on the underground citadel of London itself. At that point, it was thought, oc-

ganized resistance would rapidly decay, and the enemy would surrender unconditionally.

"That is where you come in," Mr. Jaff said to Carson. "Already we hold the surface ruins of London, and we have taken care to preserve the Carson monument with its sham rocket and body so that we may demolish it in a formal ceremony, with full publicity, and proclaim *you* as the real Robert Carson and the rightful owner and ruler of Earth. On that very spot we shall build a new headquarters for the Carson Trust, and you will be installed in it, together with the civil government and security organization, to which the military council will hand over its functions when the war is over."

"You seem to have everything well planned," Carson commented.

Mr. Jaff smiled appreciatively. "All action should be the end product of logical, constructive thought. Action without thought is futile, and often destructive. This campaign was planned in great detail for many years. Apart from a few difficulties encountered at the beginning it has worked out precisely as predicted."

Carson looked up through the curved transparent roof of the dome at the great diffuse globe that was Earth, and suddenly he was conscious of an overwhelming feeling of desolation and nostalgia. *If I could have lived my life in the ordinary way,* he thought, *I wouldn't have asked for more. If I could go back eight thousand years—* He abandoned the idea halfway through. *At all events, I'm alive,* he reflected, *and I ought to be grateful. In time I may be able to settle down and adapt myself to this cold, hard society.*

"How soon can I go to Earth?" he asked.

"As soon as London surrenders," Mr. Jaff replied.

London did not surrender. The assault was launched within four days of Carson's arrival on the Moon. Nuclear-powered ultrasonic drills cut shafts through the hard ground to provide access to the underground caverns, and men and weapons poured into the upper level of the city, but the task was more complex than had been anticipated. For one thing, there were eight levels to be occupied, and the city was divided up into autonomous units, linked by tunnels which were easy to defend and easier still to blow up. It was, in effect, a cluster

of about a dozen small cities covering an area of some twenty square miles. Under the threat of attack, each sub-city sealed itself off, so that the Martian troops, under orders to avoid damage to property, communications and essential services, were faced with the prospect of a long and tedious campaign, and the possibility of loss of prestige if they failed to achieve a rapid victory.

The military command, anxious to exploit the psychological boost which quick success would provide, decided on a restricted policy. The first aim would be to seize the government and administrative zone and take control of communications, in particular the radio and video networks. Once this had been accomplished, victory would be declared. The residential and industrial zones could then be mopped up in a more leisurely fashion, on a piecemeal basis.

Orders were issued to concentrate the attack in accordance with the predetermined plan, and to abandon temporarily military operations against those sectors of the city not directly concerned with the co-ordination of terrestrial authority. Even so, six weeks went by before the officer commanding the London assault force was able to report success. The nucleus of the city was in Martian hands; victory in principle had been achieved. It was, in fact, check rather than checkmate, but the Martian high command was satisfied.

Mr. Jaff broke the news to Carson, who had been waiting patiently in the restricted space of his quarters in the lunar dome.

"London has fallen," he announced triumphantly.

Carson felt a vague sense of regret, but was careful not to let it show in his expression.

"Earth is ours," Mr. Jaff went on portentously. "This is the first day of the dynasty of Robert Carson—the beginning of a new era in the history of the solar system. Earth is now a colony of Mars."

Carson permitted himself to smile sardonically. Mr. Jaff's eloquence possessed the undertones of blue Sonar. "When do I go to London?" he asked.

Mr. Jaff waved one hand in a vigorous circle. "At the earliest possible moment—probably within a few hours. Every second's delay represents a serious loss of propaganda value. Already they are installing video cameras at the site of the

Carson monument. We have transmitters waiting to blanket the Earth with pictures of the ceremony."

"The enemy doesn't have to watch," Carson pointed out.

"They don't have to, but they will. I don't mean the ordinary people. The signals will be jammed, of course. I mean the terrestrial politicians and military leaders. They are the ones who matter, whose morale will be broken to our advantage."

Carson considered for a moment. "I always thought it was the morale of the people that mattered in the long run. People win wars, not governments."

"Wrong," Mr. Jaff stated decisively. "Morale is a flexible thing that can be molded by authority. If the government is strong, then the people are strong, too. A weak government breeds a weak, decadent nation. That was true even in your day."

Carson shrugged. "You may be right—I don't know. I've always pinned my faith on ordinary people. Perhaps they can be molded up to a point in the short term, but it's the long term that really matters. We witnessed the emergence of strong governments in my own century. They didn't survive for long. Somehow the weak, vacillating governments seemed to find a superior strength in times of crisis, and I believe they drew that strength from the common people. After all, a nation of responsible adults doesn't require a strong government—they are already amenable to law and reason."

Mr. Jaff stared coldly at Carson for quite a long time. "That is sedition," he said finally, in an almost surprised tone of voice. "This is the hundredth century, Mr. Carson, and not the twentieth. The State is an entity in itself, and the government is the co-ordinating brain of the State, and individuals are merely the cells of a corporate body. A nation of responsible adults may well be amenable to law and reason, but unless they are directed by authority, they serve no useful purpose."

"What is a useful purpose?" Carson enquired. "Waging war on Earth, for instance?"

"Yes. Precisely. That is a useful purpose. You must think in more cosmic terms, Mr. Carson. History should be viewed in terms of broad trends rather than isolated incidents. There used to be a fetish for learning the dates of ancient wars

and battles, while the important thing—the sociological motivation for the war—was overlooked. Wars are merely symptoms of social change and evolution. Nations and planets come into conflict for economic reasons, and it is the economic factors which are important, not the names of the campaigns and the generals who conducted them."

"I see," said Carson thoughtfully. "What, then, is the motivation for this present war—surely not to put Robert Carson on the throne, as it were?"

"The motivation is simple," Mr. Jaff explained. "Raw materials, in particular radioactive elements such as uranium and thorium, which hardly exist at all on Mars. And there is a symbiotic motive—the elementary principle that two nations living and working together for one economic purpose under a single governing authority can increase over-all productivity, to the prosperity of both. I am not claiming that we are altruistic, but at the same time we are not selfish. We want Earth to prosper under our guidance, just as Mars has prospered."

"Meanwhile Mars will pull all the economic strings through the Carson Trust."

"Not quite the way I should have put it, but nevertheless substantially true."

Carson smiled narrowly. "Well, I'm in favor of prosperity, Mr. Jaff, even though I'm not in favor of war. However, if the one leads to the other—"

"The war is virtually won," pronounced Mr. Jaff. "History will record that the age of terrestrial prosperity started today."

"I hope you're right," Carson murmured without conviction.

The journey to Earth was made the next day. Carson, accompanied by Mr. Jaff and a score of lesser officials, embarked in a relatively small rocket ship which, so far as he could judge, was in fact one of the terrestrial fleet of ferry ships carrying out freight duties between Earth and Moon, but obviously it had been converted for passenger-carrying purposes. The journey took six hours, which Mr. Jaff seemed to think was rather slow for a mere quarter of a million miles.

As Earth drew near, Carson stared in fascination at its

immense rounded surface, slowly assuming color and detail, always shrouded by intermittent patches of white cloud. He recognized the continent of Europe, but as the rocket spun round the planet on its swept-back wings, America flashed beneath him, and then the Pacific Ocean, followed by the vast stretch of Asia. As Europe mounted the horizon again the retrojets roared and the wings extended. Soon the spacecraft was swooping low over the Mediterranean and curving north toward the small island known as Britain.

They landed at a demolished spaceport some thirty miles north of London. The concrete surface of the landing zone was glasslike and fissured from atomic heat, and the control buildings were gaunt empty skeletons; but temporary huts had been set up, and here and there Carson could see mobile radar and electronic control units dispersed around the perimeter of the zone. Before disembarking he had to put on a bulky suit which, it was explained, would give ample protection against radioactivity. The entire party was quickly transferred from the rocket into a small fleet of hoverjet aircraft of terrestrial manufacture. Ten minutes later they were flying over London.

The city was unrecognizable, of course. In eight thousand years, atomic bombardment—alternating with periods of rebuilding—had completely altered the geometry and appearance of the place. Even the Thames, twisting and turning like a slender silver ribbon through areas of radioactive devastation, seemed to have changed its course at several points. Central London was a wilderness of fused stone and leaning skeketal buildings, blackened and oxidized by nuclear heat flash. The invading forces had prepared their ground thoroughly.

The hoverjets flew west for a short distance. The bleak destruction eased. Buildings were still standing, and green grass glimmered patchily on a wide expanse of open ground that could have been a park—could even have been Hyde Park, though there were no remaining landmarks to facilitate identification. Suddenly Carson saw the monument, with the dark, slender shape of the rocket protruding sadly toward the sky. Temporary buildings had been erected around it, and thin, spidery video towers projected vertically from the forlorn landscape.

They landed on the open ground, within a few hundred

yards of the monument, and a group of men wearing antiradiation clothing walked forward to meet the helicopter. Beyond them, on raised platforms, the lenses of complex cameras peered inquisitively at the scene. In the background, near the monument, was a large decorated rostrum, where, presumably, Carson would be proclaimed owner of Earth and whatever else Martian authority had decided upon for his puppet role.

And then, looking toward the outer fringes of the park, beyond the monument and the rostrum and the cluster of huts, beyond a wire fence, Carson saw the mutants. There were, perhaps, several hundred of them, crowding the wire in an orderly manner, but even at that distance there was something odd and shambling about their appearance; they looked like caricatures rather than human beings.

The mutants were, he supposed, the immediate living audience, as opposed to the hypothetical video audience; they were probably denizens of what was left of the surface London, skulking and hiding in cellars and the ruins of buildings, with radioactivity scintillating in every cell of their bodies, if they had not, over the generations, developed a natural immunity to nuclear radiation. Depression gripped him for a few moments, but he shook it off and made up his mind to be impersonal and practical about the proceedings which were to come.

He descended from the hoverjet with Mr. Jaff and other officials, and was introduced to the committee of welcome. Under the probing eyes of the video cameras, he met senior officers of the invading army and civilian members of the military government, and made suitably conventional and innocuous remarks. They, in turn, were cordial but formal in their attitude, as if they knew and acknowledged his puppet status.

"Ten minutes," said Mr. Jaff, sidling up to him through the throng, "then the ceremony begins. You are not required to say anything at all, not a single word. The monument has been thoroughly mined by engineers; at the appropriate moment it will disintegrate into a million fragments. It is sufficient that you should merely show yourself. It is better psychology. Later there will be opportunities for you to talk to your subjects once the situation has crystallized."

"Whatever you say," Carson said quietly.

"To be a successful figurehead, one must be remote and perhaps a little incommunicative. Robert Carson throughout the centuries has acquired a certain mystical quality—in the eyes of the populace he had almost the status of a deity. The Robert Carson they knew formerly was a corpse in a transparent coffin, but you are alive. That is why it is important not to present too great a contrast. Act as if you were, in effect, the same Robert Carson brought mysteriously back to life, silent and perhaps still subdued by the lethargy of death."

"I'll try," Carson promised.

Presently they walked over to the solemnly decorated rostrum, Carson leading the way. He ascended the steps to the dais, followed by Mr. Jaff and the military and political leaders. The lenses of the video cameras panned and zoomed.

Carson was never quite sure what happened next. There was a tremendous hot, concussive blast, and the solid ground of the park seemed to rise tumultuously into the air. He caught a brief distorted glimpse of Mr. Jaff whirling backward with flailing arms, and then the rostrum had crumbled into fragments of steel and plastic surging upward on hot turbulent air. The entire world seemed to dissolve into thunder and fire. . . .

CHAPTER ELEVEN

At some instant before or shortly after the moment of conception, when the woman had been a single cell, or perhaps simply an ovum or a gamete, a gene had been destroyed by the impact of a gamma particle liberated from a nuclear source; or the faulty gene might have been inherited through several generations of mutated birth. Whatever the explanation, she had grown into what was superficially a half-woman, of normal size and shape, but with one eye and one ear, and a small mouth displaced to the right. The left side of her face was blank, and the hair on that side was of a different texture, being dry and limp and almost gray, while the hair on the other side of her head was sleekly brown, with the suggestion of a gentle wave. The rest of her body

was normal, so far as Carson could judge: she had two arms and two legs. She wore an ill-fitting garment that seemed to have been crudely fabricated from tarpaulin. The single eye was blue and intelligent.

