

# **Adrift Just off the Islets of Langerhans**

**The Ultimate Werewolf, #1**

**by Harlan Ellison, 1934-2018**

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**Introduction**

**Crying „Wolf!”**

That was one helluva year, 1941. Life on this planet was savagely altered for all time, for every human being, in ways too obscure and too terrible to predict. We began to metamorphose—to change shape and purpose—to become beasts of a different kind than had ever roamed the Earth before.

Looking in the mirror will not reveal the face of the creature. We look about the same. But that's only because the full moon isn't shining. Try the mirrors of television, advertising, newspaper reports, crime statistics; or look out your window at the color of the sky, the litter in the street, the graffiti on the wall. It started in earnest in 1941.

In that year, powerful influences were hardwired into our society. We went to war in the most massive assemblage of force and brutality since 1237 and the beginning of the Mongol conquest of most of the civilized world. 1941 was the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, the full-bore entry of America into World War II, the proclamation on my eighth birthday—May 27<sup>th</sup>—by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt of a state of national emergency; it was the year the human race poured fuel-oil on the conflagration and four years later added to the flames with the power of the split atom.

And the world of fantasy literature was changed forever in that year. But no one seemed to notice.

In 1941 movies were at the height of their mesmeric power over the American public. We were coming out of the Depression, millions were still on the road, selling pencils, working for what they called “coolie wages”—and radio, pulp magazines, and movies were the only inexpensive diversions. Despite the false courage embodied in Shirley Temple songs and Busby Berkeley kick-turn-kick-turn assurances that *We're in the Money*, scrounging up a dime for a Saturday matinee double-bill was no less than hardscrabble for most Americans.

But, oh, what a pull on every one of us; to be drawn into those gorgeous palaces of dreams. 1941 was arguably the best year for cinema before and since. In that twelvemonth before the world pitched headlong into darkness, here is a *partial* list of the more than four hundred motion pictures produced by Hollywood:

*The Maltese Falcon*  
*Citizen Kane*  
*Dumbo*  
*Sergeant York*  
*Major Barbara*  
*How Green Was My Valley*  
*The Lady Eve*  
*Here Comes Mr. Jordan*  
*The Stars Look Down*  
*Suspicion*  
*The Little Foxes*  
*Meet John Doe*  
*Ball of Fire*

Leonard Maltin gives four stars to seven of those, and three and a half to the remaining six. What a lineup! Films so influential that even today, when critics are

polled, at least three off that list perennially find placement among the top ten of all time. But there was one more, that went unnoticed, that altered the world of fantastic literature as surely and positively as Hitler altered the world at large sorely and negatively. Was it the John Lee Mahin-scripted, Victor Fleming-directed version of Robert Louis Stevenson's classic *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, starring Spencer Tracy, Ingrid Bergman, Lana Turner, and Sir C. Aubrey Smith... a film on which hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent for a lavish production by MGM, the most prestigious studio of its day? In fact, no.

It was a minor, only-passingly-noted, "B" (for *bottom*) second feature on a double-bill. It was from a studio hardly known as the House of Influential Cinema. It was made on a parsimonious budget; and though it boasted such outstanding thespic talents as Claude Rains, Ralph Bellamy, Warren William, and Bela Lugosi (in a cameo role), it was by no means a *big* film, or even a film that Universal pushed very hard. It was intended to come, and to go; to make a few bucks, and to fill the hole in a Saturday matinee that came immediately after a Charles Starrett "Durango Kid" western.

It has been fifty years since that intentionally disposable chunk of celluloid trash was tossed out onto the movie screens of America, like an unwanted infant wrapped in newspaper and flung into a dumpster. And if you check any exhaustive reference on the Oscars (such as ACADEMY AWARDS: *The Ungar Reference Index*) you will discover that in no category did that film get a nomination.

