



PYRAMID SCIENCE FICTION

X-1910

60c

The man who owned all Earth meets  
an unimaginable destiny in the bizarre,  
hidden world of

# *The Underpeople*

a novel by

**CORDWAINER SMITH**

author of

"Space Lords" and "The Planet Buyer"



# THE UNDERPEOPLE

CORDWAINER SMITH

A PYRAMID BOOK  
PYRAMID SCIENCE FICTION X-1910

First printing, November, 1968

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PYRAMID BOOKS are published by Pyramid Publications,  
Inc.  
444 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10022, U.S.A.

## CHAPTER ONE: LOST MUSIC IN AN OLD WORLD

YOU MAY HAVE SEEN the musical play which was written about the confrontation of Rod McBan, the boy who had bought Earth, and the Lady Johanna Gnade, proudest and most self-willed of all the Lords of the Instrumentality. It was not a very long play. Indeed, among the many plays and ballads that were composed about Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan the hundred and fifty-first, this short drama was characterized by economy of form, understatement of the dramatic elements and the generous use of music. People remembered the music even when they forgot which play it came from. (Then the Instrumentality stepped in and ordered that the play be withdrawn, gradually and imperceptibly, on the ground that the music was licentious. Unfortunately, it *was*. Old music from the First Space Age has a real tendency to corrupt people of our own time. You can't pick something out of a half-mythical place like ancient "New York" and turn it loose without people getting very queer ideas indeed.)

This is the way it happened.

Hansgeorg Wagner was one of the first musicians to be imprinted with the Doych language, sometimes called German or Teut, when the Rediscovery of Man began bringing the pre-Ruin cultures back into the world.

Hansgeorg Wagner had a neat eye for the dramatic. When the story of Rod McBan began to leak out, soon after McBan went back to his home planet of Old North Australia, Wagner refused to consider the obvious scenes: the boy gambling for Earth on his dry, faraway planet, and winning most of the available money in the universe; the boy walking on Mars; the boy meeting his "wife," C'mell, most beautiful of the cat-women who served as the girlygirl hostesses for Earth; the boy fighting Amaral for the life of one of them; the mystery of the Department Store of Hearts' Desires and what befell Rod there; or even the terrifying terminal scene with the E-telekeli. Wagner did not even want the dramatic scene in which Rod's companion, his workwoman Eleanor, parted from him on Earthport tower soon after C'mell had sung her own famous little tower song to Rod:

*And oh! my love, for you.  
High birds crying, and a  
High sky flying, and a  
High wind driving, and a  
High heart striving, and a  
High brave place for you!*

Wagner, with the instinct of a real artist, took the meeting in the music room instead.

### **In the Music Room: A Meeting with the Past**

The passenger dropshaft from Earthport was like an ancient elevator shaft, except for the fact that if an actual ancient had seen it, he would have been surprised. It was ten miles deep, or more (it's hard to figure out exactly what *miles* were, but they were much longer than kilometers), and it had no elevators. The shaft was ornamentally illuminated. There were signs for information, frequent stops for refreshment, and curious sights to be seen. This was for people only. People put on magnetic belts, stepped into the shaft, and were carried up or down at the rate of about twenty meters a minute, depending on which shaft they had gotten into; shafts always came in pairs, an up shaft and a down shaft.

By contrast, the freight shaft had no signs, no refreshments, and no amenities. The down speed was considerably faster. Freight rose or fell, tied to magnetic belts; underpeople and robots wore the belts, unless they forgot them and swiftly became bloody pulp or mashed machinery far below. The freight shaft, like the passenger shaft, did have warning in both the up and the down shaft, because if people got loose from their belts, they whistled downward to their deaths. Each set of shafts had interceptor nets, both for saving falling persons or objects, and to protect the other passengers below, but the nets did not work too well.

Wagner's drama has an initial scene showing Rod McBan and C'mell pausing at the top of the freight dropshaft. She is carrying the small monkey-surgeon A'gentur, who has gone to sleep, bone-weary after the trip. Rod McBan, standing a full head taller than most cat-men, is expostulating with gestures more coarse and more real than any c'man ever used. His big bush of yellow hair had been made cat-like before he landed on earth and the long sparse whiskers of his cat-moustache twitched oddly indeed as he explained his emphatic desires with forthright Old North Australian gestures.

After a short development of the scene, Wagner has both of them singing the lyric refrain, "Earth is mine, but what good does it do me?" from Rod, and "Earth is yours but be patient, my love" from C'mell. A touch of comedy is provided by C'mell's trying to get a magnetic harness on Rod while he squirms. The scene ends with the two of them stepping over the edge of the drop-shaft (which looks bottomless) on their long, long drop down to the surface of the Earth.

We know that the two of them dropped easily. The only difficulty was caused by Rod's tendency to talk too much when he, the richest man in the world, was supposed to be travelling in the disguise of a poor, simple cat-man. Torn between irritation and love, C'mell switched between humoring him and shushing him.

Crisis came (and Hansgeorg Wagner catches it in his play) when Rod heard the sound of unbelievable music.

It was like no music he had ever heard before.

"What's that?" he cried to C'mell.

"Music," said she, soothingly.

He did not call her a fool, but he growled in annoyance and reached over to seize a rung of the endless emergency ladder which followed the dropshaft down. He climbed a dozen rungs upward and peered into a pitch-black lateral corridor which led, apparently, to nowhere but from which strange fierce beautiful music was certainly coming. He had climbed against the gentle throbbing pull of the magnetic belt and he breathed heavily with the double exertion. C'mell had dropped another ten meters before she saw what he was doing. Wearily, but with no

word of complaint, she climbed up the ladder to him, carrying her own weight, that of the sleeping monkey-surgeon whom she had tossed over her shoulder, and the pull of her own belt as well. When her head reached the level of Rod's feet, he stepped carefully off the ladder and took two very gingerly steps into the dark lateral corridor.

The music was clear to both of them.

Throbbing, beaten strings made the lovely sounds.

She sensed his inquiry though she could not see his face in the dark.

"That instrument - it's a piano. They've started making them again."

Rod put his hand on her arm to quiet her. "Listen, I think he's singing."

Full-bodied and full-noted the music of the piano and a man's tenor voice came clearly and fully at them from the corridor, hidden by the darkness but not sounding too far away:

Ignoraba yo.  
*I didn't used to know it.*  
Ignoraba yo.  
*I didn't used to show it*  
*that I loved you, loved you so.*

*I love you and I love you,*  
Hoy y mañana.  
*There's nothing else in life for me,*  
Hoy y mañana.  
*You love me wild and use me up,*  
Hoy y mañana.  
*Was I happier or sadder when I didn't even know you?*  
Ignoraba yo,  
*I couldn't even show you.*

The voice trailed away. There were a few flourishes of beaten strings, as though the player were trying to get the arrangement just right.

"Part of that is Ancient English," said Rod, "but I never heard the other language before. And I certainly never heard that kind of a melody, anywhere."

"I know most of the music which is played on Earth," whispered C'mell, "and I never heard anything like that before. Come on, Rod. Let's go on down the shaft. When we get to a safe place, I will send messengers back to find out what is going on in this part of Earthport tower."

"No," said Rod, "I'm going in."

"You can't, Rod. You can't. It might ruin everything. The disguise, Lord Jestocost's plans, your safety."

"I bought this world," said Rod, "and I'm a ruddy fool if I can't even ask for a piece of music. I'm going in."

"Rod," she cried.

"Stop me," he said, crudely, and walked boldly down the corridor into the dark, just as though there might be no trap doors or electric screens. C'mell followed him, carefully and reluctantly.

The corridor blazed red with letters of warning:

KEEP OUT  
NO PEOPLE ALLOWED  
INSTRUMENTALITY WORK - SECRET

A recorded voice shouted at them, "Go away! Go away! No robots. No underpeople. No real persons. Lords of the Instrumentality, get individual clearance before you enter here. Secret work. Go away! Go away! No robots. No underpeople," and so on, in a sustained irritating shout.

Rod ignored the voice even though C'mell was plucking at his sleeve.

The red warning lights had revealed the outline of a door with a doorknob.

He took the doorknob, twisted it. It was locked. The door itself did not seem to be of steel or Daimoni material. Perhaps it was even wood, which was much too precious on Old North Australia to be used for anything as cheap as a common door: the Norstrilians used plastics derived from sheep-bones.

Rod shouted, "Open up, inside. Open up."

"Go away," said a mild, pleasant voice from beyond the door, so near that it startled them.

The voice was so near and the door so fragile that Rod was tempted.

He stepped back until he was next to C'mell. He was sorry when he heard her sigh with relief - apparently at the thought that he had heeded the warning and was going to go back to the dropshaft.

Instead, he used a fighting trick which he had learned at home. He jumped with the full force of his body at the door, striking the door just above the knob with both his feet and putting his hands below him so as to cushion the fall of his body against the floor.

Results were startling:

The door yielded so easily that Rod plunged on through into a bright sun-lit room, landed on a carpet and slid with the carpet until his feet, firmly but gently, were stopped by a large beautiful upright wooden box, elegantly polished, which seemed to have a rudimentary console. A middle-aged gentleman, showing great surprise, jumped out of his way. Blinking against the brightness of the light, C'mell and A'gentur followed Rod into the room.

Their startled host spoke:

"You're underpeople! Do you want to die? Somebody will kill you for this. Not I, of course. What do you want here?"

Rod brought himself to his feet with all the dignity which he could command.

"My name is Rod McBan," said he, "and I take full responsibility for what has happened. I am the new owner of this planet Earth, and I want to hear some more of that music you were making."

"*Ignoraba yo*. That Spanish bop? What business is it of yours, cat-man? That is secret work for the Instrumentality. And all you are going to do is to die when the robot police arrive."

C'mell spoke up. Her voice had a calm urgency to it, which could not be ignored by anyone. Said she, "You have a connection with the Central Computer?"

"Of course," said the man, "all protected offices do."

"You are not a person?"

"Of course not, cat-woman. I am the dog-man D'igo and I am the musical historian assigned to work in this office."

"I am C'mell," said she flatly.

The dog-man was startled but when he spoke, his voice was very agreeable: "I know who you are. Anything here is at your service, C'mell."

"Your connection?" she demanded.

He nodded his head at one side of the room. She saw the speaker in the wall. A'gentur sat sleepily on the floor, while Rod had produced one single clear note by pushing one of the keys of the beautiful big upright box.

C'mell called, "Rod, come here."

"Right ho," he said, coming over to the speaker.

"Listen. Your life may be in danger, Rod. I'll call Central Computer and I want you to assert your authority over this room and this work. Demand to hear the music that you want. Tell the Central Computer the truth. That may keep the robot police from coming in and killing you before they find that you are not really a cat-man."

"He isn't a cat-man...." murmured D'igo in wonderment from the side.

"Sh-h," said C'mell to Digo. To Rod she said, "Speak now. Establish your rights."

"Centputer," said Rod, "take this name down. Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan the hundred and fifty-first from Old North Australia. Got it?"

"Affirmative."

"Do I own you, Centputer?"

"Repeat. Repeat."

"Centputer, have I bought you?"

"Apparently impossible, but this-machine will check. No, you have not bought this-machine."

"Can you tell where I am, Centputer?"

"Restricted workroom of the Instrumentality."

"Do I own Earthport?"

"Affirmative."

"Do I own this room too?"

"Affirmative."



"I am in it."

"Re-state the instruction. This-machine cannot make your statement operational."

"I have taken this room from the Instrumentality and I will return it to the Lords of the Instrumentality when I see fit."

"That is not possible. The room belongs to the Instrumentality."

"And I," said Rod, "override the Instrumentality. Tell them to keep out till I am through."

"The instruction is impossible. This-machine has records that you own Earthport, and that the Instrumentality sold you all of it, including the room you are in. Therefore the room is yours. This-machine also has a basic programmed command that the Instrumentality cannot be overridden. This-machine must appeal to higher authority. The robot police will be warned away from your person until this-machine has been re-coded or reaffirmed by higher authority." *Click* went the speaker, and the Central Computer itself broke the connection.

"You're in for it," said C'mell. Her green eyes, which could look fierce at times, scanned him with soft indulgence: Rod could see that she was very proud of him, and he was not altogether sure of the reason. Her warning was ominous, but her expression betrayed no fear, only a new-found Confidence that he would see them through.

A'gentur spoke from the floor to D'igo: "Do you have any cocoanut, raisins, shelled nuts, or pineapple, dog-man?"

"Forgive him, colleague D'igo, if he's rude, but he's very tired and very hungry."

"It's all right," said D'igo. "I have none of those things, though I have some excellent raw liver and an assortment of bones in my cold-box. My master, a Lord, has left a pot of cocoa which I could warm up for you, animal. Would you like that?"

"Anything, anything," said A'gentur cheerfully.

"Now I've seen everything," declared D'igo with a species of desperate composure as he put the cocoa on to warm it up. "My secret room is attacked, the famous C'mell herself pays me a visit, a cat-man gives orders to the Central Computer, and I have to feed an animal in my workshop. It's not often that this sort of thing happens, is it, madame C'mell?"

"We came in here," said C'mell gracefully and quickly, "because this friend of mine insisted on hearing your music."

"You like it," smiled D'igo. "I like it myself. It's secret music and I'm not sure that it will ever be cleared for use. My master, the Lord Ingintau, wanted me to find the last song ever sung in New York."

"That was a city, wasn't it?"

"The biggest city on this continent. When New York was destroyed, there were various primitive electronic stations transmitting, some sending pictures and others relaying just words and music. The search-robots out in space have been recording all the salvageable messages from in that period of the First Doom, and I think that I have narrowed the choice down to three songs. You heard *Ignoraba Yo* - that was English and Spanish mixed, in the style called bop. I'm not sure of the next one, because I have most of the melody, but for the words, only the refrain has come through. I got my helper, a dog-girl, to sing the part while I played the piano, and I spooled it just last week. Would you like to hear it?"

"That's what I burst in for," said Rod cheerfully.

The musician D'igo rested his hand against a blank part of the wall and said, "Forty-seven, please."

The room was immediately filled with the wild catchy music of the "piano," expertly played. The particularly musical melody was quick, startling, amusing and witty in its use of a tune. By Norstrilian standards, that song would be condemned as lascivious, thought Rod - but then, that wasn't Old North Australia. It was what Ancient Earth sang as Earth died the first of a hundred deaths.

After a preliminary *la-la-la la-a-a-la* a woman's voice came on and sang the catchy refrain three times in a row in perfectly accented Ancient English, just as Rod had heard it spoken by the talking books in his family's storeroom of hidden treasures:

*Only God can make a tree,  
But you can make a girl like me!*

"It's amusing, but there's not much to it," said Rod. "What's the third one?"

"That's a period piece, antedating the fall of New York. I think it may have had something to do with a collective entertainment which they called a square dance or a country dance. I can't imagine why. Or it may have been something translated from another language and another culture into the usage of the Murkins."

"They're the ones who had New York?" asked Rod.

"The same," said D'igo.

"The same ones who built those spectacular surface roads that people see everytime they look down on Earth from nearby space?"

"That's right," smiled D'igo. "They were a wild, gifted, wanton people. Do you want to hear the third song?"

"I'll play that and sing it for you myself. I just finished arranging it myself."

He sat at the piano, played a few bars, and then sang:

*Ring a bell  
and clap! clap!  
Sing pell mell  
and tap! tap!  
The wishing well  
will miss, miss.  
Hug and tell  
and kiss, kiss.*

Rod sighed, "I still like the one I heard outside your door."

D'igo smiled his full-faced, clean-shaven smile. Rod wondered that a dog could be made into so perfect a copy of a man. Except for his indoor pallor, D'igo looked as well-shaped and as well-spoken as any man that Rod had ever seen.

"What you heard out there," said D'igo, "was a spool of my own voice. Would you like to hear my assistant sing it? She is a very talented girl. She can sing either contralto or soprano."

"Soprano," said A'gentur promptly and unexpectedly. D'igo stared at him with astonishment and reproach, but since the others did not object, he said,

"Soprano it is, then," and he muttered under his breath, "For a talking animal, you've got a fantastic education."

D'igo called to the wall, "Thirty one, third version," and then said to his guests, "Do sit down...."

*Ignoraba Yo* began to pour from the speakers with its full, hypnotic volume, carried by a woman's splendid voice.

### **Confrontation and a Half Challenge**

This is the climax of Hansgeorg Wagner's musical drama. The four of them sat listening to the music: A'gentur on the floor, drifting off to sleep again; the two cat-people, C'mell red-haired and Rod yellow-haired, staring at nothing and giving their full attention to the music; the host, D'igo, sitting with a half-smile on his face and watching his guests. Wagner combines the thrill of illegal ancient music with some deft composition of his own.

His woodwinds represent the soft rustling in the corridor.

A quick light flurry of drums indicates the new arrivals:

A tall, pitiless intelligent woman with a vividly dramatic black and white dress of the most conservative cut imaginable, accompanied by two high-ranking robot soldiers, both of them with their bodies washed in silver and gold, their swimming eyes taking in all corners of the room at once, their heavy wirepoints already buzzing with potential death.

"I," said she, "am the Lady Johanna Gnade. *You* are Digo, the musical historian. I have heard your work -"

Rod stood up and interrupted her. Though she was tall, he was several centimeters taller. "I," said he, in a perfectly composed copy of her own manner, "am Rod McBan, the owner of this room. You can sit down, ma'am and lady, if you wish. Your robots can sit down too, if they enjoy it."

For a memorable moment the two confronted another: the tall, black-haired woman and the tall yellow-haired youth in cat disguise. This was no meeting of individuals - it was a confrontation of systems, the trained power of the Instrumentality against the disciplined in-bred force of the Old North Australians.

The woman yielded, a little.

"You're a quick young man. Your name is Rod McBan and you have bought Earth. Why did you do it?"

"Do sit down," said Rod firmly and hospitably. "It's a long story and I would not want to tire a lady -"

Johanna Gnade snapped, "Don't worry about my being a lady. I'm one of the Lords of the Instrumentality. And make your story short."

"Please sit, ma'am and lady. And make your robots comfortable." There was a little more command than courtesy in his voice, but there was nothing at which she could take open offense.

"I've never had an underperson make me sit down before," she grumbled, taking a hassock and sitting bolt upright on it. "Lieutenant, captain, both of you, go in the hall. As a matter of fact, cut all outside connections with this room, but record the scene yourselves, so that I will have my own record of it."

The two robots turned off their wirepoints. They walked deftly around the room, touching the walls lightly here and there. The better-ornamented one said,

"Clear and secure, my lady."

She did not thank them. She just nodded at the broken door. They walked out into the dark corridor.

The Lady Johanna Gnade looked at C'mell, "And you are C'mell. I've seen you before. As a matter of fact, I have seen you several times, almost always when there was trouble. Are you one of our confidential agents? You always come out innocent, no matter what happens."

"No, ma'am. I'm just a girlygirl. I work at Earthport, welcoming offworld visitors and keeping them happy."

"I'm not sure I trust that word 'just,' " said the Lady Johanna Gnade. "Who put you on the job this time?"

"The Lord Jestocost," said C'mell, a little worried.

"Jestocost?" repeated the Lady Johanna Gnade. "If that's the case, it's really none of my business. Don't break into things any more, mister McBane, without asking the Lord Jestocost to arrange it first. Old Earth is no citizen-commonwealth like Old North Australia. Often we kill first and ask later. I'd like to hear your side of your story before I leave, now that I am here. How old are you?"

"Chronologically, I am about sixty-five years old. But I have gone back through a sixteen year cycle four times, so that biologically I am sixteen."

"Are you a man?"

"Certainly. This cat stuff is just a disguise."

"No, I mean are you a grown man, according to the horrible customs of your home planet?"

"Citizen. Citizen, we call it. Yes, I passed the Garden of Death."

"Why did you buy Earth?"

"To escape, ma'am and lady."

"Escape what? I thought that Norstrilia protected every single one of her people, once they passed that awful survival test."

"Usually, yes. It just happened that I had only one enemy, and he was Onseck of the whole Commonwealth administration."

"Onseck? We don't have that word."

"Honorary Secretary. The man who runs the routine admin. for Her Absent Majesty the Queen."

"I've heard of that custom of yours. Why did he hate you?"

"We were both detectives, a long time ago. I was - am - telepathically deaf and dumb. Mostly. Can't *spiek or hier*, have to rely on the old spoken words, like outlanders or barbarians. He was a short-lifer, who could not take stroon, the drug which -"

"I know all about stroon," said she, "the immortality drug. As a matter of fact, my veins are full of it right now. I am near my six hundredth birthday."

"Congratulations, ma'am and lady."

"Never mind. What happened?"

"When I knew he was after me, I went to my family's computer. It's all mechanical, not a single animal brain or animal relay in it."

"I didn't know there was one left."

"I myself repaired it," said Rod.

In this part of Hansgeorg Wagner's musical drama about Rod, the music wears a little thin because he lets Rod and the Lady Johanna Gnade speak in normal voices, using his music only as an accompaniment. Now and then he lets the spotlight drift across the calm face and strong torso of D'igo the musicologist; when that happens, he brings in a fugue or two from *Ignoraba Yo*. Otherwise the music for this part of the show is rather dull.

"If you weren't so rich," said the Lady Johanna Gnade, "I'd like to buy that machine of yours for our Earthport museum."

"It's not for sale, ma'am and lady, not at any price."

"I can imagine that. What did it do?"

"It outcomputed the Commonwealth and I became the richest man in the universe."

"So you ran away again. First you ran because you were persecuted. Then you ran because you were rich. When did you get here?"

"Today."

"Where have you been between the time you left Norstrilia and today?"

"Mars, ma'am and lady."

"Do you have to keep using that double title on me?"

"Yes, ma'am and lady. It's our custom. We don't change our customs much."

The Lady Johanna Gnade burst into a friendly laugh - her first since their encounter: "All right. What's yours?"

"What's my what?"

"Your double title. You have one, don't you?"

It was Rod's turn to look uncomfortable. "It's 'mister and owner,' ma'am and lady, but you don't have to use it all the time. After all, this is Earth."

"But you own it."

"All right, you win, ma'am."

"How are your parents, mister and owner McBan?"

His face clouded over. "Dead."

"How?"

"Their ship went milky while planoforming through space-two."

"Do you love anyone?"

"Yes, ma'am, my servant Eleanor."

"Where is she?"

"Somewhere in this tower, ma'am."

"What's she doing?"

"Pretending to be me, ma'am, while I pretend to be a cat-man. They changed her into a young man when they scunned me down and then made me look like an underperson."

"Scunned? *You* were scunned. Frozen, dehydrated, cut up, boxed. You? Who did it?"

"That monkey-doctor there," said Rod, gesturing at A'gentur on the floor.

The Lady Johanna Gnade called directly to A'gentur, "You, there, monkey, wake up! He, talks, doesn't he?"

A'gentur let one eye quiver open for a quick glance at the Lady Johanna Gnade. Within seconds he was snoring in deep sleep.

The Lady Johanna Gnade stared at A'gentur. She brushed the air with the right hand to keep the others silent. She even made a motion over A'gentur with both hands. The monkey did not stir or waken.

"I don't like this," she said. "I don't like this one bit. That being looks like an animal, but I can't tell whether it is an underperson or a human being. It went to sleep at me. I just threw the whole telepathic force of the Instrumentality at it, and *it stayed asleep*. That's never happened to me before."

C'mell said, very softly, "He was sent out to Norstrilia at the request of the Lord Redlady."

"Redlady? Redlady?" said the Lady Johanna Gnade. "He's still working?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Rod.

"Redlady at one end and Jestocost at the other! You couldn't find two more weirdos - more personalities, I mean - in the whole Instrumentality to match that pair. You're in good hands, young man. And what do you want out of all this?"

"A look at Earth, a bit of adventure, my life, and most of my fortune, ma'am and lady."

She almost looked as though she would lose her dignity and whistle in astonishment. "You're not asking much, are you? Not much by half!"

"I'll win," said Rod, "I'll win all right. The Norstrilian way."

"What's that?"

He turned serious. "Never plan too far ahead. Go from one immediate situation to the other. Never make a decision if you can put the decision on somebody else and still win for yourself. And most of all -"

"Most of all?" asked the Lady Johanna Gnade softly.

"Most of all, *never get caught winning*. Just win, but don't let it show."