He recognized the appalling evidence of mutation before he had fully recovered consciousness, and perhaps for that reason he was the less stricken by horror and revulsion. The woman moved away, out of his field of vision, and he found himself staring at a shattered stone archway, and beyond it a night sky with glittering stars.

A cool breeze sighed through the broken masonry of devastated buildings. He was lying in the shelter of the arch, and there was soft fabric beneath his back. Above him moonlight shone pallidly on a cracked wall, but he could not see the moon from where he lay.

A man came into view, a tall thin man with an extraordinarily long neck and wide, staring eyes. An odd point of detail seized Carson's attention: the man had eight spindly fingers on each hand, without thumbs. The man stooped low and peered into his face.

"Robert Carson," he said in a toneless rasping voice. "Are you Robert Carson?" Surprisingly the language he was using was not the Martian semantic blend, but rather a slurred adaptation of the older English of Carson's own era.

"Robert Carson?" the man repeated.

Carson was about to reply, when suddenly the man disappeared, and the mutated woman returned.

"Robert Carson," she said softly, in a very feminine voice.

"Yes," said Carson.

Abruptly the thin man was there, peering over her shoulder. "I knew it," he said. "I had a feeling about him."

"Where am I?" Carson asked.

"With friends," said the woman. "We will look after you."

"What happened?"

The man interlocked his sixteen fingers nervously. "Reprisal. The norms blew up a first-level residential sector under the park. They must have known."

"The norms?"

"The normal people—those who live underground. They must have known."

"I can see that only too clearly," Carson murmured. "They chose the appropriate moment, with video cameras focused

on the top Martian brass, not to mention the great Robert Carson. The propaganda value must have been enormous."

"You use unfamiliar words," said the woman. "The first level is deep. The explosion was restrained and muffled. There were only four deaths among the immortals."

"Immortality has its limits," Carson remarked. Now that he was fully conscious he was aware of stiffness and pains in his body; his right leg felt numb, as if it were fractured.

"There was an immediate counterattack. The battle is going on now underground. The norms are engaged in bitter fighting with the immortals to recapture the government zones."

"That means reinforcements will be arriving," Carson said thoughtfully. "And if the norms are counterattacking with any force, they may well push the fighting up to the surface."

"It would be wise to leave London," said the man sadly. "There will be more bombs and missiles."

Slowly Carson pushed himself into a sitting position, encumbered to some extent by the bulky antiradiation suit. He moved his arms and legs and was relieved to find that they responded normally. The suit had probably protected him from serious damage.

"At least there are no bones broken," he commented. "What happened to the others?"

"What others?"

"The rest of the Martians—the immortals."

The woman said: "After the explosion, the mutants broke through the wire fence and tried to help the survivors. Then, later, the survivors were able to help themselves, and they started searching for you, Mr. Carson. But we had already taken you away, and in the confusion nobody saw. Then many hoverjets carrying troops arrived, and we heard that severe fighting had broken out underground. We brought you here."

"Why?" Carson demanded.

"Because if you own the Earth, then we have a right to talk to you and show you how we live—but we have to seize that right. It would never be granted in a thousand years."

"What she means is that we're mutants, and mutants have no rights," the man put in.

"You must remember that I represent the enemy. It would not be good for me to fall into the hands of the norms," Carson pointed out.

The woman stroked the smooth side of her long hair in a feminine gesture. "There is no enemy where we are concerned," she said. "There are only norms and immortals—and we mutants. If the norms and the immortals choose to fight each other, that is their business. It makes living very difficult for us, but we are not directly involved in the war. We live as we can, where we can. The norms have tried to help us with food and materials and medical supplies, and we are grateful for that—but we are many millions, and there is not much they can do."

"I think there's a great deal which could be done," Carson said. "It's about time responsible human beings stopped living underground and started making the surface of the world fit for habitation. This business of mutation is a self-inflicted injury, and it ought to be tackled on a priority basis."

"That is big talk," the man remarked, but there was no unpleasantness in his voice.

"There is a solution to every problem," Carson went on firmly. "The immortals have developed very advanced clinical and surgical techniques. When the war is over Martian doctors and scientists will find ways of dealing with mutation. After all, they know how to cure death."

The woman smiled twistedly. "Mutation is a matter of birth, not death."

"It is only a question of time," Carson insisted. "Some of these scientists have been working on researches for a thousand years or more."

"But *we* are not immortals, Mr. Carson. If I live for another forty years I shall be lucky indeed. And I find it difficult to be enthusiastic about the benefits which future generations will enjoy."

Carson remained silent, suddenly depressed. *Better for me to go back,* he thought, *to rejoin the Martian force. These people won't stop me. If I stay here, I might get taken by the enemy, and that would be dangerous. When the war is won I can try to force the administrative people to study the mutant problem and take some action. After all, there's noth-*

ing I can do alone and unaided, other than make idle promises which I may not be able to fulfill.

"What are your thoughts, Robert Carson?" the woman asked presently.

"I think I ought to return," he said quietly. "I do not support war, but now that the thing has started, the sooner it ends, the better for all concerned. I am an essential part of the Martian military strategy, and it may be that the war will finish much more quickly if I carry out the duties assigned to me."

The man and the woman looked at him in melancholy disillusionment.

"We had hoped you might come with us," said the woman.

"Where?"

"Outside London. There is a place about twenty-five miles away—a mutant colony—in a valley. There is some protection from heat flash if atomic warfare should start again over London. There are caves and tunnels dug in the ground."

"What could I possibly do there?"

"Stay with us for a few days. By then the battle of London will be either won or lost. Nobody will force you to stay if you don't wish to. You can always go back."

"How do we travel? Twenty-five miles is a long journey on foot."

"We have a simple machine—a kind of box on wheels with a geared pedal device for the feet. One can do about eight miles an hour without much effort."

Carson stood up, undecided, and stared across the ruins beyond the arch to the darker skyline of eroded London. Lights moved in the sky. Probably spacecraft or hoverjets, he thought. As he watched, the night glowed white, then crimson, just above the horizon; half a minute later a muffled concussion shook the air around him. He sensed the mutant woman standing by his side.

"They have started already on the surface," she whispered. "It might not be possible to go back. The norms may be in possession of the city again. To stay here would be dangerous."

"All right," said Carson finally, with an air of resignation, "I'll come with you."

The man appeared before him in the darkness. An eight-fingered hand touched his arm like a spider.

"Thank you, Mr. Carson," breathed the man. "Thank you very much."

The journey to the mutant colony was arduous and trying. The vehicle was of soap-box construction, lashed together from pieces of plastic and metal, with no springs or rubber tires. They took turns peddling, jolting and bumping over the uneven roads, and occasionally lurching across open country. On hills they had to get out and push. The entire trip took a little more than four hours, which gave an average speed of some six miles per hour. Better than walking, Carson decided, but barely so.

The valley was narrow and confined, with steep sides covered in stunted shrubs which looked as if they had been seared by heat flash at some time. There was little grass, and the ground was damp and sour. They pushed the box car to the bottom of the valley (the slope was too steep for the primitive brakes), and left it beside a thin trickling stream. Dawn was gray in the eastern sky, and the countryside was emerging in wan ghostly color.

He followed the mutants through the scrub to where one side of the valley rose up in an almost vertical cliff face of weathered rock, and here were the caves and the tunnels. Narrow steps had been chiseled at places in the cliff, and here and there crude wooden ladders were lashed into position to provide access to cave mouths.

They began to ascend a ladder, but Carson encountered great difficulty in maintaining his balance, partly because of fatigue and partly because the antiradiation clothing hindered his movements. Presently, after much effort, he found himself entering an oval tunnel cut in the rock face. The tunnel, which was dark, extended in a straight line for some thirty paces, then opened after a sharp right-angle turn into a large cave, rectangular enough to be man-made. Simple oil lamps burned steadily in the corners, casting a yellow, vapid glow on to the gray rough-hewn walls. There were people in the cave, some standing, others sitting on rough benches. As he entered the room behind the man and woman, all eyes focused on him, and a whisper of dry voices rustled in the air: *Carson. Robert Carson himself. Carson. Carson . . .*

As Carson looked at his audience, his spine chilled. They were all mutants, of course, and some were reasonably human in appearance. But others were grotesque, nightmarish travesties of men and women. They had one thing in common—intelligent eyes, where there were eyes at all.

Carson experienced a tense, instinctive revulsion conflicting with a civilized determination not to react, not to notice. But more than anything he regretted having come.

"This is our communal assembly hall," said the tall man quietly. "The others got back earlier and told them you might be coming. They have been waiting for hours. They expect you to say a few words to them."

"How do I address them?" Carson asked anxiously. "I mean, as people or mutants or terrestrials or what?"

"They like to be called humans," said the man, without irony. "It helps them to feel—accepted."

Carson walked forward into the assembly hall, his mind rapidly formulating the trend of an impromptu speech. The mutants seemed to edge toward him intently.

"Fellow humans," he began, then paused for a moment while he mustered his thoughts. "I am Robert Carson—the real, living original Robert Carson—the owner of the Carson Trust and, therefore, the economic owner of Earth.

"Today, for the first time in eight thousand years, I have set foot once more on the planet on which I was born and raised. I am not a Martian colonist, but I am grateful to the scientists and doctors of Mars for giving me back my life. I am in a sense a man of two worlds, but if Mars was my college, then Earth is my home. My loyalty is to humanity as a whole, whether immortal, norm or mutant, and I believe that the present hostilities between the two planets will ultimately be resolved for the benefit of the whole human race. The Martian armies must inevitably win, because they have the superior weapons and technology.

"When the war is over and Earth and Mars are united on a common economic basis, there are certain important tasks to be performed—and the first will be to rehabilitate the surface of the Earth, to build cities and highways and industries, and to bring men up from below the ground. The norms and the mutants and the immortals must all live together as equals, each individual playing his responsible part in the pattern of society. There must be intensive re-

search into the whole problem of genetic mutation, and I am convinced that Martian scientists will find an answer very quickly."

They had listened to him in silence, with such lack of response that he began to wonder whether he was saying the right things. He scanned their weird faces for a sign of response, but could detect only apathy. *I must be more practical,* he thought. *These wretched mutants don't want political claptrap or ethereal promises. They want to know what I can do for them—Robert Carson, owner of the Earth.*

"Humans," he said, making a fresh start, "when the war is over I shall be ruler of Earth, and there are certain things I will do without delay. The first will be to divide the entire wealth of the Carson Trust equally between the two divided sections of humanity—the mutants, and the normal people, whether norm or immortal. There will be two independent governments—a mutant government controlling the world's surface, and a norm government for the denizens of the underground cities. Norms may live on the surface if they choose, and mutants may live underground, but they must comply with each other's laws. There will be complete equality of economic opportunity. Above all, the mutants will have the financial basis to develop their civilization in their own way."

Now there was response, and the quiet murmur of enthusiastic conversation among his audience. Encouraged, he continued his theme, inventing a program of terrestrial development as the ideas occurred to him.

"As a basic principle we must accept the fact that in pure human values an immortal is no better and no worse than a mutant, and the norm is the equal of either. Physically we may differ, but the difference is a matter of genetic biochemistry.

Yes, they murmured, *that is so.*

"Well, then, let us face reality. We are one species, all of us, and we have equal rights—"

He broke off suddenly. Deep in his ear the voice of Mr. Jaff said icily, *You are wrong, Mr. Carson. Every mutation is a new species. By the most most fundamental of nature's laws they cannot all survive. Only the fittest can survive. Look around you. How many of your mutants are fit to survive, either physically or esthetically? If you were trying to create*

a new, perfect Earth, populated by the finest eugenic strain of Homo sapiens, how many would you permit to survive?

Carson knew the answer even before the question was finished. He made no reply, but stared silently at his audience, waiting raptly for his next words.

Mr. Jaff continued: *Do not deceive yourself or your mutant friends. When the war is won, it will be our task to make a new Earth peopled with genetically perfect humans. The mutants are a phase—a mistake. They cannot be allowed to survive. Humanity was never destined to become a species of twisted monsters. The mutants must die, all of them. In the end the solar system will be peopled by immortals. How many of your mutant friends would you wish to see immortalized?*

The audience was growing restive, wondering why he had stopped talking to them. Frantically he tried to think of something to say, but the firm, plausible voice of Mr. Jaff went on and on, shattering the foundations of his abritrary new world in which mutants and norms and immortals were equals.