Yet fifty years later, even with the plethora of period films committed to videocassette, aired late night on local channels, run and rerun on cable—even specialty channels such as American Film Classics—and screened in the dwindling number of revival theaters or in film schools or museum cinema programs, you will likely never see *Dive Bomber*, *Aloma of the South Seas*, *Son of Monte Cristo*, or *Las Vegas Nights*... all of which received Oscar nominations in one or another category.

But I'll bet you an eyeball that somewhere in these here great Yew-nited States, today, tonight, tomorrow, an enraptured audience is watching Lon Chaney, Jr., as *The Wolf Man*. A film created as a throw-away fifty years ago, exquisitely scripted by Curt Siodmak, directed by George Waggner, moodily art directed in the horrorstory equivalent of *film noir*; a film that forever cast into the American idiom the timeless words of Madame Maria Ouspenskaya:

*"Even the man who is pure in heart  
And says his prayers by night  
May become a wolf when the wolfbane blooms  
And the moon is pure and bright."*

Before the seventy-one minutes of *The Wolf Man* were unleashed on generations of kids whose spines creaked and whose hair trembled as they watched tragic Lawrence Talbot metamorphose into a blood-hungry beast thing, the werewolf was barely considered fit fodder for fantasy. Yes, there had been a 1913 silent, *The Werewolf* two or three French films featuring lycanthropy, and the excellent *Werewolf of London* with Henry Hull in 1935, but that was just about the totality.

The potboiler picture no one thought would last more than a couple of weeks, has not only endured, it has skewed imaginative literature in its own image for half a century. More than any previous rendition of the werewolf mythos, *The Wolf Man* created an entire genre.

Purposely, I'll not rehash the litany of the werewolf theme in classical literature: Dumas-pere's the wolf leader in 1857, Captain Marryat's "The White Wolf of the Hartz Mountains" in 1839, or even the first known introduction of the werewolf antetype in English fiction—the 13th century court romance by Marie de France, "Lay of the Bisclavaret." Nor will I dwell at length on images of the werewolf in phenomenological anecdote... though it wouldn't hurt you to look up Freud's *Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis* (1909) in which the father of modern psychoanalysis treats the case of a wealthy young Russian whose history is now commonly referred to as being that of the "Wolf Man."

Those who want irrefutable documentation of the longevity, fecundity, and legitimacy of the werewolf motif in literature are commended to three excellent essays: "Images of the Werewolf" and "The Werewolf Theme in Weird Fiction," both by Brian J. Frost, each exhaustive and breathtakingly lucid, and both available in Frost's frequently-reprinted 1973 paperback anthology, book of the werewolf (Sphere Books Ltd.); and Bill Pronzini's 1978 essay on the form in his anthology werewolf!

I choose to sidestep Sabine Baring-Gould and Guy Endore (who was a terrific gentleman, whom I was privileged to know) and Montague Summers, to suggest that for all its weighty and unchallengeable credentials, the man-into-wolf story never really came into its own until Lon Chaney, Jr. assayed the role of Curt Siodmak's Lawrence Talbot and...

...talk about casting a role perfectly: do you know about the *amazing* thing that happened when Lon Chaney, Jr. was born?

Creighton Tull Chaney was delivered, *stillborn*, on February 10th, 1906. His father grabbed him up, rushed out into the frigid Oklahoma night, broke the ice on Belle Isle Lake with a small hatchet, and plunged the baby into the freezing water, bringing him to life. Man was *born* to play that part.

And the younger Chaney was properly proud of his performance as the Wolf Man. Though he received inordinate acclaim for his roles in *High Noon* and *The Defiant Ones*, and will always be remembered as Lenny to Burgess Meredith's George in the film of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Chaney always doted on how well he'd performed as Lawrence Talbot. He always said that others had set the models for The Mummy. Frankenstein, Dracula... but *he* had created the image of the Wolf Man, for all time, for all those who came after him.

And it is that 1941 film, I submit, that is the impetus for the book you now hold. No matter how many spectacular werewolf stories had been written and published before the house lights went down and the opening credits rolled for the first time (and I've always suspected that when Jack Williamson sat down to write darker than you think for *Unknown* in 1939, when it was published in late 1940, when it was expanded for book publication in 1948, it was the final moment of *non-filmic* influence in the werewolf genre), thereafter no one could go to the form free of the tormented face of Lawrence Talbot.