"You're all right," she laughed, standing up. "You don't need my protection. And you aren't going to get my punishment. I'd hate to tackle you, young as you are. With those companions you have, you're practically an army. That girl of yours, C'mell -"

"Yes, ma'am," said C'mell.

"She never gets caught. At anything." The Lady smiled. She went on: "And that thing on the floor, that so-called monkey. I can't make it talk. I can't even tell what it is. You're in good company, young man. I'll speak to the Lord Jestocost sometime. Do you shake hands?"

Rod politely held out his right hand.

She stopped him with a wave. "I was being friendly. Is handshaking a custom on Norstrilia, mister and owner McBane - a custom even between men and women?"

"Indeed it is, ma'am and lady."

They shook hands cordially.

"Don't take too much of Earth home with you when you leave," she called to him as she entered the dark corridor, summoned her robots and dropped down the shaft.

D'igo said, "Come back if you wish, mister and owner McBane. Call on me to come out any time, madam C'mell. Goodbye, monkey."

"Thanks," said A'gentur, wide-awake. "Let's go eat."

## CHAPTER TWO: DISCOURSES AND RECOURSES

ROD MCBAN, DISGUISED as a cat, floated down the dropshaft to the strangest encounter which could have befallen any man of his epoch. C'mell floated down beside him. She clenched her skirt between her knees, so that it would not commit immodesties. A'gentur, his monkey hand lightly on C'mell's shoulder, loved her soft red hair as it stood and moved with the updraft which they themselves created; he looked forward to becoming E-ikasuk again and he admired C'mell deeply, but love between the different strains of underpeople was necessarily platonic. Physiologically they could not breed outside their own stock and emotionally they found it hard to mesh deeply with the emphatic needs of another form of life, however related it might be. E-ikasuk therefore very truly and deeply wanted C'mell for his friend, and nothing more.

While they moved downward in relative peace, other people were concerned about them on various worlds.

### **The Cabin of the Station of Doom, the same day**

"Aunt Doris, he's dead, he's dead, he's dead. I feel it."

"Nonsense, Lavinia. He may be in trouble and we might not know. But with all that money, the government or the Instrumentality would use the Big Blink to send word of the change in status of this property. I don't mean to sound cold-hearted, girl, but when there is this much property at stake, people act rapidly."

"He is *so* dead."

Doris was not one to discount the telepathic arts. She remembered how the Australians had gotten off the incarnate fury of Paradise VII. She went over to the cupboard and took from it a strangely tinted jar. "Do you know what this is?" said she to Lavinia.

The girl forced a smile past her desperate inward feelings. "Yes," she said. "Ever since I was no bigger than a mini-elephant, people, have told me, that jar was 'do not touch.'"

"Good girl, then, if you haven't touched it!" said Aunt Doris drily. "It's a mixture of stroon and Paradise VII honey."

"Honey?" cried Lavinia. "I thought no one ever went back to that horrible place."

"Some do," said Lavinia. "It seems, that some Earth forms have taken over and are still living there. Including bees. The honey has powers on the human mind. It is a strong hypnotic. We mix it with stroon to make sure it is safe."



Aunt Doris put a small spoon into the jar, lifted, spun the spoon to pick up the threads of heavy honey, and handed the spoon to Lavinia. "Here," said she, "take this and lick it off. Swallow it all down."

Lavinia hesitated and then obeyed. When the spoon was clean she licked her lips and handed the clean spoon back to Aunt Doris, who put it aside for washing up.

Aunt Doris very ceremonially put the jar back on the high shelf of the cupboard, locked the cupboard, and put the key in the pocket of her apron.

"Let's sit outside," said she to Lavinia.

"When's it going to happen?"

"When's what going to happen?"

"The trance - the visions - whatever this stuff brings on?"

Doris laughed her weary rational laugh. "Oh, that! Sometimes nothing at all happens. In any event, it won't hurt you, girl. Let's sit on the bench. I'll tell you if you start looking strange to me."

They sat on the bench, doing nothing. Two police ornithopters, flying just under the forever-gray clouds, quietly watched the Station of Doom. They had been doing this ever since Rod's computer showed him how to win all that money - the fortune was still piling up, almost faster than it could be computed. The bird-engines were lazy and beautiful as they flew. The operators had synchronized the flapping of the two sets of wings, so that they looked like rukhs doing a ballet. The effect caught the eyes of both Lavinia and Aunt Doris.

Lavinia suddenly spoke in a clear, sharp, demanding voice, quite unlike her usual tone: "It's all mine, isn't it?"

Doris breathed softly, "What, my dear?"

"The Station of Doom. I'm one of the heiresses, anyhow, aren't I?" Lavinia pursed her lips in a proud prim smug smile which would have humiliated her if she had been in her right mind.

Aunt Doris said nothing. She nodded silently.

"If I marry Rod I'll be missus and owner McBan, the richest woman who ever lived. But if I do marry him, he'll hate me, because he'll think it's for his money and his power. But I've loved Rod, loved him specially because he couldn't hier or spiek. I've always known that he would need me someday, not like my Daddy singing his crazy sad proud songs forever and ever! But how can I marry him now ... ?"

Whispered Doris, very gently, very insinuatingly: "Look for Rod, my dear. Look for Rod in that part of your mind which thought he was dead. Look for Rod, Lavinia, look for Rod."

Lavinia laughed happily, and it was the laugh of a small child.

She stared at her feet, at the sky, at Doris - looking right through her.

Her eyes seemed to clear. When she spoke, it was in her normal adult voice:

"I see Rod. Someone has changed him into a cat-man, just like the pictures we've seen of underpeople. And there's a girl with him - a girl, Doris - and I can't be jealous of him being with her. She is the most beautiful thing that ever lived on any world. You ought to see her hair, Doris. You ought to see her hair. It is like a bushel of beautiful fire. Is that Rod? I don't

know. I can't tell. I can't see." She sat on the bench, looking straight at Doris and seeing nothing, but weeping copiously.

**At the beach of Meeva Meefla, Earth, the same day**

"Father, you can't be here. You never come here!"

"But I have," said Lord William Not-from-here. "And it's important."

"Important?" laughed Ruth. "Then it's not me. I'm not important. Your work up there is." She looked toward the rim of the Earthport, which floated, distinct and circular, beyond the crests of some faraway clouds.

The over-dressed lord squatted incongruously on the sand.

"Listen, girl," said he slowly and emphatically, "I've never asked much of you but I am asking now."

"Yes, father," she said, a little frightened by this totally unaccustomed air - her father was usually playfully casual with her, and equally usually forgot her ten seconds after he got through talking to her.

"Ruth, you know we are Old North Australians?"

"We're rich, if that's what you mean. Not that it matters, the way things go."

"I'm not talking about riches now, I'm talking about home, and I mean it!"

"Home? We never had a home, father."

"Norstrilia!" he snarled at her.

"I never saw it, father. Nor did you. Nor your father. Nor great-grandpa. What are you talking about?"

"We can go home again!"

"Father, what's happened? Have you lost your mind? You've always told me that our family bought out and could never go back. What's happened now? Have they changed the rules? I'm not even sure I want to go there, anyhow. No water, no beaches, no cities. Just a dry dull planet with sick sheep and a lot of immortal farmers who go around armed to the teeth!"

*"Ruth, you can take us back!"*

She jumped to her feet and slapped the sand off her bottom. She was a little taller than her father; though he was an extremely handsome, aristocratic-looking man, she was an even more distinctive person. It would be obvious to anyone that she would never lack for suitors or pursuers.

"All right, father. You always have schemes. Usually it's antique money. This time I'm mixed up with it somehow, or you wouldn't be here. Father, just what do you want me to do?"

"To marry. To marry the richest man who has ever been known in the universe."

"Is that all?" she laughed. "Of course I'll marry him. I've never married an off-worlder before. Have you made a date with him?"

"You don't understand, Ruth. This isn't Earth marriage. In Norstrilian law and custom you marry only one man, you marry only once, and you stay married to him for as long as you live."

A cloud passed over the sun. The beach became cooler. She looked at her father with a funny mixture of sympathy, contempt, and curiosity.

"That," she said, "is a cat of another breed. I'll have to see him first..."

### **Antechamber of the Bell and Bank, Earthport, the same day**

A bear-woman, complete with starched cap and nurse's uniform, pushed the wheel chair of the Lord Crudelta into the room. Jestocost looked up from the situation shows which he had been watching. When he saw who it was, he offered Crudelta a deep bow indeed. The bear-woman, flustered by this famous place and all the great dignitaries whom she was meeting, spoke up in a singularly high voice, begging:

"My lord and master Crudelta, may I leave you here?"

"Yes. Go. I will call for you later. Go to the bathroom on your way out. It's on the right."

"My lord -!" she gasped with embarrassment.

"You wouldn't have dared if I hadn't told you. I've been watching your mind for the last half-hour. Now go along."

The bear-woman fled with a rustle of her starched skirts.

When Crudelta looked directly at him, Jestocost gave him a very deep bow. In lifting his eyes he looked directly into the face of the old, old man and said, with something near pride in his voice:

"Still up to your old tricks, my Lord and colleague Crudelta!"

"And you to yours, Jestocost. How are you going to get that boy out of the sewers?"

"What boy? What sewers?"

"Our sewers. The boy you sold this tower to."

For once, Jestocost was flabbergasted. His jaw dropped. Then he collected himself and said, "You're a knowledgeable man, my Lord Crudelta."

"That I am," said Crudelta, "and a thousand years older than you, to boot. That was my reward for coming back from the Nothing-at-all."

"I know that, sir," Jestocost's full, pleasant face did not show worry, but he studied the old man across from him with extreme care. In his prime, the Lord Crudelta had been the greatest of the Lords of the Instrumentality, a telepath of whom the other lords were always a little afraid, because he picked minds so deftly and quickly that he was the best mental pickpocket who had ever lived. A strong conservative, he had never opposed a specific policy because it ran counter to his general appetites. He had, for example, carried the vote for the Rediscovery of Man by coming out of retirement and tongue-lashing the whole Council into a corner with his vehement support for reform. Jestocost had never liked him - who could like a rapier tongue, a mind of unfathomable brilliance, a cold old ego which neither offered nor asked companionship? Jestocost knew that if the old man had caught on to the Rod McBane adventure, he might be on the trail of Jestocost's earlier deal with - no, no, no! don't think it here, not with those eyes watching.

"I know about that, too," said the old, old man.

"What?"

"The secret you are trying most of all to hide."

Jestocost stood submissive, waiting for the blow to fall.

The old man laughed. Most people would have expected a cackle from that handsome fresh young face with the withered spidery body. They would have been fooled. The laugh was full-bodied, genuine and warm.

"Redlady's a fool," said Crudelta.

"I think so too," said Jestocost, " but what are *your* reasons, my lord and master?"

"Sending that young man off his own planet when he has so much wealth and so little experience."

Jestocost nodded, not wanting to say anything until the old man had made his line of attack plain.

"I like your idea, however," said the Lord Crudelta. "Sell him the Earth and then tax him for it. But what is your ultimate aim? Making him Emperor of the Planet Earth, in the old style? Murdering him? Driving him mad? Having the cat-girl of yours seduce him and then send him home a bankrupt? I admit I have thought of all these too but I didn't see how any of them would fit in with your passion for justice. But there's one thing you can't do, Jestocost. You can't sell him the Planet Earth and then have him stay here and manage it. He might want to use this tower for his residence. That would be too much. I am too old to move out. And he mustn't roll up that ocean out there and take it home for a souvenir. You've all been very clever, my lord - clever enough to be fools. You have created an unnecessary crisis. What are you going to get out of it?"

Jestocost plunged. The old man must have picked his own mind. Nowhere else could he have put all the threads of the case together. Jestocost decided on the truth and the whole truth. He started with the day that Big Blink rang in the enormous transactions in stroon futures, financial gambles which soon reached out of the commodity markets of Old North Australia and began to unbalance the economy of all the civilized worlds. Directed and calculated by the ancient McBan family computer which, when asked by its new mister and owner how he could escape the sick enmity of Norstrilia's Onseck, had answered that the only way was to become the richest man in the Universe - and, in four hours, had brought it about. He unrolled as much as was necessary of the thread of Rod McBan's swift yet complex dispatch to Old Earth, overseen by the disgraced Lord Redlady - the disguise as a cat-man, and the nine Rod-doubles, the servant Eleanor and eight robots, to confuse thieves, kidnappers, and anyone else who might feel an unwholesome interest in the wealthiest man of all time...

"Tell me what you plan to do," said the Lord Crudelta. "If I like it, I will help you. If I don't like it, I will have the whole story before a plenum of the council this very morning, and you know that they will tear your bright idea to shreds. They will probably seize the boy's property, send him to a hospital, and have him come out speaking Basque as a flamenco player. You know as well as I do that the Instrumentality is very generous with other people's property, but pretty ruthless when it comes to any threat directed against itself. After all, I was one of the men who wiped out Raumsog."

Jestocost began to talk very quietly, very calmly. He spoke with the assurance of an accountant who, books in order, is explaining an intricate point to his manager. Old himself, he was a child compared to the antiquity and wisdom of the Lord Crudelta. He went into details, including the ultimate disposition of Rod McBan. He even shared with the Lord Crudelta his sympathies for the underpeople and his own very secret, very quiet struggle to improve their

position. The only thing which he did not mention was the E-telekeli and the counterbrain which the underpeople had set up in Downdeep-downdeep. If the old man knew it, he knew it and Jestocost couldn't stop him, but if he did not know it, there was no point in telling him.

The Lord Crudelta did not respond with senile enthusiasm or childish laughter. He reverted, not to his childhood but to his maturity; with great dignity and force he said:

"I approve. I understand. You have my proxy if you need it. Call that nurse to come and get me. I thought you were a clever fool, Jestocost. You sometimes are. This time you are showing that you have a heart as well as a head."

"And the ex-lord Redlady?" asked Jestocost deferentially.

"Him? Nothing. Nothing. Let him live his life. The Old North Australians might as well cut their political teeth on him."

The bear-woman rustled back into the room. The Lord Crudelta waved his hand. Jestocost bowed almost to the floor, and the wheelchair, heavy as a tank, creaked its way across the doorsill.

"That," said Jestocost, "could have been trouble!" He wiped his brow.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE ROAD TO THE CATMASTER

ROD, C'MELL AND A'GENTUR had had to hold the sides of the shaft several times as the traffic became heavy and large loads, going up or down, had to pass each other and them too. In one of these waits C'mell caught her breath and said something very swiftly to the little monkey. Rod, not heeding them, caught nothing but the sudden enthusiasm and happiness in her voice. The monkey's murmured answer made her plaintive and she insisted:

"But, Yeekasoose, you must! Rod's whole life could depend on it. Not just saving his life now, but having a better life for hundreds and hundreds of years."

The monkey was cross. "Don't ask me to think when I am hungry. This fast metabolism and small body just isn't enough to support real thinking."

"If it's food you want, have some raisins." She took a square of compressed seedless raisins out of one of her matching bags.

A'gentur ate them greedily, but gloomily.

Rod's attention drifted away from them as he saw magnificent golden furniture, elaborately carved and inlaid with a pearlescent material, being piloted up the shaft by a whole troop of talkative dog-men. He asked them where the furniture was going. When they did not answer him, he repeated his question in a more peremptory tone of voice, as befitted the richest Old North Australian in the universe. The tone of demand brought answers, but they were not the ones he was expecting. "Meow," said one dog-man. "Shut up, cat, or I'll chase you up a tree." "Not to your house, buster. Exactly what do you think you are, people?" "Cats are always nosy. Look at that one." The dog-foreman rose into sight; with dignity and kindness he said to Rod, "Cat-fellow, if you feel like talking, you may get marked surplus. Better keep quiet in the public dropshaft!" Rod realized that to these beings he was one of them, a cat made into a man, and that the underpeople workmen who served Old Earth had been trained not to chatter while working on the business of Man.

He caught the tail of C'mell's urgent whisper to A'gentur: "... and don't ask him. *Tell him.* We'll risk the people zone for a visit to the Catmaster! *Tell him.*"

A'gentur was panting with a rapid shallow breath. His eyes seemed to protrude from their sockets and yet he was looking at nothing. He groaned as though with some inward effort. At last he lost his grip on the wall and would have floated slowly downward if C'mell had not caught him and cuddled him like a baby. C'mell whispered, eagerly:

"You reached *him*?"

"Him," gasped the little monkey.

"Who?" asked Rod.

"Aitch eye," said C'mell. "I'll tell you later." Of A'gentur she asked, "If you got *him*, what did *he* say?"

"He said, 'E-ikasuk, I do not say no. You are my son. Take the risk if you think it wise.' And don't ask me now, C'mell. Let me think a little. I have been all the way to Norstrilia and back. I'm still cramped in this little body. Do we have to do it now? Right now? Why can't we go to *him*" - and Mgentur nodded toward the depths below - "and find out what we want Rod for, anyhow? Rod is a means, not an end. Who really knows what to do with him?"

"What are you talking about?" said Rod.

Simultaneously C'mell snapped, "I know what we are going to do with him."

"What?" said the little monkey, very tired again.

"We're going to let this boy go free, and let him find happiness, and if he wants to give us his help, we will take it and be grateful. But we are not going to rob him. Not going to hurt him. That would be a mean, dirty way to start being better creatures than we are. If he knows who he is before he meets *him*, they can make sense." She turned to Rod and said with mysterious urgency:

"Don't you want to *know* who you are?"

"I'm Rod McBan to-the-hundred-and-fifty-first," said he promptly.

"She-h-h," said she, "no names here. I'm not talking about names. I'm talking about the deep insides of you. Life itself as it flows through you. Do you have any idea who you are?"

"You're playing games," he said. "I know perfectly well who I am, and where I live, and what I have. I even know that right now I am supposed to be a cat-man named C'roderick. What else is there to know?"

"You men!" she sobbed at him, "You men! Even when you're people, you're so dense that you can't understand a simple question. I'm not asking you your name or your address or your label or your great-grandfather's property. I'm asking about *you*, Rod, the only you that will ever live, no matter how many numbers your grandsons may put after their names. You're not in the world just to own a piece of property or to handle a surname with a number after it. You're *you*. There's never been another you. There will never be another one, after you. What does this 'you' want?"

Rod glanced down at the walls of the tunnel, which seemed to turn - oh, so far below - very gently to the North. He looked up at the little rhomboids of light cast on the tunnel walls by the landing doors into the various levels of Earthport. He felt his own weight, a half-kilo or so, tagging gently at his hand as he held to the rough surface of the vertical shaft, supported by his belt. The belt itself felt uncomfortable about his middle; after all, it was supporting most of his weight, and it squeezed him. *What do I want?* thought he. *Who am I that I should have a right to want anything? I am Rod McBan CLI, the mister and owner of the Station of Doom. But I'm also a poor freak with bad telepathy who can't even spiek or hier rightly.*

C'mell was watching him as clinically as a surgeon, but he could tell from her expression that she was not trying to peep his mind.

He found himself speaking almost as wearily as had A'gentur, who was also called something like "Yeekasoose," and who had strange powers for a little monkey,

"I don't suppose I want anything much, C'mell, except that I should like to spiek and hier correctly, like other people on my native world."

She looked at him, her expression showing intense sympathy and the effort to make a decision.

A'gentur interrupted with his high clear monkey voice, "Say that to me, sir and master."

Rod repeated, "I don't really want anything. I would like to spiek and hier because other people are fussing at me about it. And I would like to get a Cape of Good Hope twopenny triangular blue stamp while I am still on Earth. But that's about all. I guess there's nothing I really want."

The monkey closed his eyes and seemed to fall asleep again: Rod suspected it was some kind of telepathic trance.

C'mell hooked A'gentur on an old rod which protruded from the surface of the shaft. Since he weighed only a few grams, there was no pull on the belt. She seized Rod's shoulder and pulled him over to her.

"Rod, listen! Do you want to know who you are?"

"I don't know," said he. "I might be miserable."

"Not if you *know* who you are!" she insisted.

"I might not like me," said Rod. "Other people don't and my parents died together when their ship went milky out in space. I'm not normal."

"For God's sake, Rod!" she cried.

"Who?" said he.

"Forgive me, father," said she, speaking to no one in sight.

"I've heard that name before, somewhere," said Rod. "But let's get going. I want to get to this mysterious place you are taking me and then I want to find out about Eleanor. She's disguised as me, taking risks for me, along with eight robots. It's up to me to do what I can for her. Always."

"But she's your *servant*," said C'mell. "She serves you. Almost like being an underperson, like me."

"She's a person," said Rod, stubbornly. "We have no underpeople in Norstrilia, except for a few in government jobs. But she's my friend."

"Do you want to marry her?"

"Great sick sheep, girl! Are you barmy? No!"

"Do you want to marry anybody?"

"At sixteen?" he cried. "Anyhow, my family will arrange it." The thought of plain honest devoted Lavinia crossed his mind, and he could not help comparing her to this wild voluptuous creature who floated beside him in the tunnel as the traffic passed them going up and down. With near weightlessness, C'mell's hair floated like a magic flower around her head. She had been brushing it out of her eyes from time to time. He snorted, "Not Eleanor."

When he said this, another idea crossed the mind of the beautiful cat-girl.

"You know what I am, Rod," said she, very seriously.

"A cat-girl from the planet Earth. You're supposed to be my wife."

"That's right," she said, with an odd intonation in her voice. "Be it, then!"



"What?" said Rod.

"My husband," she said, her voice catching slightly. "Be my husband, if it will help you to find you."

She stole a quick glance up and down the shaft, there was nobody near.

"*Look, Rod, look!*" She spread the opening of her dress down and aside. Even with the poor light, to which his eyes had become accustomed, he could see the fine tracery of veins in her delicate chest and her young, pear-shaped breasts. The aureoles around the nipples were a clear, sweet, innocent pink; the nipples themselves were as pretty as two pieces of candy. For a moment there was pleasure and then a terrible embarrassment came over him. He turned his face away and felt horribly self-conscious. What she had done was interesting, but it wasn't *nice*.

When he dared to glance at her, she was still studying his face.

"I'm a girlygirl, Rod. This is my business. And you're a cat, with all the rights of a tomcat. Nobody can tell the difference, here in this tunnel. *Rod, do you want to do anything?*"

Rod gulped and said nothing.

She swept her clothing back inter place. The strange urgency left her voice. "I guess," she said, "that that left me a little breathless. I find you pretty attractive, Rod. I find myself thinking, 'what a pity he is not a cat.' I'm over it now."

Rod said nothing.

A bubble of laughter came into her voice, along with something mothering and tender, which tugged at his heartstrings. "Best of all, Rod, I didn't mean it. Or maybe I did. I had to give you a chance before I felt that I really knew you. Rod, I'm one of the most beautiful girls on Old Old Earth Itself. The Instrumentality uses me for that very reason. We've turned you into a cat and offered you me, and you won't have me. Doesn't that suggest that you don't know who you are?"

"Are you back on that?" said Rod. "I guess I just don't understand girls."

"You'd better, before you're through with Earth," she said. "Your agents have bought a million of them for you, out of all that stroon money."

"People or underpeople?"

"Both!"

"Let them bug sheep!" he cried. "I had no part in ordering them. Come on, girl. This is no place for a boudoir conversation!"

"Where on earth did you learn that word?" she laughed.

"I read books. Lots of books. I may look like a peasant to you Earth people, but I know a lot of things."

"Do you trust me, Rod?"

He thought of her immodesty, which still left him a little breathless. The Old North Australian humor reasserted itself in him, as a cultural characteristic and not just as an individual one: "I've seen a lot of you, C'mell," said he with a grin. "I suppose you don't have many surprises left. All right, I trust you. Then what?"

She studied him closely.

"I'll tell you what E-ikarus and I were discussing."

"Who?"

"Him." She nodded at the little monkey.

"I thought his name was A'gentur."

"Like yours is C'rod!" she said.

"He's not a monkey?" asked Rod.

She looked around and lowered her voice. "He's a bird," she said solemnly, "and he's the second most important bird on Earth."

"So what?" said Rod.

"He's in charge of your destiny, Rod. Your life or your death. Right now."

"I thought," he whispered back, "that that was up to the Lord Redlady and somebody named Jestocost on Earth."

"You're dealing with other powers, Rod - powers which keep themselves secret. They want to be friends with you. And I think," she added with a complete *non sequitur*, "that we'd better take the risk and go."

He looked blank and she added, "To the Catmaster."

"They'll do something to me there."