Come back, Mr. Carson, before it is too late. We will abandon you if we must, but we still need you as a symbol. The terrestrials have counterattacked strongly, and we may have to withdraw from London for a time. If they capture you, they will destroy you without hesitation. Come back before it is too late. The mutants cannot help you.

"But how can I get back?" asked Carson, suddenly oblivious of his audience.

Where are you?

"I don't know. A valley about twenty-five miles south or southwest of London."

Keep talking, ordered Mr. Jaff. *We will use radar direction finders to obtain a bearing and fix on your aural radio transceiver. Keep talking. We shall send a task force in hoverjets to bring you back.*

Carson looked round at the strangely inhuman but pathetic faces of his mutant audience, still restless and still waiting for him to speak more reassuring words. *I could continue speaking to them,* he thought, *and Mr. Jaff would have plenty of time to pinpoint me, and very soon I would be back with the invading forces, among normal human beings, and knowing my precise place in the scheme of*

things. But he was aware of an inner stubbornness possessing his mind—a strong conviction that he was right and Jaff, in his autocratic way, was wrong.

All this talk of genetically perfect humans—by what standard could Jaff, or anyone else, judge a human being's fitness to survive? Come to the point, Jaff himself was no beauty from a physical point of view, and yet he was immortal. By sheer accident of birth, he had inherited the right to survive indefinitely. But what supreme authority gave him the right to determine the question of life or death among others who, also by accident of birth, diverged from the standard physical specification of Homo sapiens?

In ordering the destruction of the mutants, Jaff was negating the entire natural basis of biological evolution. He was not prepared to allow the fittest to survive; on the contrary, the privilege of life was to be accorded to those selected by arbitrary eugenic standards.

Rebellion flared in Carson's mind, coupled with the knowledge that he could speak only a few words if he was to avoid being located by radar. He held up one hand in a gesture commanding attention.

"I am being monitored," he announced solemnly, "and I can say no more. If it is within my power to help you, then I will. Thank you for listening to me."

Keep talking, urged the voice of Mr. Jaff. *Keep talking, Mr. Carson.*

Carson backed away from his audience toward the entrance tunnel and the mutant man and woman he had first met. They were looking at him anxiously.

Keep talking, Mr. Jaff repeated.

Carson remained silent.

You must obey orders. Keep talking.

"I hope you are not involved in serious political trouble," said the man quietly.

Carson contrived to smile, but said nothing.

Very well, said Mr. Jaff. *If you will not learn to obey, then you must be taught.*

A second of silence followed, and then, with an abrupt click, his brain exploded into the familiar high pitched whistle. In desperation he clapped his hands to his ears and shook his head to relieve the torment, but the whistle persisted, cutting through every nerve in his body. Over the whistle a

resonant, metallic voice called: *Keep talking. Keep talking. Keep talking . . .*

In a sudden frenzy of unreasoning panic he rushed headlong from the cavern and blindly along the dark tunnel, colliding with the rough wall every few steps, not knowing what he intended to do. Behind him he felt rather than herd footsteps in pursuit, and voices calling to him, but the whistle drowned all awareness of the outside world. He reached the edge of the tunnel mouth in the cliff face without realizing it, and when his stumbling feet stepped upon empty air he was unable to think at all. For an instant his legs tangled in the crude ladder; then wood snapped with a dry splintering sound, and he was falling over and over toward the ground.

At the moment of impact the whistle faded as unconsciousness swooped upon him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"You are not so immortal that you can fall on your head with impunity," said the tall, gray-haired man in the white coat. "However, the slope of the ground helped to break your fall. Apart from bruising here and there, all is well."

Carson found himself lying flat on his back on a low bed, staring at a white luminous ceiling. The man was doing something with clinical instruments on a shining metal trolley, and beyond him a woman, also dressed in white, was writing something on a small green card.

"There was severe concussion, of course," the man continued, speaking in a leisurely manner, as if filling in time. "You have been unconscious for four days."

Certain things became apparent to Carson. He was no longer in the hands of the mutants, and, to judge by the windowless room and the evenly glowing ceiling, this was somewhere underground, in one of the buried cities. The man's accent was strange, lacking the semantic blend of the Martian tongue, but more drawling and fluent than the language of the mutants. He was clearly a terrestrial, and be-

neath his white coat he wore gray trousered clothing reminiscent of fashions in the twentieth century.

"Where am I?" Carson asked.

The man glanced quickly at him, half smiling. "In a hospital in a city, but I am not permitted to name the city. You are, I fear, a prisoner of war, Robert Carson—quite the most important prisoner we have yet captured."

"How did you find me?"

"In the simplest manner. Every mutant colony is connected by a radio device to the office of an area commissioner. The commissioner's duty is to look after the welfare of the mutants in his own district in so far as he can, particularly with matters concerning emergency food distribution and essential medical services. After your fall down the cliff, when it became obvious that you were in a coma and perhaps seriously injured, the mutants did the only thing possible to help you. They called in the area commissioner. The rest was automatic. You were taken prisoner and brought to this hospital for treatment."

"What will happen to me?"

"That is not for me to decide. I am a doctor, not a military officer. My task is to make you well, and that is all."

The doctor took a large envelope from under the trolley and produced an X-ray photograph which he held up in front of Carson. It showed a silhouette of a human skull. On one side, just inward from the ear, was a tiny rectangular shadow.

"No fractures," said the doctor in a matter-of-fact voice, "but we were interested in this curious object"—he indicated the shadow with the tip of his finger—"apparently located in the inner ear. On the operating table we found a very small metallic cylinder lodged in the ear, almost in contact with the eardrum itself, but in some curious way the metal casing had fused into the flesh so that it was impossible to remove the thing without also amputating part of the inner ear, including the drum membrane and ossicles. The result would have been permanent deafness."

"I imagine Martian doctors could soon fit a new ear," Carson commented.

"You may never see another Martian doctor in the rest of your immortal life," the doctor remarked sardonically.

"So what did you do with the—thing?"

"Nothing at all. We left it where it was."

"Did you find out what it was?"

The doctor nodded slowly. "Yes, we did. There are ways of using fine X-ray beams to scan the interior of an object and produce a detailed three-dimensional picture. The thing is, of course, a miniature radio transmitter and receiver, powered by one of the smallest atomic batteries it has been my pleasure to see. I'm afraid our terrestrial craftsmanship is crude in comparison, but then we have had other problems to deal with in the course of our short lives."

"I wish you had taken it out," said Carson. "The thing is a monitoring device, and they use it for compelling obedience by means of an ultrasonic whistle. I would have preferred deafness."

"You *have* deafness," the doctor pointed out. "If you listen carefully to the sound of your own voice, or if you turn your head while I am talking to you, you will discover that your right ear is inoperative." Carson performed the experiment while the doctor continued talking and confirmed for himself that he was indeed deaf on one side. "The radio device still works. It can hear you and me, but you can no longer hear it. All we did was to inject a long term anesthetic into the inner ear to paralyze the auditory nerves for a period of, say, three to four weeks."

"But why?"

"To cut you off from radio contact with your Martian colleagues without destroying the means of communication. We could have drilled into the device and made it useless, but the military authorities had other plans."

"What plans?"

"You will no doubt learn in due course. For the moment you are well, though a little deafer than you used to be, and you will not hear any more ultrasonic whistles—not for some time, at any rate. Meanwhile, you will spend another day or two in the hospital until we are satisfied with your condition, after which you will be transferred to another part of the city where you will come under the control of the military."

Carson nodded. On impulse he asked, "How is the war progressing?"

"Fine," said the doctor, smiling. "We are counter-attacking

on all fronts, and I'm happy to say that your friends are at present in full retreat."

"I find that hard to believe."

The doctor shrugged amiably. "Suit yourself. For you, personally, Robert Carson, the war is over."

He signaled to the woman, who wheeled the trolley from the room, then, with a final glance at Carson, went out after her.

During the next two days Carson was able to relax and consider the new situation which had developed. He welcomed the opportunity to rest, for the bruising caused by the fall—coming so soon after the physical shock of being caught up in the explosion—made him feel weary and stiff. He was well looked after by the nurse, and was examined twice by the same doctor. One surprise was the food, which, though largely synthetic, contained certain natural vegetables —peas, for instance, and something that might have been cabbage—no doubt grown in the hydroponic farms.

He tried to visualize Mr. Jaff's reaction to his capture and how it might influence the policy of the high command. After the fiasco of the initiation ceremony which had literally exploded (Mr. Jaff had apparently been well and truly rescued by the mutants), plus the terrestrial counterattacks, the capture of the great Carson, owner of Earth, by the enemy would be a gross insult added to serious injury.

The transceiver, functioning all the time while he was unconscious, had faithfully relayed to Jaff the sounds and voices of the mutants who had saved Carson and later the norms who took him to hospital. Jaff had heard the doctor diagnosing Carson's condition and the experts debating the purpose of the transceiver capsule in his ear. And, if it was allowed to continue functioning, Jaff would in due course overhear the interrogation that would take place when Carson was eventually delivered to terrestrial intelligence officers. Why the enemy thought this was desirable Carson was at a loss to understand.

At all events, there was nothing in the doctor's manner or conduct that suggested Carson would be treated as other than an important and possibly distinguished prisoner. His earlier fears that the enemy might seek to destroy the man who calimed to be the real Robert Carson seemed to be groundless, though it was too soon to be overconfident in that direc-

tion. It seemed more likely now that the terrestrials in their turn would attempt to use him as a major propaganda weapon, stealing the psychological initiative from the invaders.

Mr. Jaff and the Martian military and political leaders would be busily enumerating all the possibilities and deciding what action to take in each case on a point-counterpoint basis. In particular Mr. Jaff would be frustrated by his inability to communicate with Carson via the transceiver, and by the impossibility of enforcing obedience with the ultrasonic tone. He would be uncertain of Carson's loyalty, knowing that already he held certain ideas and views which were seditious in the eyes of Martian authority, and having heard the manner of his speech to the mutants, which conflicted in its humanitarianism with the official cold-blooded policy of elimination. Jaff, in fact, would undoubtedly be a very worried man.

I stand to lose either way, Carson thought. *The terrestrials will always think my first allegiance is to the Martians, who restored my life, while Jaff will always suspect me of having terrestrial sympathies. Neither side will trust me fully. In the long run the only friends I may ever have will be the mutants. I may be the theoretical owner of Earth, but that's only a worthless abstract symbol. Without power and the means to enforce that power I own nothing—not even myself. I would be just as useful dead, in a transparent coffin. In the end, the future will depend on who wins the war.*

Secretly, hardly admitting it even to himself, Carson wished that the terrestrials would win.

On the afternoon of the second day, Carson was given his clothes and told to dress. Ten minutes later he was escorted from the hospital by four uniformed men. In the street outside he was bundled into a large black vehicle balancing itself mysteriously on one wheel centrally located under the chassis. Evidently the terrestrials hadn't got as far as antigravity, and the single wheel was the next best thing. Jets hissed quietly, and the car began to move forward, swiftly gathering speed, while machinery hummed faintly beneath the seats—probably gyroscopes for balancing, Carson thought.

Superficially, the terrestrial underground city was similar in general construction to those of Mars. Strips of greenery

and garden were fewer, however, and the illumination was more subdued; the buildings generally possessed a simpler and more austere geometry. One could reasonably assume that the terrestrial cities were older than their Martian counterparts and lacked some of the refinements which a superior technology could provide.

They descended three levels through spiraling tunnels, and drew up finally outside an imposing gray building. Carson, surrounded by his guards, went inside, and was conducted along a wide corridor to a spacious room, colored restfully in pale green. At a long glass-topped table at one end of the room sat three men—in the center an elderly, graying individual wearing military uniform, and on either side of him a civilian.

The escort halted, then retreated a few paces, leaving Carson to face the committee. As there was no chair, he remained standing.

The uniformed man eyed him with kindly interest. "I'm told that you are Robert Carson," he said.

"Yes."

"That is to say, the original Robert Carson, who died some eight thousand years ago in one of the earlier space rockets known as *Wanderer II*."

"Correct."

The officer stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Well, you present rather a problem to us, Mr. Carson. Technically you are a prisoner of war and an enemy. But if you are whom you claim to be, then you are also the beneficiary in law of the Carson Trust, which makes you in effect the executor of an economic estate which embraces the vast majority of terrestrial property and industry."