It was that film, in that tortuous moment of human existence before we plunged so totally into the bestial existence whose results we see around us today, that the world of imaginative literature absorbed completely. *The Wolf Man* has become so thoroughly an icon, that almost no one notices (and no one has noted in print) that the only element of Accepted Werewolf Lore now endemic to *every* saga of lycanthropy that predates the film, is the business about the full moon.

The pentagram, seeing it in the palm of the next victim, silver used to kill, half-man/half-beast... it was all cobbled up by Siodmak.

So it is appropriate that on this more-or-less 50th anniversary of the first shape-change of Lawrence Talbot into the rending, ripping, frightful creature the entire world now identifies as The Wolf Man, that this book should pay homage to a "little trash movie" that has sown its seed of entertainment with such delicious profligacy.

For this book was born on a freezing night in 1906, on the shore of an Oklahoma lake, where the son of a great actor-to-be was immersed in the waters of posterity. Lon Chaney, Jr. changed for us in 1941; and we've been changing ever since.

The question remains: who among us are the real beasts?

Harlan Ellison



## **Adrift Just off the Islets of Langerhans**

**LATITUDE 38° 54' N  
LONGITUDE 77° 00' 13" W**

When Moby Dick awoke one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed of kelp into a monstrous Ahab.

Crawling in stages from the soggy womb of sheets, he stumbled into the kitchen and ran water into the teapot. There was lye in the corner of each eye. He put his head under the spigot and let the cold water rush around his cheeks.

Dead bottles littered the living room. One hundred and eleven empty bottles that had contained Robitussin and Romilar-CF. He padded through the debris to the front door and opened it a crack. Daylight assaulted him. "Oh, God," he murmured, and closed his eyes to pick up the folded newspaper from the stoop.

Once more in dusk, he opened the paper. The headline read: Bolivian ambassador found murdered, and the feature story heading column one detailed

the discovery of the ambassador's body, badly decomposed, in an abandoned refrigerator in an empty lot in Secaucus, New Jersey.

The teapot whistled.

Naked, he padded toward the kitchen: as he passed the aquarium he saw that terrible fish was still alive, and this morning whistling like a bluejay, making tiny streams of bubbles that rose to burst on the scummy surface of the water. He paused beside the tank, turned on the light and looked in through the drifting eddies of stringered algae. The fish simply would not die. It had killed off every other fish in the tank—prettier fish, friendlier fish, livelier fish, even larger and more dangerous fish—had killed them all, one by one, and eaten out the eyes. Now it swam the tank alone, ruler of its worthless domain.

He had tried to let the fish kill itself, trying every form of neglect short of outright murder by not feeding it; but the pale, worm-pink devil even thrived in the dark and filth-laden waters.

Now it sang like a bluejay. He hated the fish with a passion he could barely contain.

He sprinkled flakes from a plastic container, grinding them between thumb and forefinger as experts had advised him to do it, and watched the multicolored granules of fish meal, roe, milt, brine shrimp, day-fly eggs, oatflour and egg yolk ride on the surface for a moment before the detestable fish-face came snapping to the top to suck them down. He turned away, cursing and hating the fish. It would not die. Like him, it would not die.

In the kitchen, bent over the boiling water, he understood for the first time the true status of his situation. Though he was probably nowhere near the rotting outer edge of sanity, he could smell its foulness on the wind, coming in from the horizon; and like some wild animal rolling its eyes at the scent of carrion and the feeders thereon, he was being driven closer to lunacy every day, just from the smell.