"Yes," she said. Her face was calm, friendly, and even. "You will die, maybe - but not much chance. Or you might go mad - there's always the possibility. Or you will find all the things you want - that's the likeliest of all. I have been there, Rod. I myself have been there. Don't you think that I look like a happy, busy girl, when you consider that I'm really just an animal with a rather low-down job?"

Rod studied her, "How old are you?"

"Thirty next year," she said, inflexibly.

"For the first time?"

"For us animal-people there is no second time, Rod. I thought you knew that."

He returned her gaze. "If you can take it," said he, "I can too. Let's go."

She lifted A'gentur or E-ikarus, depending on which he really was, off the wall, where he had been sleeping like a marionette between plays. He opened his exhausted little eyes and blinked at her.

"You have given us our orders," said C'mell. "We are going to the Department Store."

"I have," he said, crossly, coming much more awake. "I don't remember it!"

She laughed, "Just through me, E-ikarus!"

"That name!" he hissed. "Don't get foolhardy. Not in a public shaft."

"All right, A'gentur," she responded, "but do you approve?"

"Of the decision?"

She nodded.

The little monkey looked at both of them. He spoke to Rod. "If she gambles her life and yours, not to mention mine - if she takes chances to make you much, much happier, are you willing to come along?"

Rod nodded in silent agreement.

"Let's go, then," said the monkey-surgeon.

"Where are we going?" asked Rod.

"Down into Earthport City. Among all the people. Swarms and swarms of them," said C'mell, "and you will get to see the everyday life of Earth, just the way that you asked at the top of the tower, an hour ago."

"A year ago, you mean," said Rod. "So much has happened!" He thought of her young naked breasts and the impulse which had made her show them to him, but the thought did not make him excited or guilty; he felt friendly, because he sensed in their whole relationship a friendliness much more fervent than sex itself.

"We are going to a store," said the sleepy monkey.

"A commissary. For things? What for?"

"It has a nice name," said C'mell, "and it is run by a wonderful person. The Catmaster himself. Five hundred some years old, and still allowed to live by virtue of the legacy of the Lady Goroke."

"Never heard of her," said Rod. "What's the name?"

"The Department Store of Hearts' Desires," said C'mell and E-ikusus simultaneously.

The trip was a vivid, quick dream. They had only a few hundred meters to fall before they reached ground level.

They came out on the people-street. A robot-policeman watched them from a corner.

Human beings in the costumes of a hundred historical periods were walking around in the warm, wet air of Earth. Rod could not smell as much salt in the air as he had smelled at the top of the tower, but down here in the city it smelled of more people than he had ever even imagined in one place. Thousands of individuals, hundreds and thousands of different kinds of foods, the odors of robots, of underpeople and of other things which seemed to be unmodified animals.

"This is the most interesting smelling place I have ever been," said he to C'mell.

She glanced at him idly. "That's nice. You can smell like a dog-man. Most of the real people I have known couldn't smell their own feet. Come on though, C'roderick - *remember who you are!* If we're not tagged and licensed for the surface, we'll get stopped by that policeman in one minute or less."

She carried E-ikusus and steered Rod with a pressure on his elbow. They came to a ramp which led to an underground passage, well illuminated. Machines, robots and underpeople were hurrying back and forth along it, busy with the commerce of Earth.

Rod would have been completely lost if he had been without C'mell. Though his miraculous broad-band hiering, which had so often surprised him at home, had not returned during his few hours on Old Earth, his other senses gave him a suffocating awareness of the huge number of

people around him and above him. (He never realized that there were times, long gone, when the cities of Earth had population which reached the tens of millions; to him, several hundred thousand people, and a comparable number of underpeople, was a crowd almost beyond all measure.) The sounds and smells of underpeople were subtly different from those of people; some of the machines of Earth were bigger and older than anything which he had previously imagined; and above all, the circulation of water in immense volumes, millions upon millions of gallons, for the multiple purposes of Earthport - sanitation, cooling, drinking, industrial purposes - made him feel that he was not among a few buildings, which he would have called a city in Old North Australia, but that he himself had become a blood-cell thrusting through the circulatory system of some enormous composite animal, the nature of which he imperfectly understood. This city was alive with a sticky, wet, complicated aliveness which he had hitherto not even imagined to be possible. Movement characterized it. He suspected that the movement went on by night and day, that there was no real cessation to it, that the great pumps thrust water through feeder pipes and drains whether people were awake or not, that the brains of this organization could be no one place, but had to comprise many sub-brains, each committed and responsible for its particular tasks. No wonder underpeople were needed! It would be boredom and pain, even with perfected automation, to have enough human supervisors to reconnect the various systems if they had breakdowns inside themselves, or at their interconnections. Old North Australia had vitality, but it was the vitality of open fields, few people, immense wealth, and perpetual military danger; this was the vitality of the cesspool, of the compost heap, but the rotting, blooming, growing components were not waste material but human beings and near-human beings. No wonder that his forefathers had fled the cities as they had been. They must have been solid plague to free men. Even Old Original Australia, somewhere here on Earth, had lost its openness and freedom in order to become the single giant city-complex of Nanbien. It must, Rod thought with horror, have been a thousand times the size of this city of Earthport. (He was wrong, because it was 150,000 times the size of Earthport before it died. Earthport had only about two hundred thousand permanent residents when Rod visited it, with an additional number walking in from the nearer suburbs, the outer suburbs still being ruined and abandoned, but Australia - under the name of Aojou Nanbien - had reached a population of thirty billion before it died, and before the Wild Ones and the Menschenjäger had set to work killing off the survivors.)

Rod was bewildered, but C'mell was not.

She had put A'gentur down, over his whined monkey-like protest. He trotted unwillingly beside them.

With the impudent knowledgeability of a true city girl, she had led them to a cross-walk from which a continuous whistling roar came forth. By writing, by picture, and by loudspeaker, the warning system repeated KEEP OFF. FREIGHT ONLY, DANGER. KEEP OFF. She had snatched up E-ikarus/A'gentur, grabbed Rod by the arm, and jumped with them on a series of rapidly moving airborne platforms. Rod, startled by the suddenness in which they had found the trackway, shouted to ask what it was:

"Freight? What's that?"

"Things. Boxes. Foods. This is the Central trackway. No sense in walking six kilometers when we can get this. Be ready to jump off with me when I give you the sign!"

"It *feels* dangerous," he said.

"It isn't," said she, "not if you're a cat."

With this somewhat equivocal reassurance, she let them ride. A'gentur could not care less. He cuddled his head against her shoulder, wrapped his long gibbonlike arms around her upper arm and went soundly to sleep.

C'mell nodded at Rod,

"Soon now!" she called, judging their distance by landmarks which he found meaningless. The landing points had flat, concrete-lined areas where the individual flat cars rushing along on their river of air, could be shunted suddenly to the side for loading or unloading. Each of these loading areas had a number, but Rod had not even noticed at what point they had gotten on. The smells of the underground city changed so much as they moved from one district to another that he was more interested in odors than in the numbers on the platforms.

She pinched his upper arm very sharply as a sign that he should get ready.

They jumped.

He staggered across the platform until he caught himself up against a large vertical crate marked "Algonquin Paper Works - Credit Slips, Miniature - 2 m." C'mell landed as gracefully as if she had been acting a rehearsed piece of acrobatics. The little monkey on her shoulder stared with wide bright eyes.

"This," said the monkey A'gentur/E-ikasus, fancy and contemptuously, "is where all the people play at working. I'm tired, I'm hungry, and my body sugar is low." He curbed himself tight against C'mell's shoulder, closed his eyes, and went back to sleep.

"He has a point," said Rod. "Could we eat?"

C'mell started to nod and then caught herself short - "You're a cat."

He nodded. Then he grinned. "I'm hungry, anyhow. And I need a sandbox."

"Sandbox?" she asked puzzled.

"An awef," he said very clearly, using the Old North Australian term.

"Awef?"

It was his turn to get embarrassed. He said it in full: "An animal waste evacuation facility."

"You mean a johnny," she cried. She thought a minute and then said, "Fooey."

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Each kind of underpeople has to use its own. It's death if you don't use one and it's death if you use the wrong one. The cat one is four stations back on this underground trackway. Or we can walk back on the surface. It would only be a half hour."

He said something rude to Earth. She wrinkled her brow.

"All I said was, 'Earth is a large healthy sheep.' That's not so dirty." Her good humor returned.

Before she could ask him another question he held up a firm hand. "I am not going to waste a half-hour. You wait here." He had seen the universal sign for "Men's room" at the upper level of the platform. Before she could stop him he had gone into it. She caught her hand up to her mouth, knowing that the robot police would kill him on sight if they found him in the wrong place. It would be such a ghastly joke if the man who owned the earth were to die in the wrong toilet..

As quick as thought she followed him, stopping just outside the door to the "men's room." She dared not go in; she trusted that the place was empty when Rod entered it, because she had heard no boom of a slow, heavy bullet, none of the crisp buzzing of a burner. Robots did not use toilets, so they went in only when they were investigating something. She was prepared to distract any man living if he tried to enter that toilet, by offering him the combination of an immediate seduction or a complimentary and unwanted monkey.

A'gentur had awakened.

"Don't bother," he said. "I called my father. Anything approaching that door will fall asleep."

An ordinary man, rather tired and worried-looking, headed for the men's room. C'mell was prepared to stop him at any cost, but she remembered what A'gentur/E-ikasus had told her, so she waited. The man reeled as he neared them. He stared at them, saw that they were underpeople, looked on through them as though they were not there. He took two more steps toward the door and suddenly reached out his hands as if he were going blind. He walked into the wall two meters from the door, touched it firmly and blindly with his hands, and crumpled gently to the floor, where he lay snoring.

"My dad's good," said A'gentur/E-ikasus. "He usually leaves real people alone, but when he must get them, he gets them. He even gave that man the distinct memory that he mistakenly took a sleeping pill when he was reaching for a pain-killer. When the human wakes up, he will feel foolish and will tell no one of his experience."

Rod came out of the ever-so-dangerous doorway. He grinned at them boyishly and did not notice the crumpled man lying beside the wall. "That's easier than turning back, and nobody noticed me at all. See, I saved you a lot of trouble, C'mell!"

He was so proud of his foolhardy adventure that she did not have the heart to blame him. He smiled widely, his cat-whispers tipping as he did so. For a moment, just a moment, she forgot that he was an important person and a real man to boot: he was a boy, and mighty like a cat, but all boy in his satisfaction, his wanton bravery, his passing happiness with vainglory. For a second or two she loved him. Then she thought of the terrible hours ahead, and of how he would go home, rich and scornful, to his all-people planet. The moment of love passed, but she still liked him very much.

"Come along, young fellow. You can eat. You are going to eat cat food since you are C'roderick, but it's not so bad."

He frowned. "What is it? Do you have fish here? I tasted fish one time. A neighbor bought one. He traded two horses for it. It was delicious."

"He wants fish," she cried to E-ikasus.

"Give him a whole tuna for himself," grumbled the monkey. "My blood sugar is still low. I need some pineapple."

C'mell did not argue. She stayed underground and led them into a hall which had a picture of dogs, cats, cattle, pigs, bears, and snakes above the door; that indicated the kinds of people who would be served there. E-ikasus scowled at the sign, but he rode C'mell's shoulder in.

"This gentleman," said C'mell, speaking pleasantly to an old bear-man who was scratching his belly and smoking a pipe, all at the same time, "has forgotten his credits."

"No food," said the bear-man. "Rules. He can drink water, though."

"I'll pay for him," said C'mell.

The bear-man yawned, "Are you sure that he won't pay you back? If he does, that is private trading and it is punished by death."

"I know the rules," said C'mell. "I've never been disciplined yet."

The bear looked over critically. He took his pipe out of his mouth and whistled, "No," said he, "and I can see that you won't be. What are you, anyhow? A model?"

"A girlygirl," said C'mell.

The bear-man leapt from his stool with astonishing speed. "Cat-madame!" he cried, "A thousand pardons. You can have anything in the place. You come from the top of Earthport? You know the Lords of the Instrumentality personally? You would like a table roped off with curtains? Or should I just throw everybody else out of here and report to my Man that we have a famous, beautiful slave from the high places?"

"Nothing that drastic," said C'mell. "Just food."

"Wait a bit," said A'gentar-E-ikasuk, "if you're offering specials, I'll have two fresh pineapples, a quarter-kilo of ground fresh coconut, and a tenth of a kilo of live insect grubs."

The bear-man hesitated. "I was offering things to the cat-lady, who serves the mighty ones, not to you, monkey. But if the lady desires it, I will send for those things." He waited for C'mell's nod, got it, and pushed a button for a low-grade robot to come. He turned to Rod McBan, "And you, cat-gentleman, what would you like?"

Before Rod could speak, C'mell said, "He wants two sailfish steaks, french fried potatoes, Waldorf salad, an order of ice cream and a large glass of orange juice."

The bear-man shuddered visibly. "I've been here for years and that is the most horrible lunch I ever ordered for a cat. I think I'll try it myself."

C'mell smiled the smile which had graced a thousand welcomes. "I'll just help myself from the things you have on the counters. I'm not fussy."

He started to protest, but she cut him short with a graceful but unmistakable wave of the hand. He gave up.

They sat at a table.

A'gentur/E-ikasuk waited for his combination monkey and bird lunch. Rod saw an old robot dressed in a prehistoric tuxedo jacket, ask a question of the bear-man, leave one tray at the door, and bring another tray to him. The robot whipped off a freshly starched napkin. There was the most beautiful lunch which Rod McBan had ever seen. Even at a state banquet, the Old North Australians did not feed their guests like that.

Just as they were finishing, the bear-cashier came to the table and asked, "Your name, Cat-madame? I will charge these lunches to the government."

"C'mell, subject to the Lord Jestocost, a Chief of the Instrumentality."

The bear's face had been epilated, so that they could see him pale.

"*C'mell*," he whispered. "*C'mell!* Forgive me, my lady. I have never seen you before. You have blessed this place. You have blessed my life. You are the friend of all underpeople. Go in peace."

C'mell gave him the bow and smile which a reigning empress might give to an active Lord of the Instrumentality. She started to pick up the monkey but he scampered on ahead of her. Rod was puzzled. As the bear-man bowed him out, he asked:

"C'mell. You are famous?"

"In a way," she said. "Only among the underpeople." She hurried them both toward a ramp. They reached daylight at last, but even before they came to the surface, Rod's nose was assaulted by a riot of smells - foods frying, cakes baking, liquor spilling its pungency on the air, perfumes fighting with each other for attention, and, above all, the smell of old things: dusty treasures, old leathers, tapestries, the echo-smells of people who had died a long time ago.

C'mell stopped and watched him, "You're smelling things again? I must say, you have a better nose than any human being I ever met before. How does it smell to you?"

"Wonderful," he gasped. "Wonderful. Like all the treasures and temptations of the universe spilled out into one little place."

"It's just the Thieves' Market of Paris."

"There are thieves on Earth? Open ones, like Viola Siderea?"

"Oh, no," she laughed. "They would die in a few days. The Instrumentality would catch them. These are just people, playing. The Rediscovery of Man found some old institutions, and an open market was one of them. They make the robots and underpeople find things for them and then they pretend to be ancient, and make bargains with each other. Or they cook food. Not many real people ever cook food these days. It's so funny that it tastes good to them. They all pick up money on their way in. They have barrels of it at the gate. In the evening, or when they leave, they usually throw the money in the gutter, even though they should really put it back in the barrel. It's not money we underpeople could use. We go by numbers and computer cards," she sighed. "I could certainly use some of that extra money."

"And underpeople like you - like us -" said Rod, "what do we do in the market?"

"Nothing," she whispered. "Absolutely nothing. We can walk through if we are not too big and not too small and not too dirty and not too smelly. And even if we are all right, we must walk right through without looking directly at the real people and without touching anything in the market?"

"Suppose we do?" asked Rod defiantly.

"The robot police are there, with orders to kill on sight when they observe an infraction. Don't you realize, C'rod," she sobbed at him, "that there are millions of us in tanks, way below in Downdeep-downdeep, ready to be born, to be trained, to be sent up here to serve Man? We're not scarce at all, C'rod, we're not scarce at all!"

"Why are we going through the market then?"

"It's the only way to the Catmaster's store. We'll be tagged. Come along."

Where the ramp reached the surface, four bright-eyed robots, the blue enamel bodies shining and their milky eyes glowing, stood at the ready. Their weapons had an ugly buzz to them and were obviously already off the "safety" mark. C'mell talked to them quietly and submissively. When the robot-sergeant led her to a desk, she stared into an instrument like binoculars and blinked when she took her eyes away. She put her palm on a desk. The identification was completed. The robot sergeant handed her three bright disks, like saucers, each with a chain attached. Wordlessly she hung them around her own neck, Rod's neck, and A'gentur's. The



robots let them pass. They walked in demure single file through the place of beautiful sights and smells. Rod felt that his eyes were wet with tears of rage. "I'll buy this place," he thought to himself, "if it's the only thing I'll ever buy."

C'mell had stopped walking.

He looked up, very carefully.

There was the sign: THE DEPARTMENT STORE OF HEARTS' DESIRES.

A door opened. A wise old cat-person's face looked out, stared at them, snapped, "No underpeople!" and slammed the door. C'mell rang the doorbell a second time. The face reappeared, more puzzled than angry.

"Business," she whispered, "of the Aitch Eye."

The face, nodded and said, "In, then. Quick!"

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE DEPARTMENT STORE OF HEARTS' DESIRES

ONCE INSIDE, ROD REALIZED that the store was as rich as the market. There were no other customers. After the outside sounds of music, laughter, frying, boiling, things falling, dishes clattering, people arguing, and the low undertone of the ever-ready robot weapons buzzing, the quietness of the room was itself a luxury, like old, heavy velvet. The smells were no less variegated than those of the outside, but they were different, more complicated, and many more of them were completely unidentifiable.

One smell he was sure of: fear, human fear. It had been in this room not long before.

"Quick," said the old cat-man. "I'm in trouble if you don't get out soon. What is your business?"

"I'm C'mell," said C'mell.

He nodded pleasantly, but showed no sign of recognition. "I forget people," he said.

"This is A'gentur." She indicated the monkey.

The old cat-man did not even look at the animal.

C'mell persisted, a note of triumph coming into her voice: "You may have heard of him under his real name, E-ikasuk."

The old man stood there, blinking, as though he were, taking it in. "Yeekasoose? With the letter E?"

"Transformed," said C'mell inexorably, "for a trip all the way to Old North Australia and back."

"Is this true?" said the old man to the monkey.

E-ikasuk said calmly, "I am the son of Him, of whom you think."

The old man dropped to his knees, but did so with dignity:

"I salute you, E-ikasuk. When you next think-with your father, give him my greetings and ask from him his blessing. I am C'william, the Catmaster."

"You are famous," said E-ikasuk tranquilly.

"But you are still in danger, merely being here. I have no license for underpeople!"

C'mell produced her trump. "Catmaster, your next guest. This is no c'man. He is a true man, an off-worlder, and he has just bought most of the planet Earth."

C'william looked at Rod with more than ordinary shrewdness. There was a touch of kindness in his attitude. He was tall for a cat-man; few animal features were left to him,

because old age, which reduces racial and sexual contrasts to mere memories, had wrinkled him into a uniform beige. His hair was not white, but beige too; his few cat-whiskers looked old and worn. He was garbed in a fantastic costume which - Rod later learned - consisted of the court robes of one of the Original Emperors, a dynasty which had prevailed more many centuries among the farther stars. Age was upon him, but wisdom was too; the habits of life, in his case, had been cleverness and kindness, themselves unusual in combination. Now very old, he was reaping the harvest of his years. He had done well with the thousands upon thousands of days behind him, with the result that age had brought a curious joy into his manner, as though each experience meant one more treat before the long bleak dark closed in. Rod felt himself attracted to this strange creature, who looked at him with such penetrating and very personal curiosity, and who managed to do so without giving offense.

The Catmaster spoke in very passable Nostrilian: "I know what you are thinking, mister and owner McBan."

"You can hier me?" cried Rod.

"Not your thoughts. Your face. It reads easily. I am sure that I can help you."

"What makes you think I need help?"

"All things need help," said the old c'man briskly, "but we must get rid of our other guests first. Where do you want to go, excellent one? And you, Cat-madame?"

"Home," said E-ikasus. He was tired and cross again. After speaking brusquely, he felt the need to make his tone more civil, "This body suits me badly, catmaster."

"Are you good at falling?" said the Catmaster. "Free fall?"

The monkey grinned. "With this body? Of course. Excellent. I'm tired of it."

"Fine," said the Catmaster, "You can drop down my waste chute. It falls next to the forgotten palace where the great wings beat against time."

The Catmaster stopped to one side of the room. With only a nod at C'Mell and Rod, followed by a brief "See you later," the monkey watched as the Catmaster opened a manhole cover, leaped thrustingly into the complete black depth which appeared, and was gone. The Catmaster replaced the cover carefully.

He turned to C'mell.

She faced him truculently, the defiance of her posture oddly at variance with the innocent voluptuousness of her young female body. "I'm going nowhere."

"You'll die," said the Catmaster. "Can't you hear their weapons buzzing just outside the door? You know what they do to us underpeople. Especially to us cats. They use us, but do they trust us?"

"I know one who does...." she said. "The Lord Jestocost could protect me, even here, just as he protects you, far beyond your limit of years."

"Don't argue it. You will make trouble for him with the other real people. Here, girl, I will give you a tray to carry with a dummy package on it. Go back to the underground and rest in the commissary of the bear-man. I will send Rod to you when we are through."

"Yes," she said hotly, "but will you send him alive or dead?"

The Catmaster rolled his yellow eyes over Rod. "Alive," he said. "This one - alive. I have predicted. Did you ever know me to be wrong? Come on, girl, out the door with you."

C'mell let herself be handed a tray and a package, taken seemingly at random. As she left Rod thought of her with quick desperate affection. She was his closest link with earth. He thought of her excitement and of how she had bared her young breasts to him, but now the memory, instead of exciting him, filled him with tender fondness instead. He blurted out, "C'mell, will you be all right?"

She turned around at the door itself, looking all woman and all cat. Her red wild hair gleamed like a hearth-fire against the open light from the doorway. She stood erect, as though she were a citizen of Earth and not a mere underperson or girlygirl. She held out her right hand clearly and commandingly while balancing the tray on her left hand. When he shook hands with her, Rod realized that her hand felt utterly human, but very strong.

With scarcely a break in her voice she said, "Rod, good-bye. I'm taking a chance with you, but it's the best chance I've ever taken. You can trust the Catmaster, here in the department store of hearts' desires. He does strange things, Rod, but they're good strange things."

He released her hand and she left. C'william closed the door behind her. The room became hushed.

"Sit down for a minute while I get things ready. Or look around the room if you prefer."

"Sir Catmaster -" said Rod.

"No title, please. I am an underperson, made out of cats. You may call me C'william."

"C'william, please tell me first. I miss C'mell. I'm worried about her. Am I falling in love with her? Is that what falling in love means?"

"She's your wife," said the Catmaster. "Just temporarily and just in pretense, but she's still your wife. It's Earthlike to worry about one's mate. She's all right."

The old c'man disappeared behind a door which had an odd sign on it: HATE HALL.

Rod looked around.

The first thing, the very first thing, which he was aware of was a display cabinet full of postage stamps. It was made of glass, but he could see the soft blues and the inimitable warm brick reds of his Cape of Good Hope triangular postage stamps. He had come to earth and there they were! He peered through the glass at them. They were even better than the illustrations which he had sent back on Norstrilia. They had the temper of great age upon them and yet, somehow, they seemed to freight with them the love which men, living men now dead, had given them for thousands and thousands of years. He looked around, and saw that the whole room was full of odd riches. There were ancient toys of all periods, flying toys, copies of machines, things which he suspected were trains. There was a two-story closet of clothing, shimmering with embroidery and gleaming with gold. There was a bin of weapons, clean and tidy-models so ancient that he could not possibly guess what they had been used for, or by whom. Everywhere, there were buckets of coins, usually gold ones. He picked up a handful. They had languages he could not even guess at and they showed the proud imperious faces of the ancient dead. Another cabinet was one which he glanced at and then turned away from, shocked and yet inquisitive: it was filled with indecent souvenirs and pictures from a hundred periods of men's history, images, sketches, photographs, dolls and models, all of them portraying grisly, comical, sweet, friendly, impressive or horrible versions of the many acts of love. The next section made him pause utterly. Who would have ever wanted these things - Whips, knives, hoods, leather corsets? He passed on, very puzzled.