"So I've been told," Carson murmured.

"Clearly we have first to establish your true identity beyond all possible doubt, and that will be done during the weeks to come. It could be, for instance, that you are not Carson at all, but a Martian colonist trained and indoctrinated to pose as Carson, quite unknowingly and in good faith. We know that the Martians possess very effective psychoneural techniques—"

"This has been considered before," said Carson, recalling his lengthy interrogation by the security people on Mars. "I was able to prove my identity just the same."

"We have already seen that particular video record," said the officer skeptically. "Our friends from Mars are very liberal in their propaganda efforts. It doesn't really prove anything other than that the Martians tested the strength and efficiency of their indoctrination methods by submitting you to a searching cross-examination, and tried to confuse you by showing you photographs which seemed to refute your statements."

"There was the business of the damaged fuel pump—"

"That could have been contrived. After all, they *had* the rocket, and they must have known precisely how the pump was damaged."

"But I remember it," Carson protested.

"By indoctrination, yes. A half-memory, buried deep in the mind, so that it could emerge plausibly to the surface when suitably keyed by questions and photographs." The officer smiled shrewdly. "We also know something of psychoneural indoctrination and deep-level hypnosis. There is one point of detail which was never referred to in that video recording—a very important point of detail. When Carson had passed out of radio range of Earth in the *Wanderer* rocket and knew he was going to die, he spent his time dictating memories and impressions into the tape recorder which formed part of the equipment. For seventeen days and nights, on and off, he reminisced—sometimes talking calmly and logically, and sometimes wildly, in a kind of insane desperation. That tape embodies the whole of Carson's life and memories."

"I know," said Carson grimly. "I made that tape. Some day I thought the information might be useful to someone."

"It *was!* To you and your Mr. Jaff. It enabled the Martians to create a synthetic Robert Carson with more than enough personal memories and mannerisms to satisfy even the most skeptical unbeliever."

Carson sighed despondently. An idea occurred to him. "How would you know about that tape, anyway?" he demanded. "The rocket was recovered by the Martians, and if they kept it secret, how could you possibly know? I was out of radio contact with Earth when I began recording. Nobody could know what was on that tape until they located the rocket."

"The answer is simple enough," said the officer, smiling.

"*We* have the tape. It was stolen from security headquarters on Mars by one of our secret agents, quite recently, not more than two years ago. It was when we began to learn that a new Robert Carson was about to be launched—if that is the expression—to support another invasion of Earth. Our agent investigated and discovered the tape. He realized that it was being used for indoctrination purposes and smuggled it to Earth. We made copies, and the original tape was returned to Mars. Nobody had noticed its absence for nearly two weeks, because the psychoneural indoctrination had been completed. The agent is still alive, and still on Mars, working in security."

"That doesn't prove I'm an imposter," Carson said wearily. "I recorded the tape myself. I know what's on it."

"Then why should the Martians be so secretive about it?"

"I don't know. Perhaps they thought people might immediately suspect indoctrination of some kind if they knew a tape existed. A man might own a small printing press, but that doesn't mean he forges currency notes."

The officer raised his eyebrows in mild remonstration. "It is easy enough to discover whether a currency note is forged or not," he pointed out. "It is far more difficult to prove human identity, particularly when all the circumstantial evidence points to what we might call a forgery of personality, and even more particularly when the prize at stake is economic ownership of an entire planet."

"I'm tired of being asked to prove I'm myself," said Carson heatedly. "I'm not interested in economic ownership of this planet or any other. I didn't ask to be brought back to life, but now that I'm alive, all I ask is to be left in peace—to live simply, without ambitions, and without being involved in political intrigue. I renounce all claim to the Carson Trust. I want no part of it."

"You can't renounce what is binding in law. If you are in truth Robert Carson, then you will have to accept your full responsibility. If you are not, then the position doesn't arise."

Carson leaned forward intently. "I'll go further," he said earnestly. "If it will help matters, if it will put an end to this unending argument about identity and economics, I'll agree to be somebody else—anyone you like. I'll try to forget I'm Robert Carson. I'll even admit that I was brainwashed.

All I ask is to be left with the secret knowledge that I am Carson, but I won't ever mention it to anyone."

"No good," said the officer, shaking his head. "If you admit to being an imposter, then you will be summarily executed, immortal or not. In any case, we cannot deal with such an important issue in terms of subterfuge. We have to know the truth. That is why this committee of three has been convened. Our task is to find out exactly who you are, whether it takes hours, weeks, months or years.

"I am Colonel Ree, a senior officer of terrestrial military intelligence. On my left is Dr. Brant, one of our leading psychoneurologists, and a specialist in indoctrination techniques. On my right is Mr. Azan, an executive director of the Carson Trust commission. Between us we shall determine the facts." He paused, rubbing his fingers together reflectively. "Certain things are already known. The Martians recovered the original *Wanderer II* rocket long after we had erected our monument as a symbol. Inside they found the dead body of Carson and the tape. Now, either they succeeded in giving Carson a new life—and after eight thousand years of death it sounds highly improbable—or they took the opportunity to *pretend* to bring Carson back to life. They found a man who resembled him physically, and gave him a full indoctrination routine over a period of years, reshaping his brain and perhaps parts of his body as well. Meanwhile, of course, the dead Carson would have been incinerated beyond trace—"

"You make it sound so complicated, whereas it really is very simple," Carson said. "Whatever the motives of the Martian politicians, and whatever plans they had, and still have, for using me as a psychological factor in their invasion of Earth, the truth is that I *am* Robert Carson, and there's nothing you or I or anybody else can do about it."

"Don't be too sure of that," said the officer ominously. "There may be a great deal we can do. For example, in a few minutes from now you are going to listen to the tape which you claim to have recorded in *Wanderer II* while we measure your psychocerebral response on special encephalographic equipment. That may tell us something. Always remember—the brain, once washed, can always be unwashed. It takes time, but it can be done."

Colonel Ree stood up, and the guards promptly marched forward, standing at either side of Carson.

"Take the prisoner to room forty," the colonel ordered.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

During the next ten days, Carson underwent a harrowing and seemingly endless routine of interrogation and psychological examination, sometimes conscious, sometimes in a comatose condition induced by drugs, but invariably with the electrodes of recording instruments connected to his head. He was forced to listen to his own tape over and over again, and then they would question him minutely, forcing his answers beyond the information embodied in the tape to particularized, unrecorded details of his life in the twentieth century. Always he gave his answers quickly and accurately. The three members of the committee, together with the technical assistants who occasionally helped them, were quite impassive in their attitude: it was as if they had ceased to regard him as a human individual at all, but rather as a complex machine which they were carefully scrutinizing in order to locate some obscure suspected fault.

Obliquely, between phases of questioning, he learned something of what was happening in the outside world, though it was difficult to decide just how much was propaganda. Terrestrial forces, it seemed, had counterattacked heavily at key points, and the invaders had been forced to withdraw from the underground cities which they had previously occupied. Although the Martians were generally in possession of the Earth's surface, they were vulnerable to missile attack and, in particular, to the use of incendiary chemicals, which were being used on an increasing scale to destroy equipment and food stores. The terrestrials were using guerilla tactics in towns and cities on the surface, where concealment was relatively easy, and it was thought that mutants were being employed on sabotage work.

Carson's personal view was that the Martian assault had lost much of its initial impetus, while the terrestrials had had time to consolidate their defenses and launch a series

of swift, effective attacks. At no point did there seem to be a long-term positive engagement of the two opposing forces. It was catch-as-catch-can fighting, vicious enough, but indecisive, and likely to drag on for a long time unless one side had the strength to steamroller the other in a fast, all-out campaign.

Of one thing Carson was certain: the Martians could not sustain a long war. The operation had been planned on shock-tactic lines, seizing key centers as quickly as possible, then proclaiming the new order of things with Carson as its figurehead, to be followed by mopping up throughout the world. It had been tacitly assumed that terrestrial resistance would crumble rapidly during the early weeks of the campaign, but the enemy had proved to be more flexible than Martian intelligence had anticipated.

Carson found himself doubting whether the Martians, for all their immense technology and apparent prosperity, could afford to keep sending men and supplies over the tenuous space routes between Mars and the Moon. Already, it seemed to him, the invaders had deployed their forces too widely over the planet, with inadequate concentration of striking power, while the real core of the defense remained buried deep in the ground. All the Martians were doing, in effect, was populating the surface of Earth—vast areas of which were uninhabitable, anyway, because of radioactivity—and relying for their sustenance on food and materials freighted from Mars. That kind of situation could hardly survive for long. To avoid stalemate there would have to be a tremendous concentrated attack from one side or the other.

Meanwhile, the quest for his true identity continued until, in the end, the committee completed its work and went off to consider its findings. Carson was left in peace for three days. The next morning he was summoned to the committee room once more. The three men were sitting at the long table, as on the first occasion, watching him with interest as he entered, escorted by the guards.

Colonel Ree, referring to a document on the table in front of him, said, "We have considered most carefully all the data and evidence relating to the disputed question of your identity, and we have referred, where necessary, to other experts for guidance on the interpretation of certain points. We have also used electronic computors to assess the prob-

ability of certain specific items of data. As a result of our joint deliberations, we have reached the conclusion that you are, in fact, Robert Carson, beyond all possible doubt. Further proof is supported by biological tests, in particular the radioactive level of your bone marrow, which is much lower than might be expected under contemporary conditions of ambient radiation. The true age of the marrow, according to one of our most prominent biophysicists, is more than five thousand years, and probably nearer eight."

He paused for a moment, eying Carson sternly. "In face of all available evidence, this committee finds that you are Robert Carson, beneficiary under the Carson Trust," he announced in formal tones.

"Well, thank you," Carson said, a little uncertainly, not knowing quite how he should react. "To me it was self-evident all the time."

"You must realize that this alters your status considerably," said the colonel. "Perhaps Mr. Azan, of the Trust commission, will outline for you just what it means to be Robert Carson on Earth, here and now."

"Indeed I will," said Mr. Azan, beaming. "I ought to explain first that throughout the centuries terrestrial law has been continuous, and the Trust has survived with the industries and projects in which it was bound up, and with the big international banking houses who administered it under the direction of the commission. It has survived despite wars, and despite attempts made by a number of governments to seize its assets and convert the fund for treasure use. It has survived because it employs manpower and machine power —in other words, planetary productivity—and the commission has always maintained adequate and benevolent control of its labor force. A government might seize factories, but to seize the manpower to operate them is to invite political disaster. Wars do not halt productivity. They channel it to military ends, and peace brings a stimulus to even greater productivity. The Trust is stronger today than ever it was."

"I understand," Carson murmured, "but I don't really see just *how* I own the Earth. After all, I was dead when the fund was first started."

"An interesting legal point," said Mr. Azan happily, interlocking his fingers and cracking the knuckles loudly. "In

fact, as a safeguard, the money was assigned to you, personally, even though you were dead. It was assumed, of course, that you would be dead forever. Nobody suspected that a later civilization would develop the science of antimortics and restore your life. In law, the money belonged to you, and you alone. No other individual or body of men or government could claim one single dollar of it."

"But surely the commission—"

"Ah, yes, the commission," Mr. Azan continued, holding up a silencing finger. "Obviously a fund assigned to a dead man could serve no useful purpose. It might just as well not exist. The terms of the Trust made provision for investment, the original purpose being to finance an expedition to recover your body in *Wanderer II.* The investment was to be effected by an impartial commission of economic and industrial experts. The fund has never belonged to the commission. Throughout the ages they have merely administered it in your name. The members of the commission have always been men of integrity, internationally chosen, with no overriding political affiliations, and they have made their investments wisely. With the aid of the fund they have in the course of time bought the entire planet—and it is all yours, Robert Carson."

Carson stared blankly at Mr. Azan. "But what am I supposed to do with it?" he asked.

"Whatever you wish," said Mr. Azan pleasantly. "The commission will advise you, naturally, but the fact is that legally all property, industry and assets owned by the Trust belong to you."

Colonel Ree leaned forward, tapping the table lightly with his fingers. "Now you can understand why the Martians took such great trouble to find you and give you back your life.. While you were dead the fund belonged to no one but was merely controlled by the commission. But a living Carson is a different matter. He has the legal right to claim all that belongs to him, to dissolve the commission, to hand the planet he owns to somebody else, if he chooses—or is made to choose."