He carried the teapot, a cup and two tea bags to the kitchen table and sat down. Propped open in a plastic stand used for keeping cookbooks handy while mixing ingredients, the Mayan Codex translations remained unread from the evening before. He poured the water, dangled the tea bags in the cup and tried to focus his attention. The references to Itzamna, the chief divinity of the Maya pantheon, and medicine, his chief sphere of influence, blurred. Ixtab, the goddess of suicide, seemed more apropos for this morning, this deadly terrible morning. He tried reading, but the words only went in, nothing happened to them, they didn't sing. He sipped tea and found himself thinking of the chill, full circle of the Moon. He glanced over his shoulder at the kitchen clock. Seven forty-four.

He shoved away from the table, taking the half-full cup of tea, and went into the bedroom. The impression of his body, where it had lain in tortured sleep, still dented the bed. There were clumps of blood-matted hair clinging to the manacles that he had riveted to metal plates in the headboard. He rubbed his wrists where they had been scored raw, slopping a little tea on his left forearm. He wondered if the Bolivian ambassador had been a piece of work he had tended to the month before.

His wristwatch lay on the bureau. He checked it. Seven forty-six. Slightly less than an hour and a quarter to make the meeting with the consultation service. He

went into the bathroom, reached inside the shower stall and turned the handle till a fine needle-spray of icy water smashed the tiled wall of the stall. Letting the water run, he turned to the medicine cabinet for his shampoo. Taped to the mirror was an Ouchless Telfa finger bandage on which two lines had been neatly typed, in capitals:

THE WAY YOU WALK IS THORNY, MY SON  
THROUGH NO FAULT OF YOUR OWN

Then, opening the cabinet, removing a plastic bottle of herbal shampoo that smelled like friendly, deep forests, Lawrence Talbot resigned himself to the situation, turned and stepped into the shower, the merciless ice-laden waters of the Arctic pounding against his tortured flesh.

Suite 1544 of the Tishman Airport Center Building was a men's toilet. He stood against the wall opposite the door labeled men and drew the envelope from the inner breast pocket of his jacket. The paper was of good quality, the envelope crackled as he thumbed up the flap and withdrew the single-sheet letter inside. It was the correct address, the correct floor, the correct suite. Suite 1544 was a men's toilet, nonetheless. Talbot started to turn away. It was a vicious joke: he found no humor in the situation; not in his present circumstances.

He took one step toward the elevators.

The door to the men's room shimmered, fogged over like a windshield in winter, and re-formed. The legend on the door had changed. It now read:

INFORMATION ASSOCIATES

Suite 1544 was the consultation service that had written the invitational letter on paper of good quality in response to Talbot's mail inquiry responding to a noncommittal but judiciously-phrased advertisement in Forbes.

He opened the door and stepped inside. The woman behind the teak reception desk smiled at him, and his glance was split between the dimples that formed, and her legs, very nice, smooth legs, crossed and framed by the kneehole of the desk. "Mr. Talbot?"

He nodded. "Lawrence Talbot."

She smiled again. "Mr. Demeter will see you at once, sir. Would you like something to drink? Coffee? A soft drink?"

Talbot found himself touching his jacket where the envelope lay in an inner pocket. "No. Thank you."

She stood up, moving toward an inner office door, as Talbot said, "What do you do when someone tries to flush your desk?" He was not trying to be cute. He was annoyed. She turned and stared at him. There was silence in her appraisal, nothing more.

"Mr. Demeter is right through here, sir."

She opened the door and stood aside. Talbot walked past her, catching a scent of mimosa.

The inner office was furnished like the reading room of an exclusive men's club. Old money. Deep quiet. Dark, heavy woods. A lowered ceiling of acoustical tile on tracks, concealing a crawl space and probably electrical conduits. The pile rug of oranges and burnt umbers swallowed his feet to the ankles. Through a wall-sized window could be seen not the city that lay outside the building but a panoramic view of Hanauma Bay, on the Koko Head side of Oahu. The pure aquamarine waves came in like undulant snakes, rose like cobras, crested out white, tunneled and struck like asps at the blazing yellow beach. It was not a window; there were no windows in the office. It was a photograph. A deep, real photograph that was neither a projection nor a hologram. It was a wall looking out on another place entirely. Talbot knew nothing about exotic flora, but he was certain that the tall, razor-edge-leaved trees growing right down to beach's boundary were identical to those pictured in books depicting the Carboniferous period of the Earth before even the saurians had walked the land. What he was seeing had been gone for a very long time.