The next section stopped him breathless. It was full of old books, genuine old books. There were a few framed poems, written very ornately. One had a scrap of paper attached to it, reading simply, "my favorite." Rod looked down to see if he could make it out. It was ancient English and the odd name was "E.Z.C. Judson, Ancient American, A.D. 1823-1866." Rod understood the words of the poem, but he did not think that he really got the sense of it. As he read it, he had the impression that a very old man, like the Catmaster, must find in it a poignancy which a younger person would miss:

*Drifting on the ebbing tide.  
Slow but sure I onward glide -  
Dim the vista seen before.  
Useless now to look behind -  
Drifting on before the wind  
Toward the unknown shore.*

*Counting time by ticking clock,  
Waiting for the final shock -  
Waiting for the dark forever -  
Oh, how slow the moments go!  
None but I, meseems, can know  
How close the tideless river!*

Red shook his head as if to get away from the cobwebs of an irrecoverable tragedy. "Maybe," he thought to himself, "that's the way people felt about death when they did not die on schedule, the way most worlds have it, or if they do not meet death a few times ahead of time, the way we do in Norstrilia. They must have felt pretty sticky and uncertain." Another thought crossed his mind and he gasped at the utter cruelty of it. "They did not even have Unselfing Grounds that far back! Not that we need them any more, but imagine just sliding into death, helpless, useless, hopeless. Thank the Queen we don't do that!"

He thought of the Queen, who may have been dead for more than ten thousand years, or who might be lost in space, the way many Old North Australians believed, and sure enough! there was her picture, with the words "Queen Elizabeth II." It was just a bust, but she was a pretty and intelligent-looking woman, with something of a Norstrilian look to her. She looked smart enough to know what to do if one of her sheep caught fire or if her own child came, blank and giggling, out of the traveling vans of the Garden of Death, as he himself would have done had he not passed the survival test.

Next there were two glass frames, neatly wiped free of dust. They had matched poems by someone who was listed as "Anthony Bearden, Ancient American A.D. 1913-1949." The first one seemed very appropriate to this particular place, because it was all about the ancient desires which people had in those days. It read:

*TELL ME, LOVE!*

*Time is burning and the world on fire.  
Tell me, love, what you most desire.  
Tell me what your heart has hidden.*

*Is it open or - forbidden?*

*If forbidden, think of days  
Racing past in a roaring haze,  
Shocked and shaken by the blast of fire....  
Tell me, love, what you most desire.*

*Tell me, love, what you most desire.  
Dainty foods and soft attire?  
Ancient books? Fantastic chess?  
Wine-lit nights? Love - more, or less?*

*Now is the only now of our age.  
Tomorrow tomorrow will hold the stage.  
Tell me, love, what you most desire!  
Time is burning and the world on fire.*

The other one might almost have been written about his arrival on Earth, his not knowing what could happen or what should happen to him now.

#### *NIGHT, AND THE SKY UNFAMILIAR*

*The stars of experience have led me astray.  
A pattern of purpose was lost on my way.  
Where was I going? How can I say?  
The stars of experience have led me astray.*

There was a slight sound.

Rod turned around to face the Catmaster.

The old man was unchanged. He still wore the lunatic robes of grandeur, but his dignity survived even this *outré* effect.

"You like my poems? You like my things? I like them myself. Many men come in here, to take things from me, but they find that title is vested in the Lord Jestocost, and they must do strange things to obtain my trifles."

"Are all these things genuine?" asked Rod, thinking that even Old North Australia could not buy out this shop if they were.

"Certainly not," said the old man. "Most of them are forgeries - wonderful forgeries. The Instrumentality lets me go to the robot-pits where insane or worn-out robots are destroyed. I can have my pick of them if they are not dangerous. I put them to work making copies of anything which I find in the museums."

"Those Cape triangles?" said Rod. "Are they real?"

"Cape triangles? You mean the letter stickers. They are genuine, all right, but they are not mine. Those are on loan from the Earth Museum until I can get them copied."

"I will buy them," said Rod.

"You will not," said the Cattnaster. "They are not for sale."

"Then I will buy Earth and you and them too," said Rod.

"Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan to-the-one-hundred-and-fifty-first, you will not."

"Who are you to tell me?"

"I have looked at one person and I have talked to two others."

"All right," said Rod. "Who?"

"I looked at the other Rod McBan, your workwoman Eleanor. She is a little mixed up about having a young man's body, because she is very drunk in the home of the Lord William Not-from-here and a beautiful young woman named Ruth Not-from-here is trying to make Eleanor marry her. She has no idea that she is dealing with another woman and Eleanor, in her copy of your proper body, is finding the experience exciting, but terribly confusing. No harm will come of it, and your Eleanor is perfectly safe. Half the rascals of Earth have converged on the Lord William's house, but he has a whole battalion from the Defense Fleet on loan around the place, so nothing is going to happen, except that Eleanor will have a headache and Ruth will have a disappointment."

Rod smiled, "You couldn't have told me anything better. Who else did you talk to?"

"The Lord Jestocost and John Fisher to-the-hundredth."

"Mister and owner Fisher? He's here?"

"He's at his home. Station of the Good Fresh Joey. I asked him if you could have your heart's desire. After a little while, he and somebody named doctor Wentworth said that the Commonwealth of Old North Australia would approve it."

"How did you ever pay for such a call?" cried Rod. "Those things are frightfully expensive."

"I didn't pay for it, mister and owner. You did. I charged it to your account, by the authority of your trustee, the Lord Jestocost. He and his forefathers have been my patrons for four hundred and twenty-six years."

"You've got your nerve," said Rod, "spending my money when I was right here and not even asking me!"

"You are an adult for some purposes and a minor for other purposes. I am offering you the skills which keep me alive. Do you think any ordinary cat-man would be allowed to live as long as this?"

"No," said Rod. "Give me those stamps and let me go."

The Catmaster looked at him levelly. Once again there was the *personal* look on his face, which in Norstrilia would have been taken as an unpardonable affront; but along with the nosiness, there was an air of confidence and kindness which put Rod a little in awe of the man, underperson though he was. "Do you think that you could love these stamps when you get back home? Could they talk to you? Could they make you like yourself? Those pieces of paper are not your heart's desire. Something else is."

"What?" said Rod, truculently.

"In a bit, I'll explain. First, you cannot kill me. Second, you cannot hurt me. Third, if I kill you, it will be all for your own good. Fourth, if you get out of here, you will be a very happy man."

"Are you barmy, mister?", cried Rod. "I can knock you flat and walk out that door. I don't know what you are talking about."

"Try it," said the Catmaster levelly.

Rod looked at the tall withered old man with the bright eyes. He looked at the door, a mere seven or eight meters away. He did not want to try it.

"All right," he conceded, "play your pitch."

"I am a clinical psychologist. The only one on Earth and probably the only one on any planet. I got my knowledge from some ancient books when I was a kitten, being changed into a young man. I change people just a little, little bit. You know that the Instrumentality has surgeons and brain experts and all sorts of doctors. They can do almost anything with personality - anything but the light stuff.... *That*, I do."

"I don't get it," said Rod.

"Would you go to a brain surgeon to get a haircut? Would you need a dermatologist to give you a bath? Of course not. I don't do heavy work. I just change people a little bit. It makes them happy. If I can't do anything with them, I give souvenirs from this junkpile out here. The real work is in there. That's where you're going, pretty soon." He nodded his head at the door marked, HATE HALL.

Rod cried out, "I've been taking orders from one stranger after another, all these long weeks since my computers and I made that money! Can't I ever do anything myself?"

The Catmaster looked at him with sympathy. "None of us can. We may think that we are free. Our lives are made for us by the people we happen to know, the places we happen to be, the jobs or hobbies which we happen to run across. Will I be dead a year from now? I don't know. Will you be back in Old North Australia a year from now, still only seventeen, but rich and wise and on your way to happiness? I don't know. You've had a ran of good luck. Look at it that way. It's luck. And I'm part of the luck. If you get killed here, it will not be my doing but just the overstrain of your body against the devices which the Lady Goroke approved a long time ago - devices which the Lord Jestocost reports to the underman in the universe who is entitled to process real people in any way whatever without having direct human supervision. All I do is to develop people, like an Ancient Man developing a photograph from a piece of paper exposed to different grades of light. I'm not a hidden judge, like your men in the Garden of Death. It's going to be you against you, with me just helping, and when you come out you're going to be a different you - the same you, but a little better there, a little more flexible here. As a matter of fact, that cat-type body you're wearing is going to make your contest with yourself a little harder for me to manage. We'll do it, Rod. Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"For the tests and changes there." The Catmaster nodded at the door marked HATE HALL.

"I suppose so," said Rod. "I don't have much choice."

"No," said the Catmaster, sympathetically and almost sadly, "not at this point, you don't. If you walk out that door, you're an illegal cat-man, in immediate danger of being buzzed down by the robot police."



"Please," said Rod, "win or fail, can I have one of these Cape triangles?"

The Catmaster smiled. "I promise you - if you want one, you shall have it." He waved at the door: "Go on in."

Rod was not a coward, but it was with feet and legs of lead that he walked to the door. It opened by itself. He walked in, steady but afraid.

The room was dark with a darkness deeper than mere black. It was the dark of blindness, the expanse of cheek where no eye has ever been.

The door closed behind him and he swam in the dark, so tangible had the darkness become.

He felt blind. He felt as though he had never seen.

But he could hear.

He heard his own blood pulsing through his head.

He could smell - indeed, he was good at smelling. And this air - this air - this air smelled of the open night on the dry plains of Old North Australia.

The smell made him feel little and afraid. It reminded him of his repeated childhoods, of the artificial drownings in the laboratories where he had gone to be reborn from one childhood to another.

He reached out his hands.

Nothing.

He jumped gently. No ceiling.

Using a fieldsman's trick familiar for times of dust storms, he dropped lightly to his hands and feet. He scuttled crabwise on two feet and one hand, using the other hand as a shield to protect his face. In a very few meters he found the wall. He followed the wall around.

Circular.

This was the door.

Follow again.

With more confidence, he moved fast - around, around, around. He could not tell whether the floor was asphalt or some kind of rough worn tile.

Door again.

A voice spieked to him.

Spieked! *And he heard it.*

He looked upward into the nothing which was bleaker than blindness, almost expecting to see the words in letters of fire, so clear had they been.

The voice was Nostrilian and it said.

*Rod McBan is a man, man, man.*

*But what is man?*

*(Immediate percussion of crazy, sad laughter.)*

Rod never noticed that he reverted to the habits of babyhood. He sat flat on his rump, legs spread out in front of him at a 90° angle. He put his hands a little behind him and leaned back, letting the weight of his body push his shoulders a little bit upward. He knew the ideas that would follow the words, but he never knew why he so readily expected them.

Light formed in the room, as he had been sure it would.

The images were little, but they looked real.

Men and women and children, children and women and men marched into his vision and out again.

They were not freaks; they were not beasts; they were not alien monstrosities begotten in some outside universe; they were not robots; they were not underpeople - they were all hominoids like himself, kinsmen in the Earthborn races of men.

First came people like Old North Australians and Earth people, very much alike, and both similar to the ancient types, except that Norstrilians were pale beneath their tanned skins, bigger, and more robust.

Then came Daimoni, white-eyed pale giants with a magical assurance, whose very babies walked as though they had already been given ballet lessons.

Then heavy men, fathers, mothers, infants swimming on the solid ground from which they would never arise.

Then rainmen from Amazonas Triste, their skins hanging in enormous folds around them, so that they looked like bundles of wet rags wrapped around monkeys.

Blind men from Olympia, staring fiercely at the world through the radars mounted on their foreheads.

Bloated monster-men from abandoned planets - people as bad off as his own race had been after escaping from Paradise VII.

And still more races.

People he had never heard of.

Men with shells.

Men and women so thin that they looked like insects.

A race of smiling, foolish giants, lost in the irreparable hebephrenia of their world. (Rod had the feeling that they were shepherded by a race of devoted dogs, more intelligent than themselves, who cajoled them into breeding, begged them to eat, led them to sleep. He saw no dogs, only the smiling unfocused fools, but the feeling *dog, good dog!* was somehow very near.)

A funny little people who pranced with an indefinable deformity of gait.

Water-people, the clean water of some unidentified world pulsing through their gills.

And then -

More people, still, but hostile ones. Lipsticked hermaphrodites with enormous beards and fluting voices. Carcinomas which had taken over men. Giants rooted in the earth. Human bodies crawling and weeping as they crawled through wet grass - contaminated somehow and looking for more people to infect.

Rod did not know it, but he growled.

He jumped into a squatting position and swept his hands across the rough floor, looking for a weapon.

These were not men - they were enemies!

Still they came. People who had lost eyes, or who had grown fire-resistant, the wrecks and residues of abandoned settlements and forgotten colonies. The waste and spoilage of the human race.

And then -

Him.

Himself.

The child Rod McBan.

And voices, Norstrilian voices calling: "He can't hier. He can't spiek. He's a freak. He's a freak. He can't hier. He can't spiek."

And another voice: "His poor parents!"

The child Rod disappeared and there were his parents again. Twelve times taller than life, so high that he had to peer up into the black absorptive ceiling to see the underside of their faces.

The mother wept.

The father sounded stern.

The father was saying, "It's no use. Doris can watch him while we're gone, but if he isn't any better we'll turn him in."

The calm, loving, horrible voice of the man, "Darling, spiek to him yourself. He'll never hier. Can that be a Rod McBan?"

Then the woman's voice, sweet-poisonous and worse than death, sobbing agreement with her man against her son.

"I don't know, Rod. I don't know. Just don't tell me about it."

He *had* hiered them, in one of his moments of wild penetrating hiering when everything telepathic came in with startling clarity. He had hiered them when he was a baby.

The real Rod in the dark room, let out a roar of fear, desolation, loneliness, rage, hate. This was the telepathic bomb with which he had so often startled or alarmed the neighbors, the mind-shock with which he had killed the giant spider in the tower of Earthport far above him.

But this time, the room was closed.

His mind roared back at itself.

Rage, loudness, hate, raw noise poured into him from the floor, the circular wall, the high ceiling.

He cringed beneath it and as he cringed, the sizes of the images changed. His parents sat in chairs, chairs. They were little, little. He was an almighty baby, so enormous that he could scoop them up with his right hand.

He reached to crush the tiny loathsome parents who had said, "Let him die."

He reached to crush them, but they faded first.

Their faces turned frightened. They looked wildly around. Their chairs dissolved, the fabric falling to the floor which in turn looked like storm-eroded cloth. They turned for a last kiss and had no lips. They reached to hug each other and their arms fell off. Their space-ship had gone milky in mid-trip, dissolving into traceless nothing. And he, he, he himself had seen it!

The rage was followed by tears, by a guilt too deep for regret, by a self-accusation so raw and wet that it lived like one more organ inside his living body.

He wanted nothing.

No money, no stroon, no Station of Doom. He wanted no friends, no companionship, no welcome, no house, no food. He wanted no walks, no solitary discoveries in the field, no friendly sheep, no treasures in the gap, no computer, no day, no night, no life.

He wanted nothing, and he could not understand death.

The enormous room lost all light, all sound, and he did not notice it. His own naked life lay before him like a freshly dissected cadaver. It lay there and it made no sense. There had been many Roderick Frederick Ronald Amold William MacArthur McBans, one hundred and fifty of them in a row, but he - 151! 151! 151! - was not one of them, not a giant who had wrestled treasure from the sick earth and hidden sunshine of the Norstrilian plains. It wasn't his telepathic deformity, his spieklessness, his brain deafness to hiering. It was himself, the "Me-subtile" inside him, which was wrong, all wrong. He was the baby worth killing, who had killed instead. He had hated mama and papa for their pride and their hate: when he hated them, they crumpled and died out in the mystery of space, so that they did not even leave bodies to bury.

Rod stood to his feet. His hands were wet. He touched his face and he realized that he had been weeping with his face cupped in his hands.

Wait.

There was something.

There was one thing he wanted. He wanted Houghton Syme - the Onseck, the man who had tried to get him condemned to the Garden of Death, who had tried to kill him outright, who had, in a way, driven him to riches and to Old Earth - not to hate him. Houghton Syme could hier and spiek, but he was a shortie, living with the sickness of death lying between himself and every girl, every friend, every job he had met. And he, Rod, had mocked that man, calling him Old Hot and Simple. Rod might be worthless but he was not as bad off as Houghton Syme, the Hon. Sec. Houghton Syme was at least trying to be a man, to live his miserable scrap of life, and all Rod had ever done was to flaunt his wealth and near-immortality before the poor cripple who had just one hundred and sixty years to live. Rod wanted only one thing - to get back to North Australia in time to help Houghton Syme, to let Houghton Syme know that the guilt was his, Rod's, and not Syme's. The Onseck had a bit of a life and he deserved the best of it.

Rod stood there, expecting nothing.

He had forgiven his last enemy.

He had forgiven himself.

The door opened very matter-of-factly and there stood the Catmaster, a quiet wise smile upon his face.

"You can come out now, Mister and Owner McBan, and if there is anything in this outer room which you want, you may certainly have it."

Rod walked out slowly. He had no idea how long he had been in HATE HALL.

When he emerged, the door closed behind him.

"No, thanks, cobber. It's mighty friendly of you, but I don't need anything much, and I'd better be getting back to my own planet."

"Nothing?" said the Catmaster, still smiling very attentively and very quietly.

"I'd like to hier and spiek, but it's not very important."

"This is for you," said the Catmaster. "You put it in your ear and leave it there. If it itches or gets dirty, you take it out, wash it, and put it back in. It's not a rare device, but apparently you don't have them on your planet." He held out an object no larger than the kernel of a ground-nut.

Rod took it absently and was ready to put it into his pocket, not into his ear, when he saw that the smiling attentive face was watching, very gently but very alertly. He put the device into his ear. It felt a little cold.

"I will now," said the Catmaster, "take you to C'mell, who will lead you to your friends in Downdeep-downdeep. You had better take this blue two-penny Cape of Good Hope postage stamp with you. I will report to Jestocost that it was lost while I attempted to copy it. That is slightly true, isn't it?"

Rod started to thank him absent-mindedly and then -

Then, with a thrill which sent gooseflesh all over his neck, back and arms, he realized that the Catmaster had not moved his lips in the slightest, had not pushed air through his throat, had not disturbed the air with the pressure of noise. The Catmaster had spieked to Rod and Rod had hiered him.

Thinking very carefully and very clearly, but closing his lips and making no sound whatever, Rod thought, Worthy and gracious Catmaster, I thank you for the ancient treasure of the old Earth stamp. I thank you even more for the hiering-spieking device which I am now testing. Will you please extend your right hand to shake hands with me, if you can actually hier me now?

The Catmaster stepped forward and extended his hand.

Man and underman, they faced each other with a kindness and gratitude which was so poignant as to be very close to grief.

Neither of them wept. Neither.

They shook hands without speaking or spieking.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: EVERYBODY'S FOND OF MONEY**

WHILE ROD MCBAN WAS going through his private ordeal at the Department Store of Hearts' Desires, other people continued to be concerned with him and his fate.

### **A Crime of Public Opinion**

A middle-aged woman, with a dress which did not suit her, sat uninvited at the table of Paul, a real man once acquainted with C'mell.

Paul paid no attention to her. Eccentricities were multiplying among people these days. Being middle-aged was a matter of taste, and many human beings, after the Rediscovery of Man, found that if they let themselves become imperfect, it was a more comfortable way to live than the old way - the old way consisting of aging minds dwelling in bodies condemned to the perpetual perfection of youth.

"I had flu," said the woman. "Have you ever had flu?"

"No," said Paul, not very much interested.

"Are you reading a newspaper?" She looked at his newspaper, which had everything except news in it.

Paul, with the paper in front of him, admitted that he was reading it.

"Do you like coffee?" said the woman, looking at Paul's cup of fresh coffee in front of him.

"Why would I order it if I didn't?" said Paul brusquely, wondering how the woman had ever managed to find so unattractive a material for her dress. It was yellow sun-flowers on an off-red background.

The woman was baffled, but only for a moment.

"I'm wearing a girdle," she said. "They just came on sale last week. They're very, very ancient, and very authentic. Now that people can be fat if they want to, girdles are the rage. They have spats for men, too, have you bought your spats yet?"

"No," said Paul, flatly, wondering if he should leave his coffee and newspaper.

"What are you going to do about that man?"

"What man?" said Paul, politely and wearily.

"The man who's bought the Earth."

"Did he?" said Paul.

"Of course," said the woman. "Now he has more power than the Instrumentality. He could do anything he wants. He can give us anything we want. If he wanted to, he could give me a thousand-year trip around the universe."

"Are you an official?" said Paul sharply.

"No," said the woman, taken a little aback.

"Then how do you know these things?"

"*Everybody* knows them. *Everybody*." She spoke firmly and pursed her mouth at the end of the sentence.

"What are you going to do about this man? Rob him? Seduce him?" Paul was sardonic. He had an unhappy love affair which he still remembered, a climb to the Abba-dingo over Alpha Ralpa Boulevard which he would never repeat, and very little patience with fools who had never dared and never suffered anything.

The woman flushed with anger. "We're all going to his hostel at twelve today. We're going to shout and shout until he comes out. Then we're going to form a line and make him listen to what each one of us wants."

Paul spoke sharply: "Who organized this?"

"I don't know. Somebody."

Paul spoke solemnly. "You're a human being. You have been trained. What is the Twelfth Rule?"

The woman turned a little pale but she chanted, as if by rote: "'Any man or woman who finds that he or she forms and shares an unauthorized opinion with a large number of other people shall report immediately for therapy to the nearest subchief.' But that doesn't mean me?..."

"You'll be dead or scrubbed by tonight, madam. Now go away and let me read my paper."

The woman glared at him, between anger and tears. Gradually fear came over her features. "Do you really think what I was saying is unlawful?"

"Completely," said Paul.

She put her pudgy hands over her face and sobbed. "Sir, sir, can you - can you please help me find a subchief? I'm afraid I do need help. But I've dreamed so much, I've hoped so much - a man from the stars. But you're right, sir. I don't want to die or get blanked out. Sir, please help me!"

Moved by both impatience and compassion, Paul left his paper and his coffee. The robot waiter hurried up to remind him that he had not paid. Paul walked over to the sidewalk where there were two barrels full of money for people who wished to play the games of ancient civilization. He selected the biggest bill he could see, gave it to the waiter, waited for his change, gave the waiter a tip, received thanks, and threw the change, which was all coins, into the barrel full of metal money. The woman had waited for him patiently, her blotched face sad.

When he offered her his arm, in the old-French manner, she took it. They walked a hundred meters, more or less, to a public visiphone. She half-cried, half-mumbled as she walked along beside him, with her uncomfortable, ancient spiked-heel feminine shoes:

"I used to have four hundred years. I used to be slim and beautiful. I liked to make love and I didn't think very much about things, because I wasn't very bright. I had had a lot of husbands. Then this change came along, and I felt useless, and I decided to be what I felt like - fat, and

sloppy and middle-aged and bored. And I have succeeded too much, just the way two of my husbands said. And that man from the stars, he has all power. He can change things."

Paul did not answer her, except to nod sympathetically.

He stood at the visiphone until a robot appeared. "A subchief," he said. "Any subchief."

The image blurred and the face of a very young man appeared. He stared earnestly and intently while Paul recited his number, grade, neonational assignment, quarters number and business. He had to state the business twice, "Criminal public opinion."

The subchief snapped, not unpleasantly, "Come on in, then, and we'll fix you up."

Paul was so annoyed at the idea that *he* would be suspected of criminal public opinion, "any opinion shared with a large number of other people, other than material released and approved by the Instrumentality and the Earth government," that he began to spiek his protest into the machine.

"Vocalize, man and citizen! These machines *don't* carry telepathy."

When Paul got through explaining, the youngster in uniform looked at him critically but pleasantly, saying, "Citizen, you've forgotten something yourself."

"He?" gasped Paul. "I've done nothing. This woman just sat down beside me and -"

"Citizen," said the subchief, "what is the last half of the Fifth Rule for All Men?"

Paul thought a moment and then answered, "The services of every person shall be available, without delay and without charge, to any other true human being who encounters danger or distress." Then his own eyes widened and he said, "You want me to do this myself?"