"I see what you mean," Carson said thoughtfully. "They never did explain just why I was owner of Earth, and they never told me what would happen after the invasion was

won—just that I would be installed in a government building, somewhere, as a symbolic ruler—"

"Having legally assigned all your rights in the Trust to Mr. Jaff or one of the others," the Colonel put in. "And very soon afterward you would die, accidentally, in such a way that antimortic surgery would be impossible—and that would be the final, irrevocable end of Robert Carson and the Carson Trust."

"Would they dare to do that?"

"It wouldn't matter once the original terms of the Trust had been abandoned and the trustees dismissed. Law is law, and terrestrials recognize that basic principle. You must remember that for a long, long time the effective ruling power on this planet has been the Trust commission, acting through the appointed government. The commission always acts correctly and in accordance with the highest ethics, and the people recognize its ultimate authority.

"If the commission should abdicate in favor of a new government, perhaps appointed by you, then there would be no trouble and no revolt. But illegal seizure of power is another matter. It would provoke the strongest possible resistance. At present we are fighting the invaders to the best of our ability, and will continue to do so while we have the backing of law. The responsibility is now yours, Robert Carson. It is for you to decide what is to be done with the world which you own."

"We fight on," said Carson firmly, "until every single Martian invader is destroyed or forced to return to his own planet."

The colonel slapped his open hand enthusiastically on the table. "Excellent. That is the attitude I hoped you would take. You must be patient for a time while I report to the military command, and then there will be a high-level conference at which you will preside. Meanwhile, you will be transferred to new quarters of size and style befitting your status. By tomorrow we shall be ready to formulate new plans."

"I am at your service," Carson said.

The new apartment was situated on the administrative level, quite near the government offices. It was big and comfortable without being ostentatious, as had been the case with

the circular room in his living quarters on Mars. Better still, there were no women installed in adjacent rooms. The terrestrials, he judged, assumed that if a man needed feminine company he would have the initiative to seek it for himself.

Mr. Jaff had obviously presented a distorted view of the terrestrials. If the commission had sought to retain their power, they could easily have denounced him as an impostor and destroyed him; on the contrary, they had set out meticulously to determine his true identity by appointing a special committee for that purpose, and having established that he was Robert Carson, they were ready to abide by the rule of law and deliver Earth to him as a complete property. That, in itself, exceeded the powers of his imagination: to own the Earth was a meaningless concept. But he could understand the legal mechanics behind it. Equally he could understand the opportunist thinking of the Martian colonists, knowing that the Trust commission would abide by the law: *Whoever owns Carson also owns the Earth.*

The picture became clearer in his mind. The Martians had hoped to make a quick invasion strike, seizing power over key centers long enough to establish through every possible channel of communication that he, Carson, was alive, and had come to claim Earth, according to the law, supported by the armed might of Mars. But the invasion had been too slow, and they had lost the man who owned the world. In effect they had also lost the war.

Without me, he thought, *they have no legal right to possess anything.* They would be operating outside the law. If they wanted Earth, they would have to seize it by force, and, even more difficult, hold it by force—not for just a few weeks, or months, or years, but for all time. And without the backing of law the entire population of Earth would be opposed to them, using every means of resistance within their power.

They would be forced to rule by ruthless totalitarian methods, and in the end they would fail, because they would have to rely on their home planet for supplies and reinforcements. It was an impossible project—they could not maintain the struggle across millions of miles of space. The truth was that there were not enough people on Mars to occupy even half the Earth by force.

He pondered the subject for a while, trying to see his

own place in the scheme of things. *I am the key,* he realized. *Terrestrial law revolves around me, and terrestrial economics is based on the ramifications of the Carson Trust—in other words, my money. Therefore I am essential to their purpose, and they will try to find me. At this stage in an invasion attempt that must already have cost an interplanetary fortune, they will use every trick in the book to try to locate me and take me alive. I'm more than a symbol to them—I'm a blank check.*

He attempted to visualize the policy of the Martian high command, and Mr. Jaff in particular. The transceiver in his ear was still working on a one-way basis, as far as he knew, and Jaff would have heard everything. He would know now that there was no possibility of further subterfuge—no way of persuading or compelling Carson to return. On the other hand, without Carson, the Martian cause was lost.

"What would I do if I were Jaff?" Carson asked himself mentally. Certain things seemed inevitable. He tabulated the answers in his mind. *I'm Jaff,* he thought, *and I know that the war has reached stalemate, and may even be lost. To force a win by sheer weight of weapons is impracticable. The only possibility of success is to take over Earth within the framework of the law—and that means that Carson has to be found and forced to co-operate. Problem—how to find Carson? Having found him, the rest is easy. Abandon the dispersed fighting. Maintain defensive action only. Organize a tough, well-equipped task force to go and get Carson at whatever cost. But, once again, the problem—how to find Carson.*

He knew the answer now, and it was absurdly simple. While the transceiver was operating, relaying voices across the radio channel to Mr Jaff's monitoring headquarters, radar direction finders could orientate themselves on the signal and fix its point of origin with precise accuracy. By now Jaff would already know where he was located, and would be mustering a striking force to make the one final important assault. It was only a question of locating the city, and the level within the city. Coma gas and black light would do the rest.

Carson began to feel vaguely alarmed. In his mind's eye he could see the fleets of hovercraft taking off at dispersed surface airports, crammed with assault troops, converging on

the city with one single mission to perform: find Robert Carson, and bring him back alive.

Anxiously he went out of the apartment, and was relieved to find two guards posted at either end of the corridor. He approached one of them.

"I should like to contact Colonel Ree," he said.

"I'm afraid the Colonel won't be available for some time, Mr. Carson," said the guard. "He's at an important conference. You may be able to get in touch with his deputy, Lieutenant Kier."

"How do I do that?"

"There are facilities in your apartment."

They went back into Carson's quarters where, in the living room, the guard indicated a panel on the wall. He pressed a switch, and a thin shutter slid aside revealing a video screen, which immediately began to glow in fugitive rainbow colors. Within a second the face of an attractive dark-haired woman had materialized in solid three-dimensional color.

"Security vidar," she announced. "Whom do you want, please?"

"It's an internal network for military and government officials," the guard explained quietly. "Just say the name of the person you want."

"Lieutenant Kier," said Carson as the guard left the room.

The girl's face faded, and the screen remained blank for a moment. Suddenly a young masculine face with keen eyes was staring at him from the screen.

"Lieutenant Kier—oh, it's you, Mr. Carson. Can I help?"

"It occurred to me," said Carson, with some urgency, "that the Martians may have discovered where I am by obtaining a radar fix on the transceiver device—"

"Of course they have," Kier interrupted. "There have already been a number of sporadic raids, mainly reconnaissance, to test our defenses. We shall have adequate warning when a major attack is launched, and plans have been made for an extremely rapid evacuation of the city by underground tunnels, if necessary. I doubt if it will come to that. This is one of the most strongly defended cities in Europe."

"What city is this?" Carson enquired.

"Didn't they tell you? The name is Atlantis. The city is excavated in the bedrock of the Atlantic Ocean, and is

connected by tunnels to the mainland of Europe. It is the most secure city on the planet, and for that reason it is the co-ordinating military and governmental headquarters for Earth as a whole. We are in an undersea fortress. There is nothing to fear."

Carson almost sighed with relief as he savored the irony of the situation. Water was the one medium which the Martians hardly knew how to cope with, for there were no seas and oceans on Mars. The problem of attacking a city buried beneath immeasurable fathoms of ocean might prove to be insuperable to Martian military technology. Mr. Jaff would be completely baffled and frustrated, wondering how to cope with this new situation.

"You mentioned raids," he said. "How could there be raids?"

"Deep-level submarines. Underwater photography. Contour sounding by ultrasonics. A few minor undersea bombs to clear the silt and expose the outlines of the city. Eventually they will try to drill through, but it will take time. If they try to attack through the tunnels they will be unlucky. We have the means to flood them almost instantly."

"Well, thanks for the information," Carson said cheerfully. "Seems I was worrying unnecessarily."

Lieutenant Kier smiled. "You underestimated our technology. In many respects the Martians are ahead of us, but we were the ones to start underground planetary engineering. We have a two-thousand year lead on the enemy in that field."

Carson made a suitable acknowledgment, then switched off the vidar. The terrestrials had overlooked nothing, he decided. If anything the Martians had underrated the competence and adaptability of the defenders of Earth.

That night, for the last time, he slept peacefully.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Early the following morning Carson was summoned to a high-command conference in an adjacent governmental building. He found himself sitting at a round table with about a dozen

terrestrials, of which half wore the uniforms of senior military officers, while the rest, dressed in civilian clothes, were obviously members of the administrative government. Colonel Ree sat next to Carson, but the man in command of the assembly was a small, wiry individual who, Ree explained quietly to Carson before the proceedings began, was none other than Marshal Haan, the commander-in-chief of the entire terrestrial defense forces.

Marshal Haan made his address in a calm, unhurried manner, keeping it short and to the point. He said: "Gentlemen, this is a council of war, operating under new terms of reference. Today we have with us the man who in law is the absolute owner of all that we are fighting to defend. I present Robert Carson, beneficiary of the fabulous Carson Trust."

All eyes switched to Carson, and for more than a minute there was embarrassing applause.

"I must point out," the Marshal continued, "that while Mr. Carson may, in law, own the world on which we live, we are, nevertheless, his tenants. We have certain obligations toward him, and toward our planet. And he, in turn, has a number of obligations toward us, and the people who live on Earth—the people who, in their several ways, have helped to make the Carson Trust what it is today. The fact is that we all have a vested interest in the Trust. It supplies the amenities of civilized living, while we supply the productivity to provide those amenities. The thing is a self-perpetuating circle, energized by the economic stimulus of the Trust."

A murmur of agreement rumbled diffusely around the table.

"There is one other factor to be considered. Mr. Carson has one privilege which is denied to the rest of us. I refer to the miniature radio device fused in his ear which makes it possible for him to communicate directly with the enemy. At the moment it is only partly operative, but we can provide ancillary equipment which will make it fully operative, if necessary."

He looked directly at Carson. "In other words, the man who, by established and respected law, is the rightful owner of Earth, also has the power to intercede between the two warring forces."

More sounds of approval, and appreciative eyes glancing quickly at Carson.

"By restoring the two-way function of the aural transceiver, Mr. Carson will have the ability to act as our spokesman, and will be able to negotiate directly with the enemy—with Mr. Jaff in particular—which is a desirable arrangement. Naturally it will depend on whether Mr. Carson is prepared to act as an intermediary in this way."

He looked questioningly toward Carson, who nodded slowly and thoughtfully.

"I am fully prepared to act in whatever way is thought advisable," Carson said. "I know Mr. Jaff very well, and he is now aware of my true status so far as terrestrial affairs are concerned. I think Mr. Jaff and I could profitably talk together and negotiate—at least, we would understand each other."

"Excellent," the Marshal commented.

"One point, however," Carson went on. "If the transceiver is restored to two-way functioning, there is a possibility that Mr. Jaff may put pressure on me by using the ultrasonic whistle—"

The Marshal raised one hand reassuringly. "We do not propose to restore the device in quite that way. After all, *it* is functioning normally—it is your ear which is not responding. What we shall do is make a simple adaptation which you can switch on or off, as you think fit. If there should be an ultrasonic whistle—then switch it off."

"Good," Carson remarked.

"So we have our intermediary, and our channel of communication with the enemy. All that needs to be decided now is the simple matter of political policy. In other words, gentlemen, what do we say to the Martians?"

A square-jawed officer sitting directly opposite Carson said, "Unconditional surrender."

Another remarked, "Immediate cessation of hostilities, and the complete withdrawal of Martian forces to the moon before any discussion of terms can begin."

Carson said, "I see no necessity for an ultimatum. It will only provoke truculent opposition, and may defeat its own purpose. In any case, would we be able to follow up an ultimatum with effective action?"

"In the course of time, yes," said a voice.

"In the course of time, the Martians will weaken to breaking strain," Carson went on. "They cannot cope with a long-

drawn-out war. Interplanetary logistics is, in the long term, too difficult and too expensive. Sooner or later they must withdraw—but there is a real danger that before they do so they will launch a final good-bye attack in an attempt to wreak as much destruction as possible. At that stage they will not hesitate to use atomic weapons on our underground cities. It will be a final gesture of brutal vengeance."