"Mr. Talbot. Good of you to come. John Demeter."

He came up from a wingback chair, extended his hand. Talbot took it. The grip was firm and cool. "Won't you sit down," Demeter said. "Something to drink? Coffee, perhaps, or a soft drink?" Talbot shook his head; Demeter nodded dismissal to the receptionist; she closed the door behind her, firmly, smoothly, silently.

Talbot studied Demeter in one long appraisal as he took the chair opposite the wingback. Demeter was in his early fifties, had retained a full and rich mop of hair that fell across his forehead in gray waves that clearly had not been touched up. His eyes were clear and blue, his features regular and jovial, his mouth wide and sincere. He was trim. The dark-brown business suit was hand-tailored and hung well. He sat easily and crossed his legs, revealing black hose that went above the shins. His shoes were highly polished.

"That's a fascinating door, the one to your outer office," Talbot said.

"Do we talk about my door?" Demeter asked.

"Not if you don't want to. That isn't why I came here."

"I don't want to. So let's discuss your particular problem."

"Your advertisement. I was intrigued."

Demeter smiled reassuringly. "Four copywriters worked very diligently at the proper phraseology."

"It brings in business."

"The right kind of business."

"You slanted it toward smart money. Very reserved. Conservative portfolios, few glammers, steady climbers. Wise old owls."

Demeter steepled his fingers and nodded, an understanding uncle. "Directly to the core, Mr. Talbot: wise old owls."

"I need some information. Some special, certain information. How confidential is your service, Mr. Demeter?"

The friendly uncle, the wise old owl, the reassuring businessman understood all the edited spaces behind the question. He nodded several times. Then he smiled and said, "That is a clever door I have, isn't it? You're absolutely right, Mr. Talbot."

"A certain understated eloquence."



“One hopes it answers more questions for our clients than it poses.”

Talbot sat back in the chair for the first time since he had entered Demeter’s office. “I think I can accept that.”

“Fine. Then why don’t we get to specifics. Mr. Talbot, you’re having some difficulty dying. Am I stating the situation succinctly?”

“Gently, Mr. Demeter.”

“Always.”

“Yes. You’re on the target.”

“But you have some problems, some rather unusual problems.”

“Inner ring.”

Demeter stood up and walked around the room, touching an astrolabe on a bookshelf, a cut-glass decanter on a sideboard, a sheaf of the *London Times* held together by a wooden pole. “We are only information specialists, Mr. Talbot. We can put you on to what you need, but the effectation is your problem.”

“If I have the *modus operandi*, I’ll have no trouble taking care of getting it done.”

“You’ve put a little aside.”

“A little.”

“Conservative portfolio? A few glammers, mostly steady climbers?”

“Bull’s-eye, Mr. Demeter.”

Demeter came back and sat down again. “All right, then. If you’ll take the time to write out very carefully *precisely* what you want—I know generally, from your letter, but I want this *precise*, for the contract—I think I can undertake to supply the data necessary to solving your problem.”

“At what cost?”

“Let’s decide what it is you want, first, shall we?”

Talbot nodded. Demeter reached over and pressed a call button on the smoking stand beside the wingback. The door opened. “Susan, would you show Mr. Talbot to the sanctum and provide him with writing materials.” She smiled and stood aside, waiting for Talbot to follow her. “And bring Mr. Talbot something to drink if he’d like it... some coffee? A soft drink, perhaps?” Talbot did not respond to the offer.

“I might need some time to get the phraseology down just right. I might have to work as diligently as your copywriters. It might take me a while. I’ll go home and bring it in tomorrow.”

Demeter looked troubled. “That might be inconvenient. That’s why we provide a quiet place where you can think.”

“You’d prefer I stay and do it now.”

“Inner ring, Mr. Talbot.”