"What do you think?" said the subchief.

"I can," said Paul.

"Of course," said the subchief. "You are normal. You remember the braingrips."

Paul nodded.

The subchief waved at him and the image faded from the screen.

The woman had seen it all. She, too, was prepared. When Paul lifted his hands for the traditional hypnotic gestures, she locked her eyes upon his hands. She made the responses as they were needed. When he had brainscrubbed her right there in the open street, she shambled off down the walkway, not knowing why tears poured down her cheeks. She did not remember Paul at all.

For a moment of crazy whimsy, Paul thought of going across the city and having a look at the wonderful man from the stars. He stared around absently, thinking. His eye caught the high thread of Alpha Ralpha Boulevard, soaring unsupported across the heavens from faraway ground to the mid-height of Earthport: he remembered himself and his own personal troubles. He went back to his newspaper and a fresh cup of coffee, helping himself to money from the barrel, this time, before he entered the restaurant.

### **On a yacht off Meeva Meefia**

Ruth yawned as she sat up and looked at the ocean. She had done her best with the rich young man.



The false Rod McBan, actually a reconstructed Eleanor, said to her, "This is right nice."

Ruth smiled languidly and seductively. She did not know why Eleanor laughed out loud.

The Lord William Not-from-here came up from below the deck. He carried two silver mugs in his hands. They were frosted.

"I am glad," said he unctuously, "that you young people are happy. These are mint juleps, a very ancient drink indeed."

He watched as Eleanor sipped hers and then smiled.

He smiled too. "You like it?"

Eleanor smiled right back at him. "Beats washing dishes, it does?" said "Rod McBan" enigmatically.

The Lord William began to think that the rich young man was odd indeed.

### **Antechamber of the Bell and Bank**

The Lord Crudelta commanded, "Send Jestocost here!"

The Lord Jestocost was already entering the room.

"What's happened on that case of the young man?"

"Nothing, Sir and Senior."

"Tush. Bosh. Nonsense. Rot." The old man snorted. "Nothing is something that doesn't happen at all. He has to be somewhere."

"The original is with the Catmaster, at the Department Store."

"Is that safe?" said the Lord Crudelta. "He might get to be too smart for us to manage. You're working some scheme again, Jestocost."

"Nothing but what I told you, Sir and Senior."

The old man frowned. "That's right. You *did* tell me. Proceed. But the others?"

"Who?"

"The decoys?"

The Lord Jestocost laughed aloud. "Our colleague, the Lord William, has almost betrothed his daughter to Mister McBan's workman, who is temporarily a 'Rod McBan' herself. All parties are having fun with no harm done. The robots, the eight survivors, are going around Earthport city. They are enjoying themselves as much as robots ever do. Crowds are gathering and asking for miracles. Pretty harmless."

"And the Earth economy? Is it getting out of balance?"

"I've set the computers to work," said the Lord Jestocost, "finding every tax penalty that we ever imposed on anybody. We're several megacredits ahead."

"You're not going to ruin him?" said Crudelta.

"Not at all, Sir and Senior," cried the Lord Jestocost. "I am a kind man."

The old man gave him a low dirty smile. "I've seen your kindness before, Jestocost, and I would rather have a thousand worlds for an enemy than have you be my friend! You're devious, you're dangerous, and you are tricky."

Jestocost, much flattered by this comment, said formally, "You do an honest official a great injustice, sir and senior."

The two men just smiled at each other: they knew each other well.

### **Ten kilometers below the surface of the Earth**

The E-telekeli stood from the lectern at which he had been praying.

Its daughter was watching him immovably from the doorway.

He spieked to her, What's wrong, my girl?

I saw his mind, father, I saw it for just a moment as he left the Catmaster's place. He's a rich young man from the stars, he's a nice young man, he has bought Earth, but he is not the man of the Promise.

You expected too much, E-lamelanie, said her father.

I expected hope, she spieked to him. Is hope a crime among us underpeople? What Joan foresaw, what the Copt promised - where are they, father? Shall we never see daylight or know freedom?

True men are not free either, spieked the E-telekeli. They too have grief, fear, birth, old age, love, death, suffering and the tools of their own ruin. Freedom is not something which is going to be given us by a wonderful man beyond the stars. Freedom is what you do, my dear, and what I do. Death is a very private affair, my daughter, and life - when you get to it - is almost as private.

I know father, she spieked. I know. I know. I know. (But he didn't.)

You may not know it, my darling, spieked the great bird-man, but long before these new people built cities, there were others in the Earth - the ones who came after the Ancient World fell. They went far beyond the limitations of the human form. They conquered death. They did not have sickness. They did not need love. They sought to be abstractions lying outside of time. And they died, E-lamelanie - they died terribly. Some became monsters, preying on the remnants of true men for reasons which ordinary men could not even begin to understand. Others were like oysters, wrapped up in their own sainthood. They had all forgotten that humanness is itself imperfection and corruption, that what is perfect is no longer understandable. We have the Fragments of the Word, and we are truer to the deep traditions of people than people themselves are, but we must never be foolish enough to look for perfection in this life or to count on our own powers to make us really different from what we are. You and I are animals, darling, not even real people, but people do not understand the teaching of Joan, that *whatever seems human is human*. It is the word which quickens, not the shape of the blood or the texture of flesh or hair or feathers. And there is that power which you and I do not name, but which we love and cherish because we need it more than do the people on the surface. Great beliefs always come out of the sewers of cities, not off the rooftops or the ziggurats. Furthermore, we are discarded animals, not used ones. All of us down here are the rubbish which mankind has thrown away and has forgotten. We have a great advantage in this, because we know from the very beginning of our lives that we are worthless. And why are we

worthless? Because a higher standard and a higher truth says that we are - the conventional law and the unwritten customs of mankind. But I feel love for you, my daughter, and you have love for me. We know that everything which loves has a value in itself, and that therefore this worthlessness of underpeople is wrong. We are forced to look beyond the minute and the hour to the place where no clocks work and no day dawns. There is a world outside of time, and it is to that which we appeal. I know that you have a love for the devotional life, my child, and I commend you for it, but it would be a sorry faith which waited for passing travelers or which believed that a miracle or two could set the nature of things right and whole. The people on the surface think they have gone beyond the old problems, because they do not have buildings which they call churches or temples, and they do not have professional religious men within their communities. But the higher power and the large problems still wait for all men, whether men like it or not. Today, the Believers among mankind are a ridiculous hobby, tolerated by the Instrumentality because they are unimportant and weak, but mankind has moments of enormous passion which will come again and in which we will share. So don't you wait for your hero beyond the stars. If you have a good devotional life within you, it is already here, waiting to be watered by your tears and ploughed up by your hard, clear thoughts. And if you don't have a devotional life, there are good lives outside.

Look at your brother, E-ikasus, who is now resuming his normal shape. He let me put him in animal form and send him out among the stars. He took risks without committing the impudence of enjoying risk. It is not necessary to do your duty joyfully - just to do it. Now he has homed to the old lair and I know he brings us good luck in many little things, perhaps in big things. Do you understand, my daughter?

She said that she did, but there was still a wild blank disappointed look in her eyes as she said it.

### **A Police-post on the surface, near Earthport**

"The robot sergeant says he can do no more without violating the rule against hurting human beings." The subchief looked at his chief, licking his chops for a chance to get out of the office and to wander among the vexations of the city. He was tired of viewscreens, computers, buttons, cards, and routines. He wanted raw life and high adventure.

"Which off-worlder is this?"

"Tostig Amaral, from the planet of Amazonas Triste. He has to stay wet all the time. He is just a licensed trader, not an honored guest of the Instrumentality. He was assigned a girlygirl and now he thinks she belongs to him."

"Send the girlygirl to him. What is she, mouse-derived?"

"No, a c'girl. Her name is C'mell and she has been requisitioned by the Lord Jestocost."

"I know all about that," said the chief, wishing that he really did. "She's now assigned to that Old North Australian who has bought most of this planet, Earth."

"But this hominoid wants her, just the same!" The subchief was urgent.

"He can't have her, not if a Lord of the Instrumentality interrupts his services."

"He is threatening to fight. He says he will kill people."

"Hmm. Is he in a room?"

"Yes, sir and chief."

"With standard outlets?"

"I'll look, sir." The subchief twisted a knob and an electronic design appeared on the left-hand screen in front of him. "Yes, sir, that's it."

"Let's have a look at him."

"He got permission, sir, to run the fire sprinkler system all the time. It seems he comes from a rainworld."

"Try, anyhow."

"Yes, sir." The subchief whistled a call to the board. The picture dissolved, whirled and resolved itself into the image of a dark room. There seemed to be a bundle of wet rags in one corner, out of which a well-shaped human hand protruded.

"Nasty type," said the chief, "and probably poisonous. Knock him out for exactly one hour. We'll be getting orders meanwhile."

### **On an Earth-level street under Earthport**

Two girls talking:

"... and I will tell you the biggest secret in the whole world, if you will never, never tell anyone."

"I'll bet it's not much of a secret. You don't have to tell me."

"I'll never tell you, then. Never."

"Suit yourself."

"Really, if you even suspected it, you would be mad with curiosity."

"If you want to tell me, you can tell me."

"But it's a *secret*."

"All right, I'll never tell anybody."

"That man from the stars. He's going to marry me."

"*You*? That's ridiculous."

"Why is it so ridiculous? He's bought my dower right already."

"I know it's ridiculous. There's something wrong."

"I don't see why you should think he doesn't like me if he has already bought my dower rights."

"Fool! I know it's ridiculous, because he has bought mine."

"*Yours*?"

"Yes."

"Both of us?"

"What for?"

"Search me."

"Maybe he is going to put us both in the same harem. Wouldn't that be romantic?"

"They don't have harems in Old North Australia. All they do is live like prudish old farmers and raise stroon and murder anybody at all that even gets near them."

"That sounds bad."

"Let's go to the police."

"You know, he's hurt our feelings. Maybe we can make him pay extra for buying our dower rights if he doesn't mean to use them."

### **In front of a café**

A man, drunk:

"I will get drunk every night and I will have musicians to play me to sleep and I will have all the money I need and it won't be that play money out of a barrel, but it will be real money registered in the computer and I will make everybody do what I say and I know he will do it for me because my mother was named MacArthur in her genetic code before everybody got numbers and you have no call to laugh at me because his name really is MacArthur McBan the eleventh and I am probably the closest friend and relative he has on earth...."

## CHAPTER SIX: TOSTIG AMARAL

ROD MCBAN LEFT THE Department Store of Hearts' Desires simply, humbly; he carried a package of books, wrapped in dustproofing paper, and he looked like any other first-class cat-man messenger. The human beings in the market were still making their uproar, their smells of foods, spices, and odd objects, but he walked so calmly and so straightforwardly through their scattered groups that even the robot police, weapons on the buzz, paid no attention to him.

When he had come across the Thieves' Market, going the other way with C'mell and A'gentur, he had been ill-at-ease. As a Mister-and-Owner from Old North Australia, he had been compelled to keep his external dignity, but he had not felt ease within his heart. These people were strange, his destination had been unfamiliar, and the problems and wealth and survival lay heavy upon him.

Now, it was all different. Cat-man he might still be on the outside, but on the inside he once again felt his proper pride of home and planet.

And more.

He felt calm, down to the very tips of his nerve endings.

The hiering-spieking device should have alerted him, excited him: it did not. As he walked through the market, he noticed that very few of the Earth people were communicating with one another telepathically. They preferred to babble in their loud airborne language, of which they had not one but many kinds, with the Old Common Tongue serving as a referent for those who had been endued with different kinds of ancient language by the processes of the Rediscovery of Man. He even heard Ancient English, the Queen's Own Language, sounding remarkably close to his own spoken language of Norstrilian. These things caused neither stimulation nor excitement, not even pity. He had his own problems, but they were no longer the problems of wealth or of survival. Somehow he had confidence that a hidden, friendly power in the universe would take care of him, if he took care of others. He wanted to get Eleanor out of trouble, to disembarass the Hon.Sec., to see Lavinia, to reassure Doris, to say a good good-bye to C'mell, to get back to his sheep, to protect his computer, and to keep the Lord Redlady away from his bad habit of killing other people lawfully on too slight an occasion for manslaughter.

One of the robot police, a little more perceptive than the others, watched this cat-man who walked with extra-natural assurance through the crowds of men, but "C'roderick" did nothing but enter the market from one side, thread his way through it, and leave at the other side, still carrying his package; the robot turned away: his dreadful, milky eyes, always ready for disorder and death, scanned the market-place again and again with fatigue-free vigilance.

Rod went down the ramp and turned right.

There was the underpeople's commissary with the bear-man cashier. The cashier remembered him.

"It's been a long day, cat-sir, since I saw you. Would you like another special order of fish?"

"Where's my girl?" said Rod bluntly.

"C'mell?" said the bear-cashier. "She waited here a long time, but then she went on and she left this message, 'Tell my man C'rod that he should eat before following me, but that when he has eaten he can either follow me by going to Upshaft Four, Ground Level, Hostel of the Singing Birds, Room Nine, where I am taking care of an off-world visitor, or he can send a robot to me and I will come to him.' Don't you think, cat-sir, that I've done well, remembering so complicated a message?" The bear-man flushed a little and the edge went off his pride as he confessed, for the sake of some abstract honesty, "Of course, that address part, I wrote that down. It would be very bad and very confusing if I sent you to the wrong address in people's country. Somebody might burn you down if you came into an unauthorized corridor."

"Fish, then," said Rod. "A fish dinner, please."

He wondered why C'mell, with his life in the balance, would go off to another visitor. Even as he thought this, he detected the mean jealousy behind it, and he confessed to himself that he had no idea of the terms, conditions, or hours or work required in the girlygirl business.

He sat dully on the bench, waiting for his food.

The uproar Of HATE HALL was still in his mind, the pathos of his parents, those dying dissolving manikins, was brought within his heart, and his body throbbed with the fatigue of the ordeal.

Idly he asked the bear-cashier, "How long has it been since I was here?"

The bear-cashier looked at the clock on the wall, "About fourteen hours, worthy cat."

"How long is that in real time?" Rod was trying to compare Norstrilian hours with Earth hours. He thought that Earth hours were one-seventh shorter, but he was not sure.

The bear-man was completely baffled, "If you mean galactic navigation time, dear guest, we never use that down here anyhow. Are there any other kinds of time?"

Rod realized his mistake and tried to correct it. "It doesn't matter. I am thirsty. What is lawful for underpeople to drink? I am tired and thirsty, both, but I have no desire to become the least bit drunk."

"Since you are a c'man," said the bear-cashier, "I recommend strong black coffee mixed with sweet whipped cream."

"I have no money," said Rod.

"The famous cat-madame, C'mell your consort, has guaranteed payment for anything at all that you order."

"Go ahead, then."

The bear-man called a robot over and gave him the orders.

Rod stared at the wall, wondering what he was going to do with this Earth he had bought. He wasn't thinking very hard, just musing idly. A voice cut directly into his mind. He realized that the bear-man was spieking to him and that he could hier it.

"You are not an underman, sir and master."

"What?" spieked Rod.

"You heard me," said the telepathic voice. "I am not going to repeat it. If you come in the sign of the Fish, may blessings be upon you."

"I don't know that sign," said Rod.

"Then," spieked the bear-man, "no matter who you are, may you eat and drink in peace because you are a friend of C'mell and you are under the protection of the One Who Lives in Downdeep."

"I don't know," spieked Rod, "I just don't know, but I thank you for your welcome, friend."

"I do not give such welcomes lightly," said the bear-man, "and ordinarily I would be ready to run away from anything as strange and dangerous and unexplained as yourself, but you bring with you the quality of peace, which made me think that you might travel in the fellowship of the sign of the Fish. I have heard that in that sign, people and underpeople remember the blessed Joan and mingle in complete comradeship."

"No," said Rod, "no. I travel alone."

His food and drink came. He consumed them quietly. The bear-cashier had given him a table and bench far from the serving tables and away from the other underpeople who dropped in, interrupting their talks, eating in a hurry so that they could get back in a hurry. He saw one wolf-man, wearing the insigne of Auxiliary Police, who came to the wall, forced his identity-card into a slot, opened his mouth, bolted down five large chunks of red, raw meat and left the commissary, all in less than one and one-half minutes. Rod was amazed, but not impressed. He had too much on his mind.

At the desk he confirmed the address which C'mell had left, offered the bear-man a handshake, and went along to Upshaft Four. He still looked like a c'man and he carried his package alertly and humbly, as he had seen other underpeople behave in the presence of real persons.

He almost met death on the way. Upshaft Four was one-directional and was plainly marked, "People Only." Rod did not like the looks of it, as long as he moved in a cat-man body, but he did not think that C'mell would give him directions wrongly or lightly. (Later, he found that she had forgotten the phrase, "Special business under the protection of Jestocost, a Chief of the Instrumentality," if he were to be challenged; but he did not know the phrase.)

An arrogant human man, wearing a billowing red cloak, looked at him sharply as he took a belt, hooked it and stepped into the shaft. When Rod stepped free, he and the man were on a level.

Rod tried to look like a humble, modest messenger, but the strange voice grated his ears:

"Just what do you think you are doing? This is a human shaft."

Rod pretended that he did not know it was himself whom the red-cloaked man was addressing. He continued to float quietly upward, his magnet-belt tugging uncomfortably at his waist.

A pain in the ribs made him turn suddenly, almost losing his balance in the belt.

"Animal!" cried the man, "Speak up or die."



Still holding his package of books, Rod said mildly, "I'm on an errand and I was told to go this way."

The man's senseless hostility gave caliber to his voice: "And who told you?"

"C'mell," said Rod absently.

The man and his companions laughed at that, and for some reason their laughter had no humor in it, just savagery, cruelty, and - way down underneath - something of fear. "Listen to that," said the man in a red cloak, "one animal says another animal told it to do something." He whipped out a knife.

"What are you doing?" cried Rod.

"Just cutting your belt," said the man. "There's nobody at all below us and you will make a nice red blob at the bottom of the shaft, cat-man. That ought to teach you which shaft to use."

The man actually reached over and seized Rod's belt.

He lifted the knife to slash.

Rod became frightened and angry. His brain ran red.

He spat thoughts at them -

pommy!

shortie!

Earthie

red dirty blue stinking little man,

die, puke, burst, blaze, die!

It all came out in a single flash, faster than he could control it. The red-cloaked man twisted oddly, as if in spasm. His two companions threshed in their belts. They turned slowly.

High above them, two women began screaming.

Further up a man was shouting, both with his voice and with his mind, "Police! Help! Police! Police! Brainbomb! Brainbomb! Help!"

The effort of his telepathic explosion left Rod feeling disoriented and weak. He shook his head and blinked his eyes. He started to wipe his face, only to hit himself on the jaw with the package of books, which he still carried. This aroused him a little. He looked at the three men. Red-cloak was dead, his head at an odd angle. The other two seemed to be dead. One was floating upside down, his rump pointing upmost and the two limp legs swinging out at odd angles; the other was right-side up but had sagged in his belt. All three of them kept moving a steady ten meters a minute, right along with Rod.

There were strange sounds from above.

An enormous voice, filling the shaft with its volume, roared down: "Stay where you are. Police. Police. Police."

Rod glanced at the bodies floating upward. A corridor came by. He reached for the grip-bar, made it, and swung himself into the horizontal passage. He sat down immediately, not getting away from the upshaft. He thought sharply with his new hiering. Excited, frantic minds beat all around him, looking for enemies, lunatics, crimes, aliens, anything strange.

Softly he began spieking to the empty corridor and to himself, "I am a dumb cat. I am the messenger C'rod. I must take the books to the gentleman from the stars. I am a dumb cat. I do not know much."

A robot, gleaming with the ornamental body-armor of old Earth, landed at his cross-corridor, looked at Rod and called up the shaft, "Master, here's one. A c'man with a package."

A young subchief came into view, feet first as he managed to ride down the shaft instead of going up it. He seized the ceiling of the transverse corridor, gave himself a push and (once free of the shaft's magnetism) dropped heavily on his feet beside Rod. Rod hiered him thinking, "I'm good at this. I'm a good telepath. I clean things up fast. Look at this dumb cat."

Rod went on concentrating, "I'm a dumb cat. I have a package to deliver. I'm a dumb cat."

The subchief looked down at him scornfully. Rod felt the other's mind slide over his own in the rough equivalent of a search. He remained relaxed and tried to feel stupid while the other hiered him. Rod said nothing. The subchief flashed his baton over the package, eyeing the crystal knob at the end.

"Books," he snorted.

Ron nodded.

"You," said the bright young subchief, "you see bodies?"

He spoke in a painfully clear, almost childish version of the Old Common Tongue.

Rod held up three fingers and then pointed upward.

"You, cat-man, you feel the brainbomb!"

Rod, beginning to enjoy the game, threw his head backward and let out a cattish yowl expressing pain. The subchief could not help clapping his hands over his ears. He started to turn away, "I can see what you think of it, cat-fellow. You're pretty stupid, aren't you?"

Still thinking low dull thoughts as evenly as he could, Rod said promptly and modestly, "Me smart cat. Very handsome too."

"Come along," said the subchief to his robot, disregarding Rod altogether.

Rod plucked at his sleeve.

The subchief turned back.

Very humbly Rod said, "Sir and master, which way, Hostel of Singing Birds, Room Nine?"

"Mother of poodles!" cried the subchief. "I'm on a murder case and this dumb cat asks *me* for directions." He was a decent young man and he thought for a minute. "This way -" said he, pointing up the upshaft - "it's twenty more meters and then the third street over. But that's 'people only.' It's about a kilometer over to the steps for animals." He stood, frowning, and then swung on one of his robots: "Wush', you see this cat!"

"Yes, master, a cat-man, very handsome."

"So you think he's handsome, too. He already thinks so, so that makes it unanimous. He may be handsome, but he's dumb. Wush', take this cat-man to the address he tells you. Use the upshaft by my authority. Don't put a belt on him, just hug him."

Rod was immeasurably grateful that he had slipped his shaftbelt off and left it negligently on the rack just before the robot arrived.

The robot seized him around the waist with what was literally a grip of iron. They did not wait for the slow upward magnetic drive of the shaft to lift them. The robot had some kind of a jet in his backpack and lifted Rod with sickening speed to the next level. He pushed Rod into the corridor and followed him.

"Where do you go?" said the robot, very plainly.

Rod concentrating on feeling stupid just in case someone might still be trying to hier his mind, said slowly and stumbingly, "Hostel of the Singing Birds, Room Nine."

The robot stopped still, as though he were communicating telepathically, but Rod's mind, though alert, could catch not the faintest whisper of telepathic communication. "Hot buttered sheep!" thought Rod, "he's using radio to check the address with his headquarters right from here!"

Wush' appeared to be doing just that. He came to in a moment. They emerged under the sky, filled with Earth's own moon, the loveliest thing that Rod had ever seen. He did not dare to stop and enjoy the scenery, but he trotted lithely beside the robot policeman.

They came down a road with heavy, scented flowers. The wet warm air of Earth spread the sweetness everywhere.

On their right there was a courtyard with copies of ancient fountains, a dining space now completely empty of diners, a robot waiter in the corner, and many individual rooms opening on the plaza.

The robot policeman called to the robot waiter, "Where's number nine?"

The waiter answered him with a lifting of the hand and an odd twist of the wrist, twice repeated, which the robot-policeman seemed to understand perfectly well.

"Come along," he said to Rod, leading the way to an outside stairway which reached up to an outside balcony serving the second story of rooms. One of the rooms had a plain number nine on it.

Rod was about to tell the robot policeman that he could see the number nine, when Wush', with officious kindness, took the doorknob and flung it open with a gesture of welcome to Rod.

There was the great cough of a heavy gun and Wush', his head blown almost completely off, clanked metallicly to the iron floor of the balcony. Rod instinctively jumped for cover and flattened himself against the wall of the building.

A handsome man, wearing what seemed to be a black suit, came into the doorway, a heavy-caliber police pistol in his hand.

"Oh, there you are," said he to Rod, evenly enough. "Come on in."

Rod felt his legs working, felt himself walking into the room despite the effort of his mind to resist. He stopped pretending to be a dumb cat. He dropped the books on the ground and went back to thinking like his normal Old North Australian self, despite the cat body. It did no good. He kept on walking involuntarily, and entered the room.