"We had already considered that point," said the Marshal. "In practice an ultimatum followed by a determined counter-attack might be a wiser policy. At least it would put them on the defensive."

"Why not give them the opportunity to come to terms with honor?" Carson suggested. "As the war has already reached a condition of balanced stagnation, we might propose a truce during which the military and political leaders of both sides could meet at some neutral place and discuss terms."

"Yes," breathed the Marshal. "A mid-war conference, under the chairmanship of Robert Carson." He added hastily, "Provided they agree, of course. We don't want to be put in the position of making concessions—"

"We will make no concessions. If and when the conference takes place, we can find out just what each planet wants from the other in the way of materials, supplies and products. We can discuss the question of exchange of personnel, of immortality techniques for terrestrials, and other vital matters such as the mutants, rehabilitation of Earth's surface, perhaps with the co-operation of Martian scientists. We might find that we can do much more together working in harmony than could be achieved by conflict."

"I can see you are something of an idealist," the Marshal said cynically. "You may have lived on Mars, but you obviously do not know the devious Martian mentality. Immortal minds tend to grow twisted and gnarled with age, like the trunks of ancient trees. They become too dry and subtle, and they tend to lack flexibility. I doubt very much if one could do a deal of the kind you suggest with Martian immortals. They are too self-contained. Because of their immense age and experience, they tend to take a parental attitude—they possess an urge to exercise a kind of fatherly discipline over those who are not immortals. You might as

well talk of a child hoping to strike a bargain with an unscrupulous adult."

"They really have no alternative," Carson pointed out. "The entire success of their invasion depends on me. Unless they can occupy Earth within the existing framework of the law, they cannot hope to occupy it at all. They can produce a striking force, but not a long-term army of occupation. Once they realize that I have changed sides, then their campaign will come to an end."

"You may be right," the Marshal conceded.

"Then I'm ready to talk to Mr. Jaff."

"Very well." The Marshal stood up. "If you gentlemen will excuse me for a few minutes, I shall escort Mr. Carson to the laboratory where engineers will supply the adaptor to provide two-way radio communication with the enemy."

He walked round the table toward the door. Carson stood up, glanced swiftly round the assembly, then followed him.

The adaptor resembled a small hearing aid, and functioned in much the same way. There were two tiny earpieces, joined by a headband in the manner of a stethophone, and a miniature amplifier with a switch, designed to hang round the neck from a looped strap. One earpiece would pick up audio vibrations from the transceiver in the deaf ear, the engineer explained, and after amplification they would be passed to a minute reproducer in the other ear. In this way Carson would be able to hear Mr. Jaff, with the added advantage that he could switch off the adaptor as and when he chose. Two-way radio contact was established once more, but this time it could be controlled from both ends.

They returned to the conference room, and resumed their seats.

Marshal Haan said, "Mr. Carson is now able to talk with the enemy, and I suggest he do so without delay, so that he can refer to us, if he wishes, for guidance on questions of policy."

The others signified their agreement. Carson nodded, fingering the switch on the plastic case of the amplifier.

"Very well, then, Mr. Carson—"

Carson switched on the amplifier. The faint sound of background static hissed in his left ear.

"Mr. Jaff," he said, speaking slowly and clearly. "Mr.

Jaff, this is Robert Carson. I am speaking from terrestrial military headquarters in Atlantis."

An interval of silence—then Mr. Jaff's voice, oddly flat and toneless: *I'm disappointed in you, Carson. I never imagined you would become a traitor and join the enemy —and after we gave you back your life.*

"Thank you for my life, but my mind is my own. You can't alter that."

We could have, but we trusted you. We relied on your sense of integrity and honor. You know that whatever we planned to do was for the ultimate benefit of Earth.

"The ultimate benefit of Mars, you mean. I am no longer so naive."

We are the immortals, Carson. We are a superior race with a superior technology, and you are one of us at heart. Do not trust these terrestrials. They are using you for their own purposes. When they have finished with you, they will destroy you. The Carson Trust has already managed very well for centuries with a fake Carson lying under a fake rocket. Why should they want you alive? For eight thousand years the Trust commission has exploited the economics of the world, and it is because they are trying to interfere with the economics of Mars too that this war was begun. Why should they hand over their powers to you? They have nothing to gain and everything to lose.

"They have one thing which you and your henchmen have not got, Mr. Jaff, and that is integrity. They respect the law, as I do. Above all, they are Earthmen, just as I am. This is my planet, and it is my duty to defend it against alien aggression."

It is only your planet by virtue of the life we gave back to you. We sponsored your rebirth, and therefore we have the moral right to exercise some control over what you plan to do with your property, just as we also have the right to protect you from terrestrial attempts to seize your power and possessions. You talk of aggression—but is it aggression if one nation tries to raise the level of civilization of another, even if, at the beginning, force is necessary?

At this point Carson outlined the trend of the conversation to the assembly. "They are, at any rate, trying to justify their attitude," he added, "which seems to suggest that they might be prepared to talk things over around a table."

"Try suggesting it to Jaff," said Marshal Haan.

Carson nodded. "Mr. Jaff," he said, "you must know that at this stage force is not likely to resolve the war. Sooner or later there will have to be a cease-fire followed by discussions, or the Martian armies will have to make a full-scale withdrawal. There are certain concessions which both sides can make in the interests of economic stability and progress on both planets. If neither side can force its policy on the other, then the sensible thing to do is to discuss the difficulties in a peaceful manner."

We have never been opposed to peaceful discussion, replied Mr. Jaff, *but in the past such talks have always broken down and it was impossible to reach agreement. There is no point in wasting time in further futile discussions.*

"This time the situation is different," Carson pointed out. "There are three parties to the discussion, and one party has what amounts to a casting vote—and I guarantee to use that casting vote fairly and reasonably on all issues."

I have not the authority to agree to such a proposal without authorization from high command. That will take time.

"We can wait. We have all the time in the world."

Very well, Mr. Carson. A pause, then: *I make one final appeal to your sense of loyalty. If Earth is yours, you are free to return to us. In your own interests as an immortal, come back now.*

"Even if I wanted to, I couldn't," said Carson with faint irony. "I am still technically a prisoner of war."

In the late afternoon Mr. Jaff called Carson over the transceiver radio link. The conference had been terminated hours earlier on the understanding that Carson would communicate with Marshal Haan as soon as any positive message was received from the enemy. Obviously Jaff had had a busy day; the mere idea of a truce involving discussion between leaders of the opposing forces was tantamount to an armistice—and therefore, from the Martian point of view, an admission of partial if not utter defeat. Carson had little doubt that top-priority signals had been flashing between Earth and the Moon, and even between Earth and Moon and Mars. Even at this stage, if the Martians agreed to discussions, he suspected that they would use them in some subtle way to seize a tactical advantage.

Mr. Jaff's voice, however, sounded sincere enough, if a little weary. It had been agreed, he stated, that key personnel of the Martian military and political invasion force would meet their terrestrial opposite numbers for informal discussions; but any agreement reached would be subject to ratification by the respective governments concerned. Carson himself was to play the role of impartial chairman, without the power of a casting vote; in the event of a major dispute over points of detail, he would merely offer guidance which both sides could refer back to their governments. The meeting was to take place within three days at a neutral site on the surface, and all military personnel and armaments would be withdrawn from a zone one hundred miles in radius centered on the conference hall. No decision would be binding, but the discussion as a whole would form the basis of a practical program for further negotiation between the heads of government of the two planets at an intermediate point, perhaps on the Moon, or even on a ship in space between Earth and Mars.

Meanwhile there would be a cease-fire, as from midnight, terrestrial time, and there would be no further troop movements or freighting of military supplies (other than food) during the period of the conference.

Carson relayed the message to Marshal Haan, who made no effort to conceal his delight. "Excellent, Mr. Carson," he said over the security vidar. "It is equivalent to a surrender. If the Martians thought for a moment that they could still steal the initiative and snatch a victory, however slight, they would not hesitate to do so. We'll agree to all their terms so that they will have no possible cause for complaint. I will order a complete cease-fire as from midnight, and meanwhile the chiefs of staff will make the necessary arrangements for the talks. Some isolated place, perhaps in America, or Africa. Perhaps this time we can come to terms with the Martians on a lasting basis."

"I hope so," Carson said earnestly.

He found himself unable to sleep that night, mainly because his imagination would not be stilled. The cease-fire came into effect promptly at twelve o'clock, and suddenly peace seemed to descend like a tangible thing.

This could be the turning point in the history of the

solar system, Carson thought. *It could even be the end of war for all time. And it's all centered on me.*

Around two o'clock in the morning he lay on his bed and made a determined effort to sleep. For a long time he pursued fugitive ideas through a world of half dreams, not fully awake, but never unconscious. The explosion occurred at precisely ten minutes past three.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

At first he was merely confused. There was no sense of alarm, nor any premonition of danger. There had been a spasmodic shuddering of the room, earthquake-like, and the angry sound of distant thunder; after that he could hear a persistent remote roar, like the noise of a great waterfall far away.

He pressed a switch in the darkness, but the room lights failed to respond. Feeling his way along the walls he found the security vidar, but that, too, was inoperative. He opened the main door to the apartment and went into the corridor. The guards were talking together in anxious tones; he could hear their voices distinctly in the darkness.

"What's happening?" he demanded.

The voices stopped abruptly. Footsteps paced slowly on a hard surface, drawing nearer.

"Is that you, Mr. Carson?"

"Yes. I thought I heard an explosion. There seems to be no power—"

"We've had no information or instructions, sir. There may have been some trouble with the generators."

"I'd like to know exactly what has happened. See if you can find out."

"Yes, sir."

The guards shuffled away in the darkness, and suddenly the corridor was a lonely place. For a while Carson listened to the background roar, trying to fathom its origin. It seemed to him that the noise was growing louder, and now he imagined he could hear other sounds—a confusion of shouts

and screams, but so far away as to be almost imperceptible. Uneasiness gripped him like an icy hand around his heart.

On an impulse he switched on the adaptor connected to the aural transceiver; there was no surprise in him as he heard the voice of Mr. Jaff intoning monotonously in his ear.

Carson, Carson. Can you hear me? Carson, Carson, can you hear me?

"Yes," Carson breathed, full of apprehension.

I've been calling you for a long time. We have sent a special task force to rescue you. They have breached the roof and one of the walls of the city, and the Atlantic Ocean is pouring in. We know exactly where you are. Don't move. We shall find you long before the water rises to your level.

"But the cease-fire—"

That was the chance we had been waiting for—to catch the enemy idle and unprepared. We were able to crawl along the ocean bottom in deep-level submarines and blow the top off Atlantis with atomic charges. The power plant is wrecked and there are no communications in the city, but we know where you are. Two hundred men are searching for you on the third level. They will find you within a few minutes.

"No!" shouted Carson in desperation, "you can't do this. It is an act of treachery."

Mr. Jaff laughed. *It is done. There is no such thing as treachery in war. We are a big jump ahead of the enemy, that is all. Very soon you will be back with . . .*

Carson flicked the switch that snapped Mr. Jaff's voice into extinction. The tumult of the rushing water was louder now, and the shouting voices were nearer. Frantically he tried to orientate his mind, to recall the layout of the building. He needed to be in the open highways, with other people, anywhere away from this black, shapeless corridor. He began to stumble forward in the dark, arms outspread, fingers touching cold walls. Presently he recognized the smooth sliding door of the elevator. He found the wall button and pressed it urgently, but nothing happened. Warily he advanced, seeking the staircase.

He reached the highway minutes later, but there was only intense night and the threatening roar of the onrushing water. He turned, baffled, feeling like a trapped animal. They

were all trapped in this sub-oceanic city, every human being from Marshal Haan down, and the chances were that they would all die unless desperate emergency measures were taken—but such as what? Surely, he supposed, in a sub-oceanic city they had made provision for escape in the face of this kind of disaster. There had always been the possibility of earthquakes rupturing the outer shell of Atlantis, and skilled planetary engineers would inevitably have taken such factors into account.