“You might be a toilet if I came back tomorrow.”

“Bull’s-eye.”

“Let’s go, Susan. Bring me a glass of orange juice if you have it.” He preceded her out the door.

He followed her down the corridor at the far side of the reception room. He had not seen it before. She stopped at a door and opened it for him. There was an *escritoire* and a comfortable chair inside the small room. He could hear Muzak. “I’ll bring you your orange juice,” she said.

He went in and sat down. After a long time he wrote seven words on a sheet of paper.

Two months later, long after the series of visitations from silent messengers who brought rough drafts of the contract to be examined, who came again to take them away revised, who came again with counterproposals, who came again to take away further revised versions, who came again—finally—with Demeter-signed finals, and who waited while he examined and initialed and signed the finals—two months later, the map came via the last, mute messenger. He arranged for the final installment of the payment to Information Associates that same day: he had ceased wondering where fifteen boxcars of maize—grown specifically as the Zuni nation had grown it—was of value.

Two days later, a small item on an inside page of the *New York Times* noted that fifteen boxcars of farm produce had somehow vanished off a railroad spur near Albuquerque. An official investigation had been initiated.

The map was very specific, very detailed; it looked accurate.

He spent several days with Gray's *Anatomy* and, when he was satisfied that Demeter and his organization had been worth the staggering fee, he made a phone call. The long-distance operator turned him over to Inboard and he waited, after giving her the information, for the static-laden connection to be made. He insisted Budapest on the other end let it ring twenty times, twice the number the male operator was permitted per caller. On the twenty-first ring it was picked up. Miraculously, the background noise-level dropped and he heard Victor's voice as though it was across the room.

"Yes! Hello!" Impatient, surly as always.

"Victor... Larry Talbot."

"Where are you calling from?"

"The States. How are you?"

"Busy. What do you want?"

"I have a project. I want to hire you and your lab."

"Forget it. I'm coming down to final moments on a project and I can't be bothered now."

The imminence of hangup was in his voice. Talbot cut in quickly. "How long do you anticipate?"

"Till what?"

"Till you're clear."

"Another six months inside, eight to ten if it gets muddy. I said: forget it, Larry. I'm *not* available."

"At least let's talk."

"No."

"Am I wrong, Victor, or do you owe me a little?"

"After all this time you're calling in debts?"

"They only ripen with age."

There was a long silence in which Talbot heard dead space being pirated off their line. At one point he thought the other man had racked the receiver. Then,

finally, “Okay, Larry. We’ll *talk*. But you’ll have to come to me: I’m too involved to be hopping any jets.”

“That’s fine. I have free time.” A slow beat, then he added, “Nothing but free time.”

“*After* the full moon, Larry.” It was said with great specificity.

“Of course. I’ll meet you at the last place we met, at the same time, on the thirtieth of this month. Do you remember?”

“I remember. That’ll be fine.”

“Thank you, Victor. I appreciate this.”

There was no response.

Talbot’s voice softened: “How is your father?”

“Goodbye, Larry,” he answered, and hung up.

They met on the thirtieth of that month, at moonless midnight, on the corpse barge that plied between Buda and Pesht. It was the correct sort of night: chill fog moved in a pulsing curtain up the Danube from Belgrade.

They shook hands in the lee of a stack of cheap wooden coffins and, after hesitating awkwardly for a moment, they embraced like brothers. Talbot’s smile was tight and barely discernible by the withered illumination of the lantern and the barge’s running lights as he said, “All right, get it said so I don’t have to wait for the other shoe to drop.”

Victor grinned and murmured ominously:

*“Even the man who is pure in heart  
“And says his prayers by night  
“May become a wolf when the wolfbane blooms  
“And the moon is pure and bright.”*

Talbot made a face. “And other songs from the same album.”

“Still saying your prayers at night?”

“I stopped that when I realized the damned thing didn’t scan.”

“Hey. We aren’t here getting pneumonia just to discuss forced rhyme.”