As he passed the man himself, he was conscious of a sticky sweet rotten smell, like nothing he had ever smelled before. He also saw that the man, though fully clothed, was sopping wet.

He entered the room.

It was raining inside.

Somebody had jammed the fire-sprinkler system so that a steady rain fell from the ceiling to the floor.

C'mell stood in the middle of the room, her glorious red hair a wet stringy mop hanging down her shoulders. There was a look of concentration and alarm on her face.

"I" said the man, "am Tostig Amaral. This girl said that her husband would come with a policeman. I did not think she was right. But she was right. With the cat-husband there comes a policeman. I shoot the policeman. He is a robot and I can pay the Earth government for as many robots as I like. You are a cat. I can kill you also, and pay the charges on you. But I am a nice man, and I want to make love with your little red cat over there, so I will be generous and pay you something so that you can tell her she is mine and not yours. Do you understand that, cat-man?"

Rod found himself released from the unexplained muscular bonds which had hampered his freedom.

"My lord, my master from afar," he said, "C'mell is an underperson. It is the law here that if an underperson and a person become involved in love, the underperson dies and the human person gets brainscrubbed. I am sure, my master, that you would not want to be brainscrubbed by the Earth authorities. Let the girl go. I agree that you can pay for the robot."

Amaral glided across the room. His face was pale, petulant, human, but Rod saw that the black clothes were not clothes at all.

The "clothing" was mucous membranes, an extension of Amaral's living skin.

The pale face turned even more pale with rage.

"You're a bold cat-man to talk like that. My body is bigger than yours, and it is poisonous as well. We have had to live hard in the rain of Amazonas Triste, and we have mental and physical powers which you had better not disturb. If you will not take payment, go away anyhow. The girl is mine. What happens to her is my business. If I violate Earth regulations, I will destroy the c'girl and pay for her. Go away, or you die."

Rod spoke with deliberate calm and with calculated risk. "Citizen, I play no game. I am not a cat-man but a subject of Her Absent Majesty the Queen, from Old North Australia. I give you warning that it is a man you face, and no mere animal. Let that girl go."

C'mell struggled as though she were trying to speak, but could not.

Amaral laughed, "That's a lie, animal, and a bold one! I admire you for trying to save your mate. But she is mine. She is a girlygirl and the Instrumentality gave her to me. She is my pleasure. Go, bold cat! You are a good liar."

Rod took his last chance. "Scan me if you will."

He stood his ground.

Amaral's mind ran over his personality like filthy hands pawing naked flesh. Rod recoiled at the dirtiness and intimacy of being felt by such a person's thoughts, because he could sense the kinds of pleasure and cruelty which Amaral had experienced. He stood firm, calm, sure, just. He was not going to leave C'mell with this - this monster from the stars, man though he might be, of the old true human stock.

Amaral laughed. "You're a man, all right. A boy. A farmer. And you cannot hier or spiek except for the button in your ear. Get out, child, before I box your ears!"

Rod spoke: "Amaral, I herewith put you in danger."

Amaral did not reply with words.

His peaked sharp face grew paler and the folds of his skin dilated. They quivered, like the edges of wet torn balloons. The room began to fill with a sickening sweet stench, as though it were a candy shop in which unburied bodies had died weeks before. There was a smell of vanilla, of sugar, of fresh hot cookies, of baked bread, of chocolate boiling in the pot; there was even a whiff of stroon. But as Amaral tensed and shook out his auxiliary skins each smell turned wrong, into a caricature and abomination of itself. The composite was hypnotic. Rod glanced at C'mell. She had turned completely white.

That decided him.

The calm which he had found with the Catmaster, might be good, but there were moments for calm and other moments for anger.

Rod deliberately chose anger.

He felt fury rising in him as hot and quick and greedy as if it had been love. He felt his heart go faster, his muscles become stronger, his mind clearer. Amaral apparently had total confidence in his own poisonous and hypnotic powers, because he was staring straightforward as his skins swelled and waved in the air like wet leaves under water. The steady drizzle from the sprinkler kept everything penetratingly wet.

Rod disregarded this. He welcomed fury.

With his new hiering device, he focused on Amaral's mind, and only on Amaral's.

Amaral saw the movement of his eyes and whipped a knife into view.

"Man or cat, you're dying!" said Amaral, himself hot with the excitement of hate and collision.

Rod then spoke, in his worst scream -

beast, filth, offal -

spot, dirt, vileness,

wet, nasty

die, die, die!

He was sure it was the loudest cry he had ever given. There was no echo, no effect. Amaral stared at him, the evil knife-point flickering in his hand like the flame atop a candle.

Rod's anger reached a new height.

He felt pain in his mind when he walked forward, cramps in his muscles as he used them. He felt a real fear of the off-world poison which this man-creature might exude, but the thought of C'mell - cat or no cat - alone with Amaral was enough to give him the rage of a beast and the strength of a machine.

Only at the very last moment did Amaral realize Rod had broken loose.

Rod never could tell whether the telepathic scream had really hurt the wet-worlder or not, because he did something very simple.

He reached with all the speed of a Norstrilian farmer, snatched the knife from Amaral's hand, ripping folds of soft, sticky skin with it, and then slashed the other man from clavicle to clavicle.

He jumped back in time to avoid the spurt of blood.

The "wet black suit" collapsed as Amaral died on the floor.

Rod took the dazed C'mell by the arm and led her out of the room. The air on the balcony was fresh, but the murder-smell of Amazonas Triste was still upon him. He knew that he would hate himself for weeks, just from the memory of that smell.

There were whole armies of robots and police outside. The body of Wush' had been taken away.

There was silence as they emerged.

Then a clear, civilized, commanding voice spoke from the plaza below, "Is he dead?"

Rod nodded.

"Forgive me for not coming closer. I am the Lord Jestocost. I know you, C'roderick, and I know who you really are. These people are all under my orders. You and the girl can wash and reclothe yourselves in the rooms below. Then you can run a certain errand. Tomorrow, at the second hour, I will see you."

Robots came close to them - apparently robots with no sense of smell, because the fulsome stench did not bother them in the least. People stepped out of their way as they passed.

Rod was able to murmur, "C'mell, are you all right?"

She nodded and she gave him a wan smile. Then she forced herself to speak. "You are brave, mister McBan. You are even braver than a cat."

The robots separated the two of them. Within moments Rod found little white medical robots taking his clothing off him gently, deftly, and quickly. A hot shower, with a smell of medication to it, was already hissing in the bath-stall. Rod was tired of wetness, tired of all this water everywhere, tired of wet things and complicated people, but he stumbled into the shower with gratitude and hope. He was still alive. He had unknown friends.

And C'mell. C'mell was safe.

"Is this," thought Rod, "what people call love?"

The clean, stinging astringency of the shower drove all thoughts from his mind. Two of the little white robots had followed him in. He sat on a hot, wet wooden bench and they scrubbed him with brushes which felt as though they would remove his very skin.

Bit by bit, the terrible odor faded.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: BIRDS, FAR UNDERGROUND

ROD MCBAN WAS TOO weary to protest when the little white robots wrapped him in an enormous towel and led him into what looked like an operating room.

A large man, with a red-brown spade beard, very uncommon on Earth at this time, said, "I am Doctor Vomact, the cousin of the other Doctor Vomact you met on Mars. I know that you are not a cat, mister and owner McBan, and it is only my business to check up on you. May I?"

"C'mell -" began Rod.

"She is perfectly all right. We have given her a sedative and for the time being she is being treated as though she were a human woman. Jestocost told me to suspend the rules in her case, and I did so, but I think we will both have trouble about the matter from some of our colleagues later on."

"Trouble?" said Rod. "I'll pay -"

"No, no, it's not payment. It's just the rule that damaged underpeople should be destroyed and not put in hospitals. Mind you, I treat them myself now and then, if I can do it on the sly. But now lets have a look at you."

"Why are we talking?" spieked Rod. "Didn't you know that I can hier now?"

Instead of getting a physical examination, Rod had a wonderful visit with the doctor, in which they drank enormous glasses of a sweet Earth beverage called *chai* by the ancient Parosski ones. Rod realized that between Redlady, the other doctor Vomact on Mars, and the Lord Jestocost on Earth, he had been watched and guarded all the way through. He found that this doctor Vomact was a candidate for a Chiefship of the Instrumentality, and he learned something of the strange tests required for that office. He even found that the doctor knew more than he did himself about his own financial position, and that the actuarial balances of Earth were sagging with the weight of his wealth, since the increase in the price of stroon might lead to shorter lives. The doctor and he ended by discussing the underpeople; he found that the doctor had just as vivid an admiration for C'mell as he himself did.

The evening ended when Rod said, "I'm young, doctor and sir, and I sleep well, but I'm never going to sleep again if you don't get that smell away from me, I can smell it inside my nose."

The doctor became professional. He said, "Open your mouth and breathe right into my face!"

Rod hesitated and then obeyed.

"Great crooked stars!" said the doctor. "I can smell it too. There's a little bit in your upper respiratory system, perhaps a little even in your lungs. Do you need your sense of smell for the next few days?"

Rod said he did not.

"Fine," said the doctor. "We can numb that section of the brain and do it very gently. There'll be no residual damage. You won't smell anything for eight to ten days, and by that time the smell of Amaral will be gone. Incidentally, you were charged with first degree murder, tried, and acquitted - on the matter of Tostig Amaral."

"How could I be?" said Rod. "I wasn't even arrested."

"The Instrumentality computered it. They had the whole scene on tape, since Amaral's room has been under steady surveillance since yesterday. When he warned you that whether cat or man, you were dying, he finished the case against himself. That was a death threat and your acquittal was for self-defense."

Rod hesitated and then blurted out the truth, "And the men in the shaft?"

"The Lords Jestocost and Crudelta and I talked it over. We decided to let the matter drop. It keeps the police lively if they have a few unsolved crimes here and there. Now lie down, so I can kill off that smell."

Rod lay down. The doctor put his head in a clamp and called in robot assistants. The smell-killing process knocked him out, and when he wakened, it was in a different building. He sat up in bed and saw the sea itself. C'mell was standing at the edge of the water. He sniffed. He smelled no salt, no wet, no water, no Amaral. It was worth the change.

C'mell came to him. "My dear, my very dear, my sir and master, but my very dear! You chanced your life for me last night."

"I'm a cat myself," laughed Rod.

He leaped from the bed and ran out to the water margin. The immensity of blue water was incredible. The white waves were separate, definable miracles, each one of them. He had seen the enclosed lakes of Australia, but none of them did things like this.

C'mell had the tact to stay silent till he had seen his fill.

Then she broke the news.

"You own Earth. You have work to do. Either you stay here - and begin studying how to manage your property, or you go somewhere else. Either way, something a little bit sad is going to happen. Today."

He looked at her seriously, his pajamas flapping in the wet wind which he could no longer smell.

"I'm ready," he said. "What is it?"

"You lose me."

"Is that all?" he laughed.

C'mell looked very hurt. She stretched her fingers as though she were a nervous cat looking for something to claw.

"I thought -" said she, and stopped. She started again, "I thought -" She stopped again. She turned to look at him, staring fully, trustingly into his face. "You're such a young man, but you can do anything. Even among men you are fierce and decided. Tell me, sir and master, what - what do you wish?"



"Nothing much," he smiled at her, "except that I am buying you and taking you home. We can't go to Norstrilia unless the law changes, but we can go to New Mars. They don't have any rules there, none which a few tons of stroon won't get changed. C'mell, I'll stay cat. Will you marry me?"

She started laughing but the laughter turned into weeping. She hugged him and buried her face against his chest. At last she wiped her tears off on her arm and looked up at him:

"Poor silly me! Poor silly you! Don't you see it, mister, I *am* a cat. If I had children, they would be cat-kittens, every one of them, unless I went every single week to get the genetic code recycled so that they would turn out underpeople. Don't you know that you and I can never marry - not with any real hope? Besides, Rod, there is the other rule. You and I cannot even see each other again from this sunset onward. How do you think the Lord Jestocost saved my life yesterday? How did he get me into a hospital to be flushed out of all those Amaral poisons? How did he break almost all the rules of the book?"

The brightness had gone out of Rod's day. "I don't know," he said dully.

"By promising them I would die promptly and obediently if there were any more irregularities. By saying I was a nice animal. A biddable one. My death is hostage for what you and I must do. It's not a law. It's something worse than a law - it's an agreement between the Lords of the Instrumentality."

"I see," said he, understanding the logic of it, but hating the cruel Earth customs which put C'mell and himself together, only to tear them apart.

"Let's walk down the beach, Rod," she said. "Unless you want your breakfast first of all...."

"Oh, no," he said. Breakfast! a flutty crupp for all the breakfasts on Earth!

She walked as though she had not a care in the world, but there was an undertone of meaning to her walk which warned Rod that she was up to something.

It happened.

First, she kissed him, with a kiss he remembered the rest of his life.

Then, before he could say a word, she spieked. But her spieking was not words or ideas at all. It was singing of a high wild kind. It was the music which went along with her very own poem, which she had sung to him atop Earthport:

*And oh! my love, for you.  
High birds crying, and a  
High sky flying, and a  
High wind driving, and a  
High heart striving, and a  
High brave place for you!*

But it was not those words, not those ideas, even though they seemed subtly different this time. She was doing something which the best telepaths of Old North Australia had tried in vain for thousands of years to accomplish - she was transmitting the mathematical and proportional essence of music right out of her mind, and she was doing it with a clarity and force which would have been worthy of a great orchestra. The "high wind driving" fugue kept recurring.

He turned his eyes away from her to see the astonishing thing which was happening all around them. The air, the ground, the sea were all becoming thick with life. Fish flashed out of blue waves. Birds circled by the multitude around them. The beach was thick with little running birds. Dogs and running animals which he had never seen before stood restlessly around C'mell - hectares of them.

Abruptly she stopped her song.

With very high volume and clarity, she spat commands in all directions:

"Think of people."

"Think of this cat and me running away somewhere."

"Think of ships."

"Look for strangers."

"Think of things in the sky."

Rod was glad he did not have his broad-band hiering come on, as it sometimes had done at home. He was sure he would have gone dizzy with the pictures and the contradictions of it all.

She had grabbed his shoulders and was whispering fiercely into his ear:

"Rod, they'll cover us. Please make a trip with me, Rod. One last dangerous trip. Not for you. Not for me. Not even for mankind. For life, Rod. The Aitch Eye wants to see you."

"Who's the Aitch Eye?"

"He'll tell you the secret if you see him," she hissed. "Do it for me, then, if you don't trust my ideas."

He smiled. "For you, C'mell, yes."

"Don't even think then, till you get there. Don't even ask questions. Just come along. Millions of lives depend on you, Rod."

She stood up and sang again, but the new song had no grief in it, no anguish, no weird keening from species to species. It was as cool and pretty as a music box, as simple as an assured and happy good-bye.

The animals vanished so rapidly that it was hard to believe that legions of them had so recently been there.

"That," said C'mell, "should rattle the telepathic monitors for a while. They are not very imaginative anyhow, and when they get something like this they write up reports about it. Then they can't understand their reports and sooner or later one of them asks me what I did. I tell them the truth. It's simple."

"What are you going to tell them this time?" he asked, as they walked back to the house.

"That I had something which I did not want them to hear."

"They won't take that."

"Of course not, but they will suspect me of trying to beg stroom from you to give to the underpeople."

"Do you want some, C'mell?"

"Of course not! It's illegal and it would just make me live longer than my natural life. The Catmaster is the only underperson who gets stroon, and he gets it by a special vote of the Lords."

They had reached the house. C'mell paused:

"Remember, we are the servants of the Lady Frances Oh. She promised Jestocost that she would order us to do anything that I asked her to do. So she's going to order us to have a good, hearty breakfast. Then she is going to order us to look for something far under the surface of Earthport."

"She is? But why -"

"No questions, Rod." The smile she gave him would have melted a monument. He felt well. He was amused and pleased by the physical delight of hiering and spieking with the occasional true people who passed by. (Some underpeople could hier and spiek but they tried to conceal it, for fear that they would be resented.) He felt strong. Losing C'mell was a sad thing to do, but it was a whole day off; he began dreaming of things that he could do for her when they parted. Buying her the services of thousands of people for the rest of her life? Giving her jewelry which would be the envy of Earth mankind? Leasing her a private planoform yacht? He suspected these might not be legal, but they were pleasant to think about.

Three hours later, he had no time for pleasant thoughts. He was bone-weary again. They had flown into Earthport city "on the orders of" their hostess, the lady Oh, and they had started going down. Forty-five minutes of dropping had made his stomach very queasy. He felt the air go warm and stale and he wished desperately that he had not given up his sense of smell.

Where the dropshafts ended, the tunnels and the elevators began.

Down they went, where incredibly old machinery spun slowly in a spray of oil performing tasks which only the wildest mind could guess at.

In one room, C'mell had stopped and had shouted at him over the noise of engines, "That's a pump."

It did look obvious. Huge turbines moved wearily. They seemed to be hooked up to an enormous steam engine powered by nuclear fuel. Five or six brightly polished robots eyed them suspiciously as they walked around the machine, which was at least eighty meters long by forty-five high.

"And come here...." shouted C'mell.

They went into another room, empty and clean and quiet except for a rigid column of moving water which shot from floor to ceiling with no evidence of machinery at all. An underman, sloppily formed from a rat body, got up from his rocking chair when they entered. He bowed to C'mell as though she were a great lady but she waved him back to his chair.

She took Rod near the column of water and pointed to a shiny ring on the floor.

"That's the other pump. They do the same amount of work."

"What is it?" he shouted

"Force-field, I guess. I'm not an engineer." They went on.

In a quieter corridor she explained that the pumps were both of them for the service of weather control. The old one had been running six or seven thousand years, and showed very

little wear. When people needed a supplementary one, they had simply printed it on plastic, set it in the floor, and turned it on with a few amps. The underman was there just to make sure that nothing broke down or went critical.

"Can't real people design things any more?" asked Red.

"Only if they want to. Making them want to do things is the hard part now."

"You mean, they don't want to do anything?"

"Not exactly," said C'mell, "but they find that we are better than they are at almost anything. Real work, that is, not statesmanship like running the Instrumentality and the Earth government. Here and there a real human being gets to work, and there are always offworlders like you to stimulate them and challenge them with new problems. But they used to have secure lives of four hundred years, a common language, and a standard conditioning. They were dying off, just by being too perfect. One way to get better would have been to kill off us underpeople, but they couldn't do that all the way. There was too much messy work to be done that you couldn't count on robots for. Even the best robot, if he's a computer linked to the mind of a mouse, will do fine routine, but unless he has a very complete human education, he's going to make some wild judgments which won't suit what people want. So they need underpeople. I'm still cat underneath it all, but even the cats which are unchanged are pretty close relatives of human beings. They make the same basic choices between power and beauty, between survival and self-sacrifice, between common sense and high courage. So the Lady Alice More worked out this plan for the Rediscovery of Man. Set up the Ancient Nations, give everybody an extra culture besides the old one based on the Old Common Tongue, let them get mad at each other, restore some disease, some danger, some accidents, but average it out so that nothing is really changed."

They had come to a storeroom, the sheer size of which made Rod blink. The great reception hall at the top of Earthport had astounded him; this room was twice the size. The room was filled with extremely ancient cargoes which had not even been unpacked from their containers. Rod could see that some were marked outbound for worlds which no longer existed, or which had changed their names; others were inbound, but no one had unpacked them for five thousand years and more.

"What's all this stuff?"

"Shipping. Technological change. Somebody wrote it all off the computers, so they didn't have to think of it any more. This is the thing which underpeople and robots are searching, to supply the ancient artifacts for the Rediscovery of Man. One of our boys - rat stock, with a human IQ of three hundred - found something marked *Musée Nationale*. It was the whole national Museum of the Republic of Mali, which had been put inside a mountain when the ancient wars became severe. Mali apparently was not a very important 'nation,' as they called those groupings, but it had the same language as France, and we were able to supply the real material with almost everything they needed to restore some kind of a French civilization. China has been hard. The Chinese survived longer than any other nation, and they did their own grave-robbing, so that we have found it impossible to reconstruct China before the age of space. We can't modify people into being Ancient Chinese."

Rod stopped, thunderstruck. "Can I talk to you here?"

C'mell listened with a faraway look on her face. "Not here. I feel the very weak sweep of a monitor across my mind now and then. In a couple of minutes you can. Let's hurry along."

"I just thought," cried Rod, "of the most important question in all the worlds!"

"Stop thinking it, then," said C'mell, "until we come to a safe place."

Instead of going straight on through the big aisle between the forgotten crates and packages, she squeezed between two crates and made her way to the edge of the big underground storeroom.

"That package," she said, "is stroon. They lost it. We could help ourselves to it if we wanted to, but we're afraid of it."

Rod looked at the names on the package. It had been shipped by Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan XXVI to Adaminaby Port and reconsigned to Earthport.

"That's one hundred and twenty-five generations ago, shipped from the Station of Doom. My farm. I think it turns poison if you leave it for more than two hundred years. Our own military people have some horrible uses for it, when invaders show up, but ordinary Norstrilians, when they find old stroon, always turn it in to the Commonwealth. We're afraid of it. Not that we often lose it. It's too valuable and we're too greedy, with a twenty million per cent import duty on everything...."

C'mell led on. They unexpectedly passed a tiny robot, a lamp fixed to his head, who was seated between two enormous piles of books. He was apparently reading them one by one, because he had beside him a pile of notes larger in bulk than he was. He did not look up, nor did they interrupt him.

At the wall, C'mell said, "Now do exactly what you're told. See the dust along the base of this crate?"

"I see it," said Rod.

"That must be left undisturbed. Now watch. I'm going to jump from the top of this crate to the top of that one, without disturbing the dust. Then I want you to jump the same way and go exactly where I point, without even thinking about it, if you can manage. I'll follow. Don't try to be polite or chivalrous, or you'll mess up the whole arrangement."

Rod nodded.

She jumped to a case against the wall. Her red hair did not fly behind her, because she had tied it up in a turban before they started out, when she had obtained coveralls for each of them from the robot servants of the Lady Frances Oh. They had looked like an ordinary couple of working c'people.

Either she was very strong or the case was very light. Standing on the case, she tipped it very delicately, so that the pattern of dust around its base would be unchanged, save for microscopic examination. A blue glow came from beyond the case. With an odd, practiced turn of the wrist she indicated that Rod should jump from his case to the tipped one, and from there into the area - whatever it might be - beyond the case. It seemed easy for him, but he wondered if she could support both his weight and hers on the case. He remembered her order not to talk or think. He tried to think of the salmon steak he had eaten the day before. That should certainly be a good cat-thought, if a monitor should catch his mind at that moment! He jumped, teetered on the slanting top of the second packing case, and scrambled into a tiny doorway just big enough for him to crawl through. It was apparently designed for cables, pipes and maintenance, not for habitual human use: it was too low to stand in. He scrambled forward.

There was a slam.

C'mell had jumped in after him, letting the case fall back into its old and apparently undisturbed position.

She crawled up to him. "Keep going," she said.

"Can we talk here?"

"Of course! Do you want to? It's not a very sociable place."

"That question, that big question," said Rod. "I've got to ask you. You underpeople are taking charge of people, if you're fixing up their new cultures for them, you're getting to be the master of men!"

"Yes," said C'mell, and let the explosive affirmative hang in the air between them.

He couldn't think of anything to say; it was his big bright idea for the day, and the fact that she already knew underpeople were becoming secret masters - that was too much!

She looked at his friendly face and said, more gently, "We underpeople have seen it coming for a long time. Some of the human people do, too. Especially the Lord Jestocost. He's no fool. And, Rod, you fit in."

"I?"

"Not as a person. As an economic change. As a source of unallocated power."

"You mean, C'mell, you're after me, too? I can't believe it. I can recognize a pest or a nuisance or a robber. You don't seem like any of these. You're good, all the way through." His voice faltered. "I meant it this morning, C'mell, when I asked you to marry me."

The delicacy of cat and the tenderness of woman combined in her voice as she answered, "I know you meant it." She stroked a lock of hair away from his forehead, in a caress as restrained as any touch could be. "But it's not for us. And I'm not using you myself, Rod. I want nothing for myself, but I want a good world for underpeople. And for people too. For people too. We cats have loved you people long before we had brains. We've been *your* cats longer than anyone can remember. Do you think our loyalty to the human race would stop just because you changed our shapes and added a lot of thinking power? I love you, Rod, but I love people, too. That's why I'm taking you to the Aitch Eye."