A pallid light flashed over his head, flickered uncertainly for a few seconds, then steadied into a gaunt amber glow. Emergency lighting, he thought. Now he could see people hurrying from buildings and running along the highway. He followed until, breathless because of the unaccustomed exertion, he caught up with a man wearing a military uniform. His face in profile seemed familiar, and abruptly he recognized him as Lieutenant Kier, Colonel Ree's deputy, the man who had said via security vidar the previous day, *We are in an undersea fortress—there is nothing to fear.*

Kier glanced quickly around, saw Carson, and stopped running. They stood facing each other in the subdued lighting, gulping deep breaths of stifling air.

"You were right," said Kier. "They have attacked. All the levels from six to ten are flooded. We've lost a great deal of air, but we've managed to close most of the airtight and watertight doors. That should slow things down for a while, though the pressure will win in the end."

"Pressure?" Carson queried.

"The pressure of the Atlantic Ocean at this depth—enough to crush us into unrecognizable pulp. Already the water is compressing the air as it rises. Can't you feel it?"

"Yes," said Carson, realizing suddenly why the air had become so hot, and knowing the reason for his erratic breathing and the throbbing pain in his ears and behind his eyes. "The point is, what can we do?"

"The sensible thing is to make our way to the upper level, which will be the last to survive. There is a certain amount of surfacing gear, if it can be put into use. And there's always a chance that the engineers will be able to pump air back into the lower levels—if they can get the nuclear power plant to work."

"They're after me—you realize that," Carson said.

Kier nodded. "The water will hinder them just as much as it hinders us. We'd better go on. The elevators won't be working, so we'll have to ascend the spiral ramp. That's hard work at the best of times."

They continued running along the highway, joining a throng of people, men and women together, all in search of escape. The air became more oppressive and noticeably hotter. Carson found his mouth quite dry and his lungs aching from the heat. Oddly enough there was no sense of having to gasp for air; the difficulty was in exhaling, as if the lungs, of their own volition, wished to remain distended. It required a positive act of will to contract the chest and squeeze out the stale air; inhaling was a simple matter of relaxing and allowing the pressurized air outside to rush in, like water finding its own level.

They passed the dark, silent elevators and made their way toward the entrance to the ramp. While they were still some distance away, it became apparent that a battle of some kind was in progress. In the semi-gloom of the emergency lighting system it was difficult to perceive detail: there was a random crackling and a flashing of electrostatic weapons, and a billowing haze spreading through the air above the cloud. Carson thought he could see strange figures encased in metallic pressurized suits advancing through the multitude.

"Coma gas," Kier said urgently. "Without anticoma injections we don't stand a chance."

There was already a pungent, aromatic smell in the air where they stood.

"What now?" Carson asked.

Kier fumbled in his tunic and produced a small gray pistol of curious shape. "Electrostatic," he murmured. "Quite lethal at close range. I'll get as near as I can. Good-bye, Mr. Carson. I may see you sometime—"

With that Kier plunged into the crowd, forcing his way toward the entrance to the ramp. Carson lost sight of him within half a minute.

The crowd in front, nearest the ramp and the invaders, were attempting to retreat against the pressure of those at the rear who, not understanding the situation, were trying to push their way forward. Carson found himself caught as if in a vise, moving with the mass, quite incapable of independent motion. All the time the coma gas thickened, and

the crowd was becoming a collapsing mound of solid humanity as unconsciousness struck.

For a while he struggled furiously to escape from the trap, but was unable to make it. His mind blacked out abruptly. Even in this instant of bitter defeat he found himself admiring the ruthless efficiency of the Martian military machine, and, in a masochistic way, he could share the triumph of Mr. Jaff.

"How could you have imagined for one moment that we should be prepared to surrender a costly and ambitious military venture because of one man?" asked Mr. Jaff.

It was a wide circular room with horizontal windows looking out on bleak, flat countryside. A stunted tree waved solemnly in a high wind, and purple hills tinted the far horizon. There were half a dozen other people in the room apart from Mr. Jaff—mainly high-ranking officers, so far as Carson could judge.

"The operation was simple enough. We used three submarines and not more than two hundred men. We knew precisely where you were located. The wall of Atlantis was breached to give immediate access to the spiral ramp connecting all the levels of the city. That gave us complete control of population movement. Our men wore pressure suits, just in case the water rose more rapidly than had been calculated—but, in fact, the operation was completed with plenty of time to spare. I understand the most difficult task was tracing you, Mr. Carson. There were so many bodies that even our portable radar was thrown off balance. However, we got you in the end, and here you are!"

"And the others?" asked Carson dejectedly.

Mr. Jaff spread out his hands helplessly. "The fortunes of war. After all, Atlantis was a purely military and governmental fortress. It was a legitimate target."

"You mean—"

"The water rose, as water will, and the air escaped slowly. It was all over in about two hours, possibly three. There were no survivors, so far as we know, though a few lucky ones may have escaped in surfacing equipment from the top level. If so, they are presumably floating around in mid-Atlantic. Perhaps we might arrange to search the area from

low-flying hovercraft. So far there have been no radar indications."

"It was hardly a legitimate act of warfare," Carson said sullenly. "After the cease-fire—"

"Is there such a thing as a *legitimate* act of war?" demanded Mr. Jaff. "A cease-fire is for the weak—not the strong. The Atlantis mission has enhanced our military prestige, and, incidentally, deprived the terrestrials of their high command in one stroke. They are an enemy without a leader, disorganized and unco-ordinated. Already the cities are beginning to surrender. They realize now that they face the possibility of utter destruction. No longer can they assume that our military tactics are based on the principle of avoiding destruction to property and plant."

"You will never hold an entire planet by violence and ruthlessness," Carson protested. "How can you hope to develop Earth as an economic unit if it is run on the lines of a prisoner-of-war camp, or worse?"

"The Earth is yours, Robert Carson," said Mr. Jaff, smiling. "Not even the enemy will deny that. It is for you to act in the best interests of your subjects. After all, as a kind of benevolent dictator, what do you wish to achieve? Rehabilitation of the Earth's surface? This used to be a green and fertile planet, and it can be so again, with the application of patience and science. A solution to the mutant problem? That can easily be achieved, and quite humanely. The one can assist the other: human bodies make excellent fertilizer. Immortality for all normal terrestrial humans? It can be done, as you yourself know from personal experience. Intensive development of planetary, and interplanetary, technology, for the ultimate benefit of humanity? That is just a question of time and application. We have the knowledge and the power. Sooner or later, a race of immortal humans will spread out among the stars and people the cosmos. The ethics of the dream outweighs the ethics of detail. To cure a human virus disease may involve the cruel death of a million tiny animals, but the end justifies the means."

"It has always been recognized that one could gain the Earth by selling one's soul to the devil," Carson said somberly. "Good may come out of evil, but that is not a justification for evil. Man has the right to live in freedom, even a mutant—"

"Nobody has the right to live," Mr. Jaff stated dogmatically. "It is a meaningless expression. Does the fertilized egg have the right to live while the unfertilized egg has the right to die? If you prune a tree in order to improve its beauty and fruitfulness, are you not depriving the sawn-off branches of their right to live? If you were growing a crop of cereal and you discovered part of it diseased and deformed by radioactive mutation, would you hesitate to destroy the bad in order that the good might flourish?"

"We are not trees and plants," Carson insisted. "We are humans, and we have certain rights and responsibilities. We are entitled to live in our own homes or countries or planets without fear of ruthless dispossession acting in the name of scientific progress."

"We are entitled to nothing," said Mr. Jaff quietly. "We are born into the world with nothing, and we leave it with nothing. There is no profit-and-loss account. But in the act of living and surviving we all change the world in some way, perhaps infinitesimally, perhaps immeasurably. History will judge our contribution to human affairs, but judgment without punishment is worthless. Ordinary mortal men can act irresponsibly because they will never live long enough to see the long-term results of their actions. That is why we have mutants on Earth."

"Immortals are still human, and they can act irresponsibly too," said Carson bitterly.

Mr. Jaff shook his head slowly. "That is not true, Mr. Carson, and you know it at heart. We can afford to take the long-term view because we shall live and continue to live in the world we are creating now. Every act we commit determines the pattern of our future existence, and the kind of world we shall find ourselves in during the centuries to come. We can't afford to be humane if we are to create a perfect world, and we can't afford to tolerate the short-term irresponsibility of those who are not immortal, who do not really care what happens to the world after they are dead. You can't plan a perfect world with minds which are only mature for a mere two generations."

"Nor can you plan a world on the basis that individuals don't matter—that they can be destroyed, herded and brainwashed to fit an economic or political pattern. If I am owner of Earth, then I cannot sanction a policy of that kind."

"We can force you to co-operate, if we have to," said Mr. Jaff ominously, "but we would prefer to develop Earth within the framework of terrestrial law. It will make our task easier, and will benefit all in the long run. That is why I have talked to you at some length in order to clarify our attitude."

"What exactly is it you want me to do?"

"The world now knows that you have rejoined us. It is widely believed that you yourself organized the rescue mission. As Robert Carson, you are to issue a decree dissolving the Trust commission and appointing a Martian council to administer the Trust. From that point on we shall do the rest."

"The answer is still no," said Carson firmly.

Mr. Jaff uttered a long, patient sigh. "In that case, there is only one thing left for us to do, but this is definitely your last chance, Mr. Carson. I appeal to you to make the most of it. Follow me."

Reluctantly Carson walked behind Mr. Jaff to a door in the circular wall of the room.

"In here," said Mr. Jaff. "You can have ten minutes. No more."

Slowly Carson walked into the adjoining room. The door closed behind him with a faint astringent click.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The room was smaller, with fewer windows, but still circular in shape. A woman was standing by one of the windows, her back toward him, but she turned as he entered the room. He recognized her instantly, with her bronze hair and green eyes.

"Competence Cayne," he said.

She came over to him and put her hands on his shoulders, then kissed him lightly. "Aren't you glad to see me?" she inquired.

"Yes and no," he said, frowning. "Why are you here?"

"To try to persuade you to change your mind."

"Not even you could do that."

"No?" She regarded him archly for a moment. "You must

not allow your prejudice against Mr. Jaff and his colleagues to poison your feelings for me."

"I thought you didn't favor the compulsion neurosis known as love."

"I favor human relationships," she murmured, smiling mischievously. "I'll tell you a secret. I've been granted a permanent assignment. You."

He said nothing, but eyed her questioningly.

She went on: "You and I can be together all the time. You don't need to worry about the world at all. Leave government and economics to those best qualified to attend to them. You don't need to be more than a figurehead, Robert Carson, and a figurehead can have a lot of fun."

"Is that the bargain? The Carson Trust in exchange for you?"

"Aren't I worth it?"

He laughed briefly and sardonically.

"After all, what is the Carson Trust worth to you? You may own a planet, but there's nothing you can do with it."

"I can try to make it a better planet."

"Just how do you propose to do that?"

"Well, I had thought in terms of a kind of coalition government including both Martians and terrestrials."

"Immortals and norms," she mused. "Mutants, too?"

"Perhaps."

"It would never work. You could never reach agreement on policy between the immortals, the mortals and the deformed. One party would dominate the others sooner or later, so why not start with domination in the first place?"

"Because I don't care for the Martian kind of domination. I think the terrestrials should be allowed to solve their own problems and build their own future without domination of any kind."

She shook her head sadly. "You really are being obtuse. You will co-operate with the Martians, either voluntarily or by force. The choice is yours. Indoctrination is not pleasant. There is no way in which you can assist the terrestrials while you remain alive."

He became aware of some strange quality in her eyes.

"We have just a few minutes left," she said. "Let's go outside."

He followed her to the door, and as they passed through

she quickly put her hand to his right ear and pressed into it a piece of pliable waxlike substance. "Don't talk," she whispered urgently. "I have blocked the transceiver, but it can still pick up the vibrations of your own voice through the bones of your head. Walk naturally with me and listen to what I have to say."

They went out into the wind, walking across dry barren soil, keeping their backs toward the building.

"Mars has its own problems," she said quietly, "and there are many of us who would like to see the end of the military clique which dominates the government. If the war is lost, they can be overthrown; then perhaps we can come to peaceable terms with the terrestrials. But now that they have you, they cannot lose, and they will take good care you do not escape again. There is only one other alternative. Do you understand?"

He nodded slowly, saying nothing.

"It will have to be done in such a way that later antimortic surgery is impossible. There must never be another living Robert Carson to be used as a symbol for power politics."