"Can you tell me what that is - now?"

She laughed. "This place is safe. It's the Holy Insurgency. The secret government of the underpeople. This is a silly place to talk about it, Rod. You're going to meet the head of it, right now."

"All of them?" Rod was thinking of the Chiefs of the Instrumentality.

"It's not a them, it's a him. The E-telekali. The bird beneath the ground. E-ikasuk is one of his sons."

"If there's only one, how did you choose him? Is he like the British Queen, whom we lost so long ago?"

C'mell laughed. "We did not choose him. He *grew* and now he leads us. You people took an eagle's egg and tried to make it into a Daimoni man. When the experiment failed, you threw the fetus out. It lived. It's he. It'll be the strongest mind you've ever met. Come on. This is no place to talk, and we're still talking."

She started crawling down the horizontal shaft, waving at Rod to follow her.

He followed.

As they crawled, he called to her, "C'mell, stop a minute."

She stopped until he caught up with her. She thought he might ask for a kiss, so worried and lonely did he look. She was ready to be kissed. He surprised her by saying, instead.

"I can't smell, C'mell. Please, I'm so used to smelling that I miss it. What does this place smell like?"

Her eyes widened and then she laughed: "It smells like underground. Electricity burning the air. Animals somewhere far away, a lot of different smells of them. The old, old smell of man, almost gone. Engine oil and bad exhaust. It smells like a headache. It smells like silence, like things untouched. There, is that it?"

He nodded and they went on.

At the end of the horizontal C'mell turned and said, "All men die here. Come on!"

Rod started to follow and then stopped, "C'mell, are you discoordinated? Why should I die? There's no reason to."

Her laughter was pure happiness. "Silly C'rod! You are a *cat*, cat enough to come where no man has passed for centuries. Come on. Watch out for those skeletons. They're a lot of them around here. We hate to kill real people, but there are some, that we can't warn off in time."

They emerged on a balcony, overlooking an even more enormous storeroom than the one before. This had thousands more boxes in it. C'mell paid no attention to it. She went to the end of the balcony and raced down a slender steel ladder.

"More junk from the past!" she said, anticipating Rod's comment. "People have forgotten it up above; we mess around in it."

Though he could not smell the air, at this depth it felt thick, heavy, immobile.

C'mell did not slow down. She threaded her way through the junk and treasures on the floor as though she were an acrobat. On the far side of the old room she stopped. "Take one of these," she commanded.

They looked like enormous umbrellas. He had seen umbrellas in the pictures which his computer had showed him. These seemed oddly large, compared to the ones in the pictures. He looked around for rain. After his memories of Tostig Amarat he wanted no more indoor rain. C'mell did not understand his suspicions.

"The shaft," she said, "has no magnetic controls, no updraft of air. It's just a shaft twelve meters in diameter. These are parachutes. We jump into the shaft with them and then we float down. Straight down. Four kilometers. It's close to the Moho."

Since he did not pick up one of the big umbrellas, she handed him one. It was surprisingly light.

He blinked at her. "How will we ever get out?"

"One of the bird-men will fly us up the shaft. It's hard work, but they can do it. Be sure to hook that thing to your belt. It's a long slow time falling, and we won't be able to talk. And it's terribly dark, too."

He complied.

She opened a big door, beyond which there was the feel of nothing. She gave him a wave, partially opened her "umbrella" stepped over the edge of the door and vanished. He looked over the edge himself. There was nothing to be seen. Nothing of C'mell, no sound except for the slippage of air and an occasional mechanical whisper of metal against metal. He supposed that must be the rib-tips of the umbrella touching the edge of the shaft as she fell.

He sighed. Norstrilia was safe and quiet compared to this.

He opened his umbrella too.

Acting on an odd premonition, he took his little hiering-spieking shell out of his ear and put it carefully in his coverall pocket.

That act saved his life.



## CHAPTER EIGHT: HIS OWN STRANGE ALTAR

ROD MCBAN REMEMBERED falling and falling. He shouted into the wet adhesive darkness, but there was no reply. He thought of cutting himself loose from his big umbrella and letting himself drop to his death below him, but then he thought of C'mell and he knew that his body would fall upon her like a bomb. He wondered about his desperation, but could not understand it. (Only later did he find out that he was passing telepathic suicide screens which the underpeople had set up, screens fitted to the human mind, designed to dredge filth and despair from the paleocortex, the smell-bite-mate sequence of the nose-guided animals who first walked Earth; but Rod was cat enough, just barely cat enough, and he was also telepathically subnormal, so that the screens did not do to him what they would have done to any normal man of Earth - delivered a twisted dead body at the bottom. No man had ever gotten that far, but the underpeople resolved that none ever should.) Rod twisted in his harness and at last he fainted.

He awakened in a relatively small room, enormous by Earth standards, but still much smaller than the storerooms which he had passed through on the way down.

The lights were bright.

He suspected that the room stank, but he could not prove it with his smell gone.

A man was speaking: "The Forbidden Word is never given unless the man who does not know it plainly asks for it."

There was a chorus of voices sighing, "We remember. We remember. We remember what we remember."

The speaker was almost a giant, thin and pale. His face was the face of a dead saint, pale, white as alabaster, with glowing eyes. His body was that of man and bird both, man from the hips up, except that human hands grew out of the elbows of enormous clean white wings. From the hips down his legs were bird-legs, ending in a horny, almost translucent bird-feet which stood steadily on the ground.

"I am sorry, mister and owner McBan, that you took that risk. I was misinformed. You are a good cat on the outside, but still completely a human man on the inside. Our safety devices bruised your mind and they might have killed you."

Rod stared at the man as he stumbled to his feet. He saw that C'mell was one of the people helping him. When he was erect, someone handed him a beaker of very cold water. He drank it thirstily. It was hot down here - hot, stuffy, and with the feel of big engines nearby.

"I," said the great bird-man, "am the E-telekeli." He pronounced it Ee-telly-kelly. "You are the first human being to see me in the flesh."

"Blessed, blessed, blessed, fourfold blessed is the name of our leader, our father, our brother, our son the E-telekeli," chorused the underpeople.

Rod looked around. There was every kind of underperson imaginable here, including several that he had never even thought of. One was a head on a shelf, with no apparent body. When he looked, somewhat shocked, directly at the head, its face smiled and one eye closed in a deliberate wink. The E-telekeh followed his glance. "Do not let us shock you. Some of us are normal, but many of us down here are the discards of men's laboratories. You know my son."

A tall, very pale young man with no feathers stood up at this point. He was stark naked and completely unembarrassed. He held out a friendly hand to Rod. Rod was sure he had never seen the young man before. The young man sensed Rod's hesitation:

"You new me as A'gentur. I am the E-ikusus."

"Blessed, blessed, threefold blessed is the name of our leader-to-be, the Yeekasoose!" chanted the underpeople.

Something about the scene caught Rod's rough Norstrilian humor. He spoke to the great underman as he would have spoken to another mister-and-owner back home, friendly but bluntly.

"Glad you welcome me, sir!"

"Glad, glad, glad is the stranger from beyond the stars!" sang the chorus.

"Can't you make them shut up?" asked Rod.

"'Shut up, shut up, shut up,' says the stranger from the stars!" chorused the group.

The E-telekeli did not exactly laugh, but his smile was not pure benevolence.

"We can disregard them and talk, or I can blank out your mind every time they repeat what we say. This is a sort of court ceremony."

Rod glanced around. "I'm in your power already," said he, "so it won't matter if you mess around a little with my mind. Blank them out."

The E-telekeli stirred the air in front of him as though he were writing a mathematical equation with his finger; Rod's eyes followed the finger and he suddenly felt the room hush.

"Come over here and sit down," said the E-telekeli.

Rod followed.

"What do you want?" he asked as he followed.

The E-telekeli did not even turn around to answer. He merely spoke while walking ahead:

"Your money, mister and owner McBAn. Almost all of your money."

Rod stopped walking. He heard himself laughing wildly. "Money? You? Here? What could you possibly do with it?"

"That," said the E-telekeli, "is why you should sit down."

"Do sit," said C'mell, who had followed.

Rod sat down.

"We are afraid that Man himself will die and leave us alone in the universe. We need Man, and there is still an immensity of time before we all pour into a common destiny. People have

always assumed that the end of things is around the corner, and we have the promise of the second Forbidden One that this will be soon. But it could be hundreds of thousands of years, maybe millions. People are scattered, mister McBan, so that no weapon will ever kill them all on all planets, but no matter how scattered they are, they still are haunted by themselves. They reach a point of development and then they stop."

"Yes," said Rod, reaching for a carafe of water and helping himself to another drink, "But it's a long way from the philosophy of the universe down to my money. We have plenty of barmy swarmy talk in Old North Australia, but I never heard of anybody asking for another citizen's money, right off the bat."

The eyes of the E-telekeli glowed like cold fire but Rod knew that this was no hypnosis, no trick being played upon himself. It was the sheer force of the personality burning outward from the bird-man.

"Listen carefully, mister McBan. We are the creatures of man. You are gods to us. You have made us into people who talk, who worry, who think, who love, who die. Most of our races were the friends of man before we became underpeople - like C'mell. How many cats have served and loved man, and for how long? How many cattle have worked for men, been eaten by men, been milked by men across the ages, and have still followed where men went, even to the stars? And dogs. I do not have to tell you about the love of dogs for men. We call ourselves the Holy Insurgency because we are rebels. We are a government. We are a power almost as big as the Instrumentality. We love you, Rod, not because you are a rich Norstrilian, but because it is our faith to love the mankind which created us."

"This is a long slow wicket for my money," said Rod. "Come to the point, sir."

The E-telekeli smiled with sweetness and sadness. Rod immediately knew that it was his own denseness which made the bird-man sad and patient. For the very first time he began to accept the feeling that this person might actually be the superior of any human being he had ever met.

"I'm sorry," said Rod. "I haven't had a minute to enjoy my money since I got it. People have been telling me that everybody is after it. I'm beginning to think that I shall do nothing but run the rest of my life..."

The E-telekeli smiled happily, the way a teacher smiles when a student has suddenly turned in a spectacular performance. "Correct. You have learned a lot from the Catmaster, and from your own self. I am offering you something more - the chance to do enormous good. Have you ever heard of Foundations?"

Rod frowned. "The bottoms of buildings?"

"No. Institutions. From the very ancient past."

Rod shook his head. He hadn't.

"If a gift was big enough, it endured and kept on giving, until the culture in which it was set had fallen. If you took most of your money and gave it to some good, wise men, it could be spent over and over again to improve the race of man. We need that. Better men will give us better lives. Do you think that we don't know how pilots and pinlighters have sometimes died, saving their cats in space?"

"Or how people kill underpeople without a thought?" countered Rod. "Or humiliate them without noticing that they do it? It seems to me that you must have some self-interest, sir."

"I do. Some - but not as much as you think. Men are evil when they are frightened or bored. They are good when they are happy and busy. I want you to give your money to provide games, sports, competitions, shows, music, and a chance for honest hatred."

"Hatred?" said Rod. "I was beginning to think that I had found a Believer bird ... somebody who mouthed old magic."

"We're not ending time," said the great man-bird. "We are just altering the material conditions of man's situation for the present historical period. We want to steer mankind away from tragedy and self-defeat. Though the cliffs crumble, we want man to remain. Do you know Swinburne?"

"Where is it?" said Rod.

"It's not a place. It's a poet, before the age of space. He wrote this. Listen:

*Till the slow sea rise and the sheer cliff crumble,  
Till terrace and meadow the deep gulfs drink,  
Till the strength of the waves of the high tides crumble,  
The fields that lessen, the rocks that shrink,  
Here now in his triumph where all things falter,  
Stretched out on the spoils that his own hand spread,  
As a god self-slain on his own strange altar,  
Death lies dead.*

Do you agree with that?"

"It sounds nice, but I don't understand it," said Rod. "Please, sir, I'm tired than I thought. And I have only this one day with C'mell. Can I finish the business with you and have a little time with her?"

The great underman lifted his arms. His wings spread like a canopy over Rod.

"So be it!" he said, and the words rang out like a great song.

Rod could see the lips of the underpeople chorusing, but he did not notice the sound.

"I offer you a tangible bargain. Tell me if you find I read your mind correctly."

Rod nodded, somewhat in awe.

"You want your money, but you do not want it. You will keep one hundred thousand credits, which will leave you the richest man in Old North Australia for the rest of a very long life. The rest you will give to a foundation which will teach men to hate easily and lightly, as in a game not sickly and wearily, as in habit. The trustees will be Lords of the Instrumentality whom I know, such as Jestocost, Crudelta, and Lady Johanna Gnade."

"And what do I get?"

"Your heart's desire." The beautiful wise pale face stared down at Rod like a father seeking to fathom the puzzlement of his own child. Rod was a little afraid of the face, but he confided in it, too.

"I want too much. I can't have it all."

"I'll tell you what you want.

"You want to be home right now, and all the trouble done with. I can set you down at the Station of Doom in a single long jump. Look at the floor - I have your books and your postage stamp which you left in Amaral's room. They go too."

"But I want to see Earth."

"Come back, when you are older and wiser. Some day. See what your money has done."

"Well -" said Rod.

"You want C'mell." The bland wise white face showed no embarrassment, no anger, no condescension. "You shall have her, in a linked dream, her mind to yours, for a happy subjective time of about a thousand years. You will live through all the happy things that you might have done together if you had stayed here and become a c'man. You will see your kitten-children flourish, grow old, and die. That will take about one half-hour."

"It's just a dreamy," said Rod. "You want to take megacredits from me and give me a dreamy!"

*"With two minds? Two living, accelerated minds, thinking into each other? Have you ever heard of that?"*

"No," said Rod.

"Do you trust me?" said the E-telekeli.

Rod stared at the man-bird inquisitively and a great weight fell from him. He did trust this creature more than he had ever trusted the father who did not want him, the mother who gave him up, the neighbors who looked at him and were kind. He sighed, "I trust you."

"I also," added the E-telekeli, "will take care of all the little incidentals through my own network and I will leave the memory of them in your mind. If you trust me that should be enough. You get home, safe. You are protected, off Norstritia, into which I rarely reach, for as long as you live. You have a separate life right now with C'mell and you will remember most of it. In return, you go to the wall and transfer your fortune, minus one-half megac, to the Foundation of Rod McBan."

Rod did not see that the underpeople thronged around him like worshipers. He had to stop when a very pale, tall girl took his hand and held it to her cheek. "You may not be the Promised One, but you are a great and good man. We can take nothing from you. We can only ask. That is the teaching of Joan. And you have given."

"Who are you?" said Rod in a frightened voice, thinking that she might be some lost human girl whom the underpeople had abducted to the guts of the Earth.

"E-lamelanie, daughter of the E-telekeli."

Rod stared at her and went to the wall. He pushed a routine sort of button. What a place to find it! "The Lord Jestocost," he called. "McBan speaking. No, you fool, I own this system."

A handsome, polished plumpish man appeared on the screen. "If I guess right," said the strange man, "You are the first human being ever to get into the depths. Can I serve you, mister and owner McBan?"

"Take a note" said the E-telekeli, out of sight of the machine, beside Rod.

Rod repeated it.

The Lord Jestocost called witnesses at his end.

It was a long dictation, but at last the conveyance was finished. Only at one point did Rod balk. When they tried to call it the McBan Foundation, he, said, "Just call it the One Hundred and Fifty Fund."

"One Hundred and Fifty?" asked Jestocost.

"For my father. It's his number in our family. I'm to-the-hundred-and-fifty-first. He was before me. Don't explain the number. Just use it."

"All clear," said Jestocost. "Now we have to get notaries and official witnesses to veridicate our imprints of your eyes, hands and brain. Ask the Person with you to give you a mask, so that the cat-man face will not upset the witnesses. Where is this machine you are using supposed to be located? I know perfectly well where I think it is."

"At the foot of Alpha Ralpa, in a forgotten market," said the E-telekeli. "Your servicemen will find it there tomorrow when they come to check the authenticity of the machine." He still stood out of line of sight of the machine, so that Jestocost could hear him but not see him.

"I know the voice," said Jestocost. "It comes to me as in a great dream. But I shall not ask to see the face."

"Your friend down here has gone where only underpeople go," said the E-telekeli, "and we are disposing of his fate in more ways than one, my Lord, subject to your gracious approval."

"My approval does not seem to have been needed much," snorted Jestocost, with a little laugh.

"I would like to talk to you. Do you have any intelligent underperson near you?"

"I can call C'mell. She's always somewhere around."

"This time, my Lord, you cannot. She's here."

"There, with *you*? I never knew she went there." The amazement showed on the face of the Lord Jestocost.

"She is here, nevertheless. Do you have some other underperson?"

Rod felt like a dummy, standing in the visiphone while the two voices, unseen by one another, talked past him. But he felt, very truly, that they both wished him well. He was almost nervous in anticipation of the strange happiness which had been offered to him and C'mell, but he was a respectful enough young man to wait until the great ones got through their business.

"Wait a moment," said Jestocost.

On the screen, in the depths, Rod could see the Lord of the Instrumentality work the controls of other, secondary screens. A moment later Jestocost answered:

"B'dank is here. He will enter the room in a few minutes."

"Twenty minutes from now, my sir and Lord, will you hold hands with your servant B'dank as you once did with C'mell? I have the problem of this young man and his return. There are things which you do not know, and I would rather not put them on the wires."

Jestocost hesitated only for the slightest of moments. "Good, then," he laughed. "I might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb."

The E-telekeli stood aside. Someone handed Rod a mask which hid his cat-man features and still left his eyes and hands exposed. The brain print was gotten through the eyes.

The recordings were made.

Rod went back to the bench and table. He helped himself to another drink of water from the carafe. Someone threw a wreath of fresh flowers around his shoulders. Fresh flowers! In such a place.... He wondered. Three rather pretty undergirls, two of them of cat origin and one of them derived from dogs, were leading a freshly dressed C'mell toward him. She wore the simplest and most modest of all possible white dresses. Her waist was cinched by a broad golden belt. She laughed, stopped laughing and then blushed as they led her to Rod.

Two seats were arranged on the bench. Cushions were disposed so that both of them would be comfortable. Silky metallic caps, like the pleasure caps used in surgeries, were fitted on their heads. Rod felt his sense of smell explode within his brain; it came alive richly and suddenly. He took C'mell by the hand and began walking through an immemorial Earth forest, with a temple older than time shining in the clear soft light cast by Earth's old moon. He knew that he was already dreaming. C'mell caught his thought and said,

"Rod, my master and lover, this *is* a dream. But I am in it with you...."

*Who can measure a thousand years of happy dreaming - the travels, the hunts, the picnics, the visits to forgotten and empty cities, the discovery of beautiful views and strange places? And the love, and the sharing, and the re-reflection of everything wonderful and strange by two separate, distinct and utterly harmonious personalities. C'mell the c'girl and C'roderick the c'man: they seemed happily doomed to be with one another. Who can live whole centuries of real bliss and then report it in minutes? Who can tell the full tale of such real lives - happiness, quarrels, reconciliations, problems, solutions and always sharing, happiness, and more sharing?...*

When they awakened Rod very gently, they let C'mell sleep on. He looked down at himself and expected to find himself old. But he was a young man still, in the deep forgotten underground of the E-telekeli, and he could not even smell. He reached for the thousand wonderful years as he watched C'mell, young again, lying on the bench, but the dream-years had started fading even as he reached for them.

Rod stumbled on his feet. They led him to a chair. The E-telekeli sat in adjacent chair, at the same table. He seemed weary.

"My mister and owner McBan, I monitored your dreamsharing, just to make sure it stayed in the right general direction. I hope you are satisfied."

Rod nodded, very slowly, and reached for the carafe of water, which someone had refilled while he slept.

"While you slept, mister McBan," said the great E-Man, "I had a telepathic conference, with the Lord Jestocost, who has been your friend, even though you do not know him. You have heard of the new automatic planoform ships?"

"They are experimental," said Rod.

"So they are," said the E-telekeli, "but perfectly safe. And the best 'automatic' ones are not automatic at all. They have snakemen pilots. My pilots. They can outperform any pilots of the Instrumentality."

"Of course," said Rod, "because they are dead."

"No more dead than I," laughed the white calm bird of the underground. "I put them in cataleptic trances, with the help of my son the doctor E-ikasuk, whom you first knew as the monkey-doctor A'gentur. On the ships they wake up. One of them can take you to Norstrilia in a single long fast jump. And my son can work on your right here. We have a good medical workshop in one of those rooms. After all, it was he who restored you under the supervision of Doctor Vomact on Mars. It will seem like a single night to you, though it will be several days in objective time. If you say good-bye to me now, and if you are ready to go, you will wake up in orbit just outside the Old North Australian subspace net. I have no wish for one of my underpeople to tear himself to pieces if he meets Mother Hitton's dreadful little kittens, whatever they may be. Do you happen to know?"

"I don't," said Rod quickly, "and if I did, I couldn't tell you. It's the Queen's secret."

"The Queen?"

"The Absent Queen. We use it to mean the Commonwealth government. Anyhow, mister bird, I can't go now. I've got to go back up to the surface of Earth. I want to say good-bye to the Catmaster. And I'm not going to leave this planet and abandon Eleanor. And I want my stamp that the Catmaster gave me. And the books. And maybe I should report about the death of Tostig Amaral."

"Do you trust me, mister and owner McBane?" The white giant rose to his feet; his eyes shone like fire.

The underpeople spontaneously chorused, "Put your trust in the joyful lawful, put your trust in the awful bright blank power of the underbird!"

"I've trusted you with my life and my fortune, so far," said Rod, a little sullenly, "but you're not going to make me leave Eleanor - no matter how much I want to get home. And I have an old enemy at home that I want to help. Houghton Syme, the Hon.Sec. There might be something on Old Earth which I could take back to him."

"I think you can trust me a little further," said the E-telekeli. "Would it solve the problem of the Hon.Sec. if you gave him a dreamshare with someone he loved, to make up his having a short life?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"I can," said the master of the underpeople, "have his prescription made up. It will have to be mixed with plasma from his blood before he takes it. It would be good for about three thousand years of subjective life. We have never let this out of our own undercity before, but you are the Friend of Earth, and you shall have it."

Rod tried to stammer his thanks, but he mumbled something about Eleanor instead: he just *couldn't* leave her.

The white giant took Rod by the arm and led him back to the visiphone, still oddly out of place in this forgotten room, so far underground.

"You know," said the white giant, "that I will not trick you with false messages or anything like that?"

One look at the strong, calm, relaxed face - a face so purposeful that it had no fretful or immediate purpose - convinced Rod that there was nothing to fear.

"Tune it, then," said the E-telekeli. "If Eleanor wants to go home we will arrange with the Instrumentality for her passage. As for you, my son E-ikasuk will change you back as he



changed you over. There is only one detail. Do you want the face you originally had or do you want it to reflect the wisdom and experience I have seen you gain?"

"I'm not posh," said Rod. "The same old face will do. If I am any wiser, my people will find it out soon enough."

"Good. He will get ready. Meanwhile, turn on the visiphone. It is already set to search for your fellow-citizen."

Rod flicked it on. There was a bewildering series of flashes and a kaleidoscopic dazzlement of scenes before the machine seemed to race along the beach at Meeya Meefia and searched out Eleanor. This was a very strange screen indeed: it had no visiphone at the other end. He could see Eleanor, looking exactly like his Norstrilian self, but she could not observe that she was being seen.

The machine focused on Eleanor/Rod McBan's face. She/he was talking to a very pretty woman, oddly mixed Norstrilian and Earth-like in appearance.

"Ruth Not-from-here," murmured the E-telekeli, "the daughter of the Lord William Not-from-here, a Chief of the Instrumentality. He wanted his daughter to marry 'you' so that they could return to Norstrilia. Look at the daughter. She is annoyed at 'you' right now."

Ruth was sitting on the beach, twisting away at her fingers in nervousness and worry, but her fingers and face showed more anger than despair. She was speaking to Eleanor, the 'Rod McBan.'

"My father just told me!" Ruth cried out. "Why, oh why did you give all your money for a Foundation of some kind? The Instrumentality just told him. I just don't understand. There's no point in us getting one of those Australian marriages now -"

"Suits me," said Eleanor/Rod McBan.

"Suits you, does it!" shrieked Ruth. "After the advantages you've taken of me!"