He eyed her gloomily, but her face was impassive. "This is your chance to save two planets from domination by a military caste," she went on. She produced a slim rectangular canister from inside her belt and handed it to him. "Conceal this in your clothing, perhaps under the belt. When you are ready, press the catch on the side. Wait until you have the chance of wide publicity—the proclamation, for instance. Meanwhile pretend to co-operate."

"Jaff may suspect," he breathed, mouthing the words almost silently.

Her smile was hard and triumphant. "Don't worry about Jaff. He is one of us, and he has his own ambitions. But he, too, is monitored, and has to play his part."

Her arms encircled his neck for a moment while she kissed him, but the movement simply disguised the quick manipulation of her fingers as she removed the wax plug from his ear and discarded it.

"Well," she said, "you have had plenty of time to think. Have you made up your mind?"

"As you said earlier," he replied, "I have no choice. I don't wish to be indoctrinated, and I don't wish to co-

operate voluntarily. I'll compromise by choosing you, and bow out gracefully, leaving the future of Earth in the hands of those best fitted to deal with it."

"You are wise," she murmured.

He looked at her for quite a long time before speaking again. Finally he said, "I hope we shall be together for always."

"Of course," she said quietly. "After all, we are immortals."

Slowly, arm in arm, they walked back to the circular building.

There was a new quality in Mr. Jaff's eyes and an unaccustomed solemnity in his expression when Carson reported back to him. It was as if he were trying to convey, on some telepathic plane, apologies for past events; as if he were trying to say, "I had to do at all times what they expected me to do, and there was no way of explaining. But now, perhaps, you will understand my dilemma, just as I understand yours."

But there was nothing in his manner or in the tone of his voice to suggest that his attitude was in any way different from usual. He did not react markedly to Carson's statement of his decision, but merely nodded his head tersely, as if he had expected that answer.

"I knew you would not fail us," he said. "At this point, my work is virtually done. All that remains is to plan a suitable ceremony which can be relayed around the world on sound and video circuits. There will have to be a formal, official function, authenticated by legal experts and civic dignitaries, in which you solemnly dissolve the existing Trust commission and hand over control of the Trust to Martian authority. You can leave the details to the gentlemen in this room." He indicated the officers with a brief movement of his hand, adding: "You will be well briefed and rehearsed, but there will be little to do—sign a few documents and perhaps make a short speech."

"I'll do whatever is required," Carson said.

"For the present you may join Miss Cayne in the other room. She will show you where the residential quarters are located."

"Very well," Carson agreed. He went back to the smaller

room, where the woman was waiting. She looked at him inquiringly.

"Robert Carson surrendered unconditionally," he stated, with no great enthusiasm. "I suppose it is the only way."

She held up a cautioning finger, then came over to him, producing further wax which she used to silence the aural transceiver device.

"Mr. Jaff can hardly be monitoring," he whispered. "He is in conference with the officers."

"There are other monitors. Jaff acts as supervisor and is advised by his staff. It is never safe to take risks."

"Tell me about Jaff."

"What is there to tell? He has worked hard to obtain a position of trust, and he has to fulfill his duties meticulously. Like many of the officials concerned with security and administration he, too, is monitored by the military authority. But he has links with terrestrial espionage agents on Mars, and it was Jaff himself who was responsible for stealing the Carson tape in order to have it copied. He will be an important man in the new administration after the insurrection."

"He has ruthless, inhuman ideas."

"Only superficially. He has to reflect official policy, whether he supports it or not." She hesitated uncertainly, anxiety in her eyes. "We cannot talk much longer in this way, Carson. They may be able to hear you, even though you are whispering, and the long silence may make them suspicious anyway. Tell me, are you prepared to die for the second time?"

He considered the question for a while. "No," he said finally, "but I am acting under pressure. If my death will destroy the Martian hold on Earth, and help to reform Martian government and political policy, then it will be worthwhile. Perhaps I may achieve a kind of immortality after all." He paused reflectively, then indicated the device located beneath his belt. "What exactly will happen when I release the catch?"

She closed her eyes for a moment. "You will learn soon enough. There will be no question of antimortics."

She removed the plug from his ear. "You are very silent," she said distinctly. "Surely you are not already having second thoughts about handing over the Trust to the custodianship of Mars."

"No," he agreed reluctantly. "I will do what I have decided to do."

She smiled in a melancholy way. "You won't regret it. Meanwhile, I will show you your apartment."

She led the way from the room.

He found it impossible to sleep that night. The thought of imminent death troubled him, even though he realized that it was inevitable. *I died once before,* he thought, *and death itself was nothing, just a deeper form of dreamless sleep. But the moments before death were bad. I would not want to endure them again.*

Then later, conflicting thoughts obsessed his mind. "Why should I die?" he asked himself. "Why should I sacrifice my life for this alien age? Why should I care who rules Earth or what happens to the mutants—and, for that matter, why should I commit suicide so that Mr. Jaff can achieve his ambition in Martian politics? They made me an immortal, and now they expect me to throw it aside for some nebulous interplanetary intrigue. If I choose to live, what can Jaff do about it? I'll sign away the Carson Trust and become a remote figurehead—the great Robert Carson, living in privilege, watching these aliens sorting out their complex affairs, without interfering. And if the military clique continues to dominate Martian politics, well, why should I worry? Martian politics were under way while I was still dead, long before I was reincarnated. It is none of my business, and the problems of Earth are even less. Who am I, a creature of the long-dead past, to decry modern sociological science?"

He spent the night in a state of confusion, and at one point he got up to examine the slim lethal device which he had attached to the inside of his belt. It was of dull metal, slightly curved, and about half the size of a cigarette case. The case was perfectly smooth all over, with no sign of a crevice or crack, and the operative catch was a mere sliding button on one edge. It seemed incredible that so small an object could destroy a man. He handled it gingerly, turning it over and over. It could hardly contain any appreciable amount of explosive, nor was it big enough to house an imaginable nuclear device. On the other hand, he thought, it could be basically electronic—something that would paralyze the central nervous system.

A new thought occurred to him—supposing the thing were simply a factitious dummy, just a piece of machined metal possessing no lethal properties whatsoever. Supposing this were simply a plot to create a defeatist frame of mind in which he would agree to abdicate his ownership of Earth, and then find himself incapable of carrying out the suicidal act that would undermine the very basis of Martian authority. One could not underestimate the subtlety of Mr. Jaff—or of the very competent Competence Cayne, for that matter. He examined the slender object suspiciously. There was only one way to find out if it was lethal or not, and that was to press the catch—but courage failed him.

They had built an immense structure of prefabricated parts on the site where the original Carson memorial had stood. Satellite pylons located around it supported automatic video cameras operated by remote control. A tiered terrace in plastic and timber provided standing space for thousands of terrestrial observers, and already the tiers were full, and the crowds extended beyond the perimeter of the site. Everyone who could possibly come had arrived, it seemed, to witness the inauguration of the age of the living Carson, owner of Earth.

Carson, waiting beneath the wide dais, rehearsed the lines of his speech with a cynical attitude. Mr. Jaff, standing nearby, was looking at him in a solicitous way, and there was a sprinkling of high-ranking military officers and politicians. Competence Cayne was present, too, but her capacity, it seemed, was simply one of moral support. The beginning of the ceremony had been timed for three o'clock, and there was still just over a quarter of an hour to go. Everyone seemed to be idling impatiently, and Carson himself was growing restive as the minutes dragged by.

Presently the girl came over to him and spoke quietly in enigmatic phrases presumably intended to deceive the monitors.

"After the speech, and before the signing. You know what to do. The speech itself—could be original—"

"It will be highly original, and rather short," he remarked.

She smiled wryly. "I'm glad you're being philosophical about it. In a way, what you are about to do will strengthen

the legend of Robert Carson." Her voice dropped to a mere whisper. "You will be remembered as the savior of Earth, and also the savior of Mars. You will always be remembered, and in that way you will achieve your own kind of immortality."

"I don't want immortality. I would rather see Robert Carson forgotten—for the world to solve its problems without reference to what is, in effect, a myth. Mr. Jaff said that the only importance of life is in the contribution one makes to human affairs. After eight thousand years, what contribution can I possibly make? It would have been better if they had never found my body."

"You have served your purpose."

He smiled regretfully. "What purpose? I went to a great deal of trouble to prove that I was myself, the legendary Robert Carson. In doing that I was serving Mr. Jaff's purpose. I am beginning to wonder why I bothered. Everyone, it seems, needed Carson, but they expected me to prove my own identity. What would have happened if I had failed?"

"You did not fail. You are Carson, and the world accepts you. That is the essential point. Even if you were to disappear, here and now, the Trust commission would lose all authority while it was still thought you were alive. Meanwhile it would be possible to produce documentary evidence to prove that you had assigned the Trust to the custodianship of the Martians."

She came close to him and whispered quietly into his left ear. "There is even a double ready to take your place, if necessary. Every possibility has been allowed for by the Martian military authority. That is why you must die in the full view of the world. Once you are dead, there can never be another Carson."

"I understand," he said thoughtfully.

Mr. Jaff was approaching, he observed, and people were beginning to move toward the staircase leading toward the dais.

"We're ready, Mr. Carson," said Jaff. "Are *you?*" he added significantly.

Carson touched his belt and sighed. "Yes. I'm ready."

"Then let's go."

From the dais, standing between military officers, with Mr. Jaff somewhere behind him, he looked out on the multitude

who had come to witness his inauguration as owner of Earth. Their upturned faces were mere atoms of humanity spread against a background of devastation. One of the officers was speaking, and unseen microphones were relaying his voice across the planet. The video cameras on their trellis pylons transmitted crisp, three-dimensional color pictures to millions of observers in all continents.

I'm not part of them, he thought. *I lived my life many thousands of years ago, and nobody is entitled to more than one life. I haven't the right to interfere. It would have been better if I had never been reincarnated: the conflicts of the solar system would have resolved themselves in their own natural way.*

He fingered his belt in brooding anticipation.

The officer had stopped speaking. Someone had taken Carson's arm and was leading him forward to the edge of the dais. The crowd was cheering him, he realized, and the combined sound of their voices was a remote thunder in his ears.

"The speech," somebody whispered. "The prepared speech."

He fumbled in his pocket for the rectangle of card that bore the salient points of what he had to say, but he did not look at it. He tried to estimate just how much time would be available to him before they cut the sound and cameras. A few seconds, perhaps. Time enough in which to abdicate.

Briefly he glanced backward and saw Mr. Jaff, tensed and poised. Carson smiled, and Jaff returned the smile uneasily.

He turned to the crowd, collecting his thoughts. "Humans," he said, using the word that would embrace terrestrials, Martians and mutants. Amplifiers hurled the word across the massed heads of his audience. "There is one thing I have to tell you, and it will make everything else quite meaningless. I am *not* Robert Carson. I am an ordinary man involved in power politics, pretending to be the legendary Carson for the purposes of fraud. I am not Carson and never was. I learned about Carson from a tape recording. I was indoctrinated and rehearsed for the role by Martian officials. The real Carson has been dead for eight thousand years, and is still dead. I am not Carson and I am not the owner of the Earth—and never was—"

They were moving up behind him. Firm fingers grasped his

arm, jerking him backward. Frantically he ran his fingers along the edge of his belt, seeking the flat metallic device. He found the catch, and pressed it determinedly.

Carson seemed to ignite suddenly into crumbling, melting incandescence. Smoke obscured the dais. From the multitude came a vast shocked sound of consternation and horror.

At the back of the dais Mr. Jaff, standing stiffly as if paralyzed, stared wide-eyed at the mound of ash on the floor, still issuing pungent smoke, saying to himself over and over again: "How could he have known? How could he have possibly known?"

8000 years ago he'd died...

Eighty centuries of war and massive destruction, and peace and war again; centuries in which the earth was ravaged and mankind forced to leave the once green hills and fields to burrow, molelike, away from the deadly radiation that was the atom's legacy.

Centuries, too, in which man gained firm footholds in space and victories over disease and age and, finally, death itself.

Eighty centuries of undreamed-of progress and unspeakable violence, while Robert Carson, earth's first sacrifice to space, circled the heavens in his airless tomb.

Now, suddenly, he was alive again, resurrected from the dead and dreamless centuries by a miracle of science, thrust into the middle of the greatest conflict in mankind's history.

And Robert Carson, eight thousand years a corpse, was the undisputed owner of the world!

LITHO'D IN CANADA