The false Rod McBan merely smiled at her friendly and knowledgeably. The real Rod, watching the picture ten kilometers below, thought that Eleanor seemed to have learned a great deal about how to be a young rich man on Earth.

Ruth's face changed suddenly. She broke from anger to laughter. She showed her bewilderment. "I must admit," she said honestly, "That I didn't really want to go back to the old family home in Old North Australia. The simple, honest life, a little on the stupid side. No oceans. No cities. Just sick, giant sheep and worlds full of money with nothing to spend it on. I like Earth and I suppose I'm decadent...."

Rod/Eleanor smiled right back at her. "Maybe I'm decadent too. I'm not poor. I can't help liking you. I don't want to marry anybody. But I have big credits here, and I enjoy being a young man -"

"I should say you do!" said Ruth. "What an odd thing for you to say!"

The false "Rod McBan" gave no sign that he/she noted the interruption. "I've just about decided to stay here and enjoy things. Everybody's rich in Norstrilia, but what good does it do? It had gotten pretty dull for me, I can tell you, or I wouldn't have taken the risk of coming here. Yes. I think I'll stay. I know that Rod -" He/she gasped, "Rod MacArthur, I mean, a sort of relative of mine - Rod can get the tax taken off my personal fortune so that I can stay right here."

("I will, too," said the real Rod McBan, far below the surface of the Earth.)

"You're welcome here, my dear," said Ruth Not-from-here to the false Rod McBan.

Down below, the E-telekeli gestured at the screen. "Seen enough?" he said to Rod.

"Enough," said Rod, "but make sure that she knows *I* am all right and that I am trying to take care of her. Can you get in touch with the Lord Jestocost or somebody and arrange for Eleanor to stay here and keep her fortune? Tell her to use the name of the owners of the Station of Doom, but I don't think Earthpeople will notice the difference anyhow. *She'll* know it's all right with me, and that's all that matters. If she really likes it here in a copy of my body, may the great sheep sit on her!"

"An odd blessing," said the E-telekeli, "but it can all be arranged."

Rod made no move to leave. He had turned off the screen, but he just stood there.

"Something else?" said the E-telekeli.

"C'Mell," said Rod.

"She's all right," said the lord of the underworld. "She expects nothing from you. She's a good underperson."

"I want to do something for her."

"There is nothing she wants. She is happy. You do not need to meddle."

"She won't be a girlygirl forever," Rod insisted. "You underpeople get old. I don't know how you manage without stroon."

"Neither do I," said the E-telekeli. "I just happen to have long life. But you're right about her. She will age soon enough, by your kind of time."

"I'd like to buy the restaurant for her, the one the bear-man has, and let it become a sort of meeting place open to people and underpeople. She could give it the romantic and interesting touch so that it could be a success."

"A wonderful idea. A perfect project for your Foundation," smiled the E-telekeli. "It shall be done."

"And the Catmaster?" asked Rod. "Is there anything I can do for him?"

"No, do not concern yourself with C'william," said the E-telekeli. "He is under the protection of the Instrumentality and he knows the sign of the Fish." The great underman paused to give Rod a chance to inquire what that sign might be, but Rod did not note the significance of the pause, so the bird-like giant went on. "C'william has already received his reward in the good change which he has made in your life. Now, if you are ready, we will put you to sleep, my son E-ikasuk will change you out of your cat-body and you will wake in orbit around your home."

"C'mell? Can you wake her up so I can say goodbye after that thousand years?"

The master of the underworld took Rod gently by the arm and walked him across the huge underground room, talking as they went. "Would you want to have another good-bye, after that thousand years she remembers with you, if you were she? Let her be. It is kinder this way. You are human. You can afford to be rich with kindness. It is one of the best traits which you human people have."

Rod stopped. "Do you have a recorder of some kind, then? She welcomed me to Earth with a wonderful little song about 'high birds crying' and I want to leave one of our Norstrilian songs for her."

"Sing anything," said the E-telekeli, "and the chorus of my attendants will remember it as long as they live. The others would appreciate it, too."

Rod looked around at the underpeople who had followed them. For a moment he was embarrassed at singing to all of them, but when he saw their warm, adoring smiles, he was at ease with them. "Remember this, then, and be sure to sing it to C'mell for me, when she awakens." He lifted his voice a little and sang:

*Run where the ram is dancing, prancing!  
Listen where the ewe is greeting, bleating.  
Rush where the lambs are running, funning.  
Watch where the stroon is growing, flowing.  
See how the men are reaping, heaping  
Wealth for their world!*

*Look, where the hills are dipping, ripping.  
Sit where the air is drying, frying.  
Go where the clouds are pacing, racing,  
Stand where the wealth is gleaming, teeming.  
Shout to the top of the singing, ringing  
Norstrilian power and pride.*

The chorus sang it back at him with a wealth and richness which he had never heard in the little song before.

"And now," said the E-telekeli, "the blessing of the First Forbidden One be upon you." The giant bowed a little and kissed Rod McBan on the forehead. Rod thought it strange and started to speak, but the eyes were upon him.

Eyes - like twin fires.

Fire - like friendship, like warmth, like a welcome and a farewell.

Eyes - which became a single fire.

He awakened only when he was in orbit around Old North Australia.

The descent was easy. The ship had a viewer. The snake-pilot said very little. He put Rod down in the Station of Doom, a few hundred meters from his own door. He left two heavy packages. An Old North Australian patrol ship hovered overhead and the air hummed with danger while Norstrilian police floated to the ground and made sure that no one besides Rod McBan got off. The Earth ship whispered and was gone.

"I'll give you a hand, mister," said one of the police. He clutched Rod with one, mechanical claw of his ornithopter, caught the two packages in the other, and flung his machine into the air with a single beat of the giant wings. They coasted into the yard, the wings tipped up, Red and his packages were deposited deftly and the machine flapped away in silence.

There was nobody there. He knew that Aunt Doris would come soon. And Lavinia. Lavinia! Here, now, on this dear poor dry earth, he knew how much Lavinia suited him. Now he could spiek, he could hier!

It was strange. Yesterday - or was it yesterday (for it felt like yesterday)? - he had felt very young indeed. And now, since his visit to the Catmaster, he felt somehow grown up, as if he had discovered all his personal ingrown problems and had left them behind on Old Earth. He seemed to know in his deepest mind that C'mell had never been more than nine-tenths his, and that the other tenth - the most valuable and beautiful and most secret tenth of her life - was forever given to some other man or underman whom he would never know. He felt that C'mell would never give her heart again. And yet he kept for her a special kind of tenderness, which would never recur. It was not marriage which they had had, but it was pure romance.

But here, here waited home itself, and love. Lavinia was in it, dear Lavinia with her mad lost father and her kindness to a Rod who had not let much kindness into his life.

Suddenly, the words of an old poem rose unbidden to his mind:

*Ever. Never. Forever.  
Three worlds. The lever  
Of life upon time.  
Ever. Never. Forever.*

He spieked. He spieked very loud, "Lavinia!"

Beyond the hill the cry came back, right into his mind, "Rod, Rod! Oh, Rod! Rod?"

"Yes," he spieked. "Don't run. I'm home."

He felt her mind coming near, though she must have been beyond one of the nearby hills. When he touched minds with Lavinia, he knew that this was her ground, and his too. Not for them the wet wonders of Earth, the golden-haired beauties of C'mell and Earth people! He knew without doubt that Lavinia would love and recognize the new Rod as she had loved the old.

He waited very quietly and then he laughed to himself under the gray nearby friendly sky of Norstrilia. He had momentarily had the childish impulse to rush across the hills and to kiss his own computer.

He waited for Lavinia instead.

## CHAPTER NINE: COUNSELS, COUNCILS, CONSOLES AND CONSULS

### Ten years later, two earth-men talking

"You don't believe all the malarkey, do you?"

"What's 'marlarkey'?"

"Isn't that a beautiful word? It's ancient. A robot dug it up. It means rubbish, hooey, nonsense, gibberish, phlutt, idle talk or hallucinations - in other words, just what you've been saying."

"You mean, about a boy buying the planet Earth?"

"Sure. He couldn't do it, not even with Norstrilian money. There are too many regulations. It was just an economic adjustment."

"What's an 'economic adjustment'?"

"That's another ancient word I found. It's almost as good as malarkey. It does have some meaning, though. It means that the masters rearrange things by changing the volume or the flow or the title to property. The Instrumentality wanted to shake down the Earth government and get some more free credits to play around with, so between them they invented an imaginary character named Rod McBan. Then, they had him buy the Earth. Then he goes away. It doesn't make sense. No normal boy would have done that. They say he had one million women. What do you think a normal boy would do if somebody gave him one million women?"

"You're not proving anything. Anyhow, I saw Rod McBan myself, two years ago."

"That's the other one, not the one who is supposed to have bought Earth. That's just a rich immigrant who lives down near Meeya Meefia. I could tell you some things about him, too."

"But why shouldn't somebody buy Earth if he corners the Norstrilian stroon market?"

"Who ever cornered it in the first place? I tell you, Rod McBan is just an invention. Have you ever seen a picturebox of him?"

"No."

"Did you ever know anybody who met him?"

"I heard that the Lord Jestocost was mixed up in it, and that expensive girlygirl What's-her-name - you know - the redhead - C'mell, was too."

"That's what *you* heard. Malarkey, pure genuine ancient malarkey. There was no such boy, ever. It's all propaganda."

"You're always that way. Grumbling. Doubting. I'm glad I'm not you."

"Pal, that's real, real reciprocal. 'Better dead than gullible,' that's my motto."

### **On a planofforming ship, outbound from Earth, also ten years later.**

The Stop-captain, talking to a passenger, female:

"I'm glad to see, ma'am, that you didn't buy any of those Earth fashions. Back home, the air would take them off you in half minute."

"I'm old-fashioned," she smiled. Then a thought crossed her mind, and she added a question: "You're in the space business, sir and Stop-captain. Did you ever hear the story of Rod McBan? I think it's thrilling."

"You mean, the boy who bought Earth?"

"Yes," she gasped. "Is it true?"

"Completely true," he said, "except for one little detail. This 'Rod McBan' wasn't named that at all. He wasn't a Norstrilian. He was a hominoid from some other world, and he was buying the Earth with pirate money. They wanted to get his credits away from him, but he may have been a Wet Stinker from Amazonas Triste or he may have been one of those little tiny men, about the size of a walnut, from the Solid Planet. That's why he bought Earth and left it so suddenly. You see, ma'am and dame, no Old North Australian ever thinks about anything except his money. They even have one of the ancient forms of government still left on that planet, and they would never let one of their own boys buy Earth. They'd all sit around and talk him into putting it in a savings account, instead. They're clannish people. That's why I don't think it was a Norstrilian at all."

The woman's eyes widened. "You're spoiling a lovely story for me, mister and Stop-captain."

"Don't call me 'mister,' ma'am. That's a Norstrilian title. I'm just a plain 'sir.' "

They both stared at the little imaginary waterfall on the wall.

Before the Stop-captain went back to his work, he added, "For my money, it must have been one of those little tiny men from the Solid Planet. Only a fool like that would buy the dower rights to a million women. We're both grown up, ma'am. I ask you, what would an itty-bitty man from the Solid Planet do with one Earth woman, let alone a million of them?"

She giggled and blushed as the Stop-captain stamped triumphantly away, having gotten in his last masculine word.

### **E'lamelanie, two years after Earth**

"Father, give me hope."

The E-telekeli was gentle. "I can give you almost anything from this world, but you are talking about the world of the sign of the Fish, which none of us controls. You had better go back into the everyday life of our cavern and not spend so much time on your devotional exercises, if they make you unhappy."

She stared at him. "It's not that. It's not that at all. It's just that I know that the robot, the rat and the Copt all agreed that the Promised One would come here to Earth." A desperate note entered her voice. *"Father, could it have been Rod McBan?"*

"What do you mean?"

"Could he have been the Promised One, without my knowing it? Could he have come and gone just to test my faith?"

The bird-giant rarely laughed; he had never laughed at his own daughter before. But this was too absurd: he laughed at her, but a wise part of his mind told him that the laughter, though cruel now, would be good for her later on.

"Rod? A promised speaker of the truth? Oh, no. Ho - ho - ho. Rod McBan is one of the nicest human beings I ever met. A good young man, almost like a bird. But he's no messenger from eternity."

The daughter bowed and turned away.

She had already composed a tragedy about herself, the mistaken one, who had met "the prince of the word," whom the worlds awaited, and had failed to know him because her faith was too weak. The strain of waiting for something that might happen now or a million years from now was too much. It was easier to accept failure and self-reproach than to endure the timeless torment of undated hope.

She had a little nook in the wall where she spent many of her waiting hours. She took out a little stringed instrument which her father had made for her. It emitted ancient, weeping sounds, and she sang her own little song to it, the song of E-lamelanie who was trying to give up waiting for Rod McBan.

She looked out into the room.

A little girl, wearing nothing but panties, stared at her with fixed eyes. E-lamelanie looked back at the child. It had no expression; it just stared at her. She wondered if it might be one of the turtle-children whom her father had rescued several years earlier.

She looked away from the child and sang her song anyhow:

*Once again, across the years,  
I wept for you.  
I could not stop the bitter tears  
I kept for you.  
The hearthstone of my early life  
Was swept for you.  
A different, modulated time  
awaits me now.  
Yet there are moments when the past  
asks why and how.  
The future marches much too fast.  
Allow, allow -  
But no. That's all. Across the years  
I wept for you.*

When she finished, the turtle-child was still watching. Almost angrily, E-lamelanie put away her little violin.

### **What the turtle-child thought, at the same moment**

I know a lot even if I don't feel like talking about it and I know that the most wonderful real man in all the planets came right down here into this big room and talked to these people because he is the man that the long silly girl is singing about because she does not have him but why should she anyhow and I am really the one who is going to get him because I am a turtle-child and I will be right here waiting when all these people are dead and pushed down into the dissolution vats and someday he will come back to earth and I will be all grown up and I will be a turtle-woman, more beautiful than any human woman ever was, and he is going to marry me and take me off to his planet and I will always be happy with him because I will not argue all the time, the way that bird-people and cat-people and dog-people do, so that when Rod McBan is my husband and I rush dinner out of the wall for him, if he tries to argue with me I will just be shy and sweet and I won't say anything, nothing at all, to him for one hundred years and for two hundred years, and nobody could get mad at a beautiful turtle-woman who never talked back....

### **The Council of the Guild of Thieves, under Viola Siderea**

The herald called, "His audacity, the Chief of thieves, is pleased to report to the Council of Thieves!"

An old man stood, very ceremoniously: "You bring us wealth, sir and chief, we trust - from the gullible - from the weak - from the heartless among mankind?"

The Chief of Thieves proclaimed,

"It is the matter of Rod McBan."

A visible stir went through the Council.

The Chief of Thieves went on, with equal formality: "We never did intercept him in space, though we monitored every vehicle which came out of the sticky, sparky space around Norstrilia. Naturally, we did not send anyone down to meet Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons - may the mildew-men find them! whatever those 'kittons' may be. There was a coffin with a woman in it and a small box with a head. Never mind. He got past us. But when he got to Earth, we caught four of him."

"Four?" gasped one old Councilor.

"Yes," said the Chief Of Thieves. "Four Rod McBans. There was a human one, too, but we could tell that one was a decoy. It had originally been a woman and was enjoying itself hugely after having been transformed into a young man. So we got four Rod McBans. All four of them were Earth robots, very well made."

"You stole them?" said a Councilor.

"Of course," said the Chief of Thieves, thinkg like a human wolf. "And the Earth government made no objection at all. The Earth government simply sent us a bill for them when we tried to leave - something like one-fourth megacredit 'for the use of custom designed robots.' "

"That's a low honest trick!" cried the Chairman of the Guild of Thieves. "What did you do?" His eyes stared wide open and his voice dropped. "You didn't turn honest and charge the bill to us, did you? We're already in debt to those honest rogues!"



The Chief of Thieves squirmed a little. "Not quite that bad, your tricky highnesses! I cheated the Earth some, though I fear it may have bordered on honesty, the way I did it."

"What did you do? Tell us quick, man!"

"Since I did not get the real Rod McBan, I took the robots apart and taught them how to be thieves. They stole enough money to pay all the penalties and recoup the expense of the voyage."

"You show a profit?" cried a Councilor.

"Forty minicredits," said the Chief of Thieves. "But the worst is yet to come. You know what Earth does to real thieves."

A shudder went through the room. They all knew about Earth reconditioners which had changed bold thieves into dull honest rogues.

"But, you see, sirs and honored ones," the Chief of Thieves went on, apologetically, "the Earth authorities caught us at that, too. They liked the thief robots. They made wonderful pickpockets and they kept the people stirred up. The robots also gave everything back. So," said the Chief of Thieves, blushing, "we have a contract to turn two thousand humanoid robots into pickpockets and sneak-thieves. Just to make life on Earth more fun. The robots are out in orbit, right now."

"You mean," shrilled the Chairman, "you signed an *honest* contract? You, the Chief of Thieves!"

The Chief really blushed and choked. "What could I do? Besides, they had me. I got good terms, though. Two hundred and twenty credits for processing each robot into a master chief. We can live well on that for a while."

For a long time there was dead silence.

At last one of the oldest Thieves on the Council began to sob: "I'm old. I can't stand it. The horror of it! Us - *us* doing honest work!"

"We're at least teaching the robots how to be thieves," said the Chief of Thieves, starkly.

No one commented on that.

Even the herald had to step aside and blow his nose.

### **At Meeva Meefia, twenty years after Rod's trip home**

Roderick Henry McBan, the former Eleanor, had become only imperceptibly older with the years. He had sent away his favorite, the little dancer, and he wondered why the Instrumentality, not even the Earth government, had sent him official warning to "stay peaceably in the dwelling of the said stated person, there to await an empowered envoy of this Instrument" and to comply with orders subsequently to be issued by the envoy hereinbefore indicated."

Roderick Henry McBan remembered the long years of virtue, independence and drudgery on Norstrilia with unconcealed loathing. He liked being a rich, wild young man on Earth ever so much better than being a respectable spinster under the gray skies of Old North Australia. When he dreamed, he was sometimes Eleanor again, and he sometimes had long morbid periods in which he was neither Eleanor nor Rod, but a nameless being cast out from some world or time of irrecoverable enchantments. In those gloomy periods, which were few but

very intense, and usually cured by getting drunk and staying drunk for a few days, he found himself wondering who he was. What could he be? Was he Eleanor, the honest workwoman from the Station of Doom? Was he an adoptive cousin of Rod McBan, the man who had bought Old Earth Itself? What was this self - this Roderick Henry McBan? He maundered about it so much to one of his girlfriends, a calypso singer, that she set his own words, better arranged, to an ancient tune and sang them back to him:

*To be me, is it right, is it good?  
To go on, when the others have stood -  
To the gate, through the door, past the wall,  
Between this and the nothing-at-all.*

*It is cold, it is me, in the out.  
I am true, I am me, in the lone.  
Such silence leaves room for no doubt.  
It is brightness unbroken by tone.*

*To be me, it is strange, it is true.  
Shall I lie? To be them, to have peace?  
Will I know, can I tell, when I'm through?  
Do I stop when my troubles must cease?*

*If the wall isn't glass, isn't there  
If it's real but compounded of air,  
Am I lost if I go where I go  
Where I'm me? I am yes. Am I no?*

*To be me, is it right, is it so?  
Can I count on my brain, on my eye?  
Will I be you or be her by and bye?  
Are they true, all these things that I know?*

*You are mad, in the wall. On the out,  
I'm alone and as sane as the grave.  
Do I fall, do I lose what I save?  
Am I me, if I echo your shout?*

*I have gone to a season of time....  
Out of thought, out of life, out of rhyme.  
If I come to be you, do I lose  
The chance to be me if I choose?*

Rod/Eleanor had moments of desperation, and sometimes wondered if the Earth authorities or the Instrumentality would take him/her away from reconditioning.

The warning today was formal, fierce, serene in its implacable self-assurance.

Against his/her better judgment, Roderick Henry McBan poured out a stiff drink and waited for the inevitable.

Destiny came as three men, all of them strangers, but one wearing the uniform of an Old North Australia counsul. When they got close, she recognized the consul as Lord William Not-from-here, with whose daughter Ruth he/she had disported on these very sands many years before.

The greetings were wearisomely long, but Rod/Eleanor had learned, both on Old North Australia and here on Manhome Earth, never to discount ceremony as the salvager of difficult or painful occasions. It was the Lord William Not-from-here who spoke.

"Hear now, Lord Roderick Eleanor, the message of a plenum of the Instrumentality, lawfully and formally assembled, to wit -

"That you, the Lord Roderick Eleanor be known to be and be indeed a Chief of the Instrumentality until the day of your death -

"That you have earned this status by survival capacity, and that the strange and difficult lives which you have already led with no thought of suicide have earned you a place in our terrible and dutiful ranks -

"That in being and becoming the Lord Roderick Eleanor, you shall be man or woman, young or old, as the Instrumentality may order -

"That you take power to serve, that you serve to take power, that you come with us, that you look not backward, that you remember to forget, that you forget old remembering, that within the Instrumentality you are not a person, but a part of a person -

"That you be made welcome to the oldest servant of mankind, the Instrumentality Itself."

Roderick Eleanor had not a word to say.

Newly appointed Lords of the Instrumentality rarely had anything to say. It was the custom of the Instrumentality to take new appointees by surprise, after minute examination of their records for intelligence, will, vitality, and again, vitality.

The Lord William was smiling as he held out his hand and speaking in off-worldly honest Norstrilian talk, "Welcome, cousin from the gray rich clouds. Not many of our people have ever been chosen. Let me welcome you."

Roderick Eleanor took his hand. There was still nothing to say.

### **The Palace of the Governor of Night, twenty years after Rod's return**

"I turned off the human voice hours ago, Lavinia. Turned it off. We always get a sharper reading with the numbers. It doesn't have a clue on our boys. I've been across this console a hundred times. Come along, old girl. It's no use predicting the future. The future is already here. Our boys will be out of the van, one way or the other, by the time we walk over the hill and down to them." He spoke with his voice, as a little sign of tenderness between them.

Lavinia asked nervously, "Shouldn't we take an ornithopter and fly?"

"No, girl," said Rod tenderly. "What would our neighbors and kinsmen think if they saw the parents flying in like wild off-worlders or a pair of crimson pommies who can't keep a steady head when there's a bit of blow-up. After all, our big girl Casheba made it two years ago, and her eyes weren't so good."

"She's a howler, that one," said Lavinia warmly. "She could fight off a space pirate even better than you could before you could spiek."

They walked slowly up the hill.

When they crossed the top of the hill, they got the ominous melody coming right at them:

*Out in the garden of death, our young  
Have tasted the valiant taste of fear.  
With muscular arm and reckless tongue,  
They have won, and lost, and escaped us here.*

In one form or another, all Old North Australians knew that tune. It was what the old people hummed when the young ones had to go into the vans to be selected out for survival or nonsurvival.

They saw the judges come out of the van. The Hon.Sec. Houghton Syme was there, his face bland and his cares erased by the special dreamlives which Rod's medicine had brought from the secret underground of Earth. The Lord Redlady was there, and Doctor Wentworth.

Lavinia started to run downhill toward the people, but Rod grabbed her arm and said with rough affection,

"Steady on, old girl. McBans never run - from nothing, and to nothing!"

She gulped but she joined pace with him.

People began looking up at them as they approached.

Nothing was to be told from the expressions.

It was the Lord Redlady, unconventional to the end, who broke the sign to them.

He held up one finger.

Only one.

Immediately thereafter Rod and Lavinia saw their twins. Ted, the fairer one, sat on a chair while Old Bill tried to give him a drink. Ted wouldn't take it. He looked across the land as though he could not believe what he saw. Rich, the darker twin, stood all alone.

All alone, and laughing.

Laughing.

Rod McBan and his missus walked across the land of Doom to be civil to their neighbors. This was indeed what inexorable custom commanded. She squeezed his hand a little tighter; he held her arm a little more firmly.

After a long time they had done their formal courtesies. Rod pulled Ted to his feet. "Hullo, boy. You made it. You know who you are?"

Mechanically the boy recited, "Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan to-the-hundred-and-fifty-second, sir and father!"

Then the boy broke, for just a moment. He pointed at Rich, who was still laughing, off by himself, and then plunged for his father's hug:

"O, dad! Why me? Why *me*?"