The lines of weariness in Talbot’s face settled into a joyless pattern. “Victor, I need your help.”

“I’ll listen, Larry. Further than that it’s doubtful.”

Talbot weighed the warning and said, “Three months ago I answered an advertisement in *Forbes*, the business magazine. Information Associates. It was a cleverly phrased, very reserved, small box, inconspicuously placed. Except to those who knew how to read it. I won’t waste your time on details, but the sequence went like this: I answered the ad, hinting at my problem as circuitously as possible without being completely impenetrable. Vague words about important money. I had hopes. Well, I hit with this one. They sent back a letter calling a meet. Perhaps another false trail, was what I thought... God knows there’ve been enough of those.”

Victor lit a Sobranie Black & Gold and let the pungent scent of the smoke drift away on the fog. “But you went.”

“I went. Peculiar outfit, sophisticated security system, I had a strong feeling they came from, well, I’m not sure where... or when.”

Victor’s glance was abruptly kilowatts heavier with interest. “When, you say? Temporal travelers?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ve been waiting for something like that, you know. It’s inevitable. And they’d certainly make themselves known eventually.”

He lapsed into silence, thinking. Talbot brought him back sharply, I don’t know, Victor. I really don’t. But that’s not my concern at the moment.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry, Larry. Go on. You met with them...”

“Man named Demeter. I thought there might be some clue there. The name. I didn’t think of it at the time. The name Demeter; there was a florist in Cleveland, many years ago. But later, when I looked it up, Demeter, the Earth goddess, Greek mythology... no connection. At least, I don’t think so.

“We talked. He understood my problem and said he’d undertake the commission. But he wanted it specific, what I required of him, wanted it specific for the contract—God knows how he would have enforced the contract, but I’m sure he could have—he had a *window*, Victor, it looked out on—”

Victor spun the cigarette off his thumb and middle finger, snapping it straight down into the blood-black Danube. “Larry, you’re maundering.”

Talbot’s words caught in his throat. It was true. “I’m counting on you, Victor. I’m afraid it’s putting my usual aplomb out of phase.”

“All right, take it easy. Let me hear the rest of this and we’ll see. Relax.”

Talbot nodded and felt grateful. “I wrote out the nature of the commission. It was only seven words.” He reached into his topcoat pocket and brought out a folded slip of paper. He handed it to the other man. In the dim lantern light, Victor unfolded the paper and read:

#### GEOGRAPHICAL COORDINATES FOR LOCATION OF MY SOUL

Victor looked at the two lines of type long after he had absorbed their message. When he handed it back to Talbot, he wore a new, fresher expression. “You’ll never give up, will you, Larry?”

“Did your father?”

“No.” Great sadness flickered across the face of the man Talbot called Victor. “And,” he added, tightly, after a beat, “he’s been lying in a catatonia sling for sixteen years *because* he wouldn’t give up.” He lapsed into silence. Finally, softly, “It never hurts to know when to give up, Larry. Never hurts. Sometimes you’ve just got to leave it alone.”

Talbot snorted softly with bemusement. “Easy enough for you to say, old chum. You’re going to die.”

“That wasn’t fair, Larry.”

“Then help me, dammit! I’ve gone farther toward getting myself out of all this than I ever have. Now I need *you*. You’ve got the expertise.”

“Have you sounded out 3M or Rand or even General Dynamics? They’ve got good people there.”

“Damn you.”

“Okay. Sorry. Let me think a minute.”

The corpse barge cut through the invisible water, silent, fog-shrouded, without Charon, without Styx, merely a public service, a garbage scow of unfinished sentences, uncompleted errands, unrealized dreams. With the exception of these two, talking, the barge’s supercargo had left decisions and desertions behind.

Then, Victor said, softly, talking as much to himself as to Talbot, “We could do it with microtelemetry. Either through direct micro-miniaturizing techniques or by shrinking a servo-mechanism package containing sensing, remote control, and guidance/ manipulative/ propulsion hardware. Use a saline solution to inject it into the bloodstream. Knock you out with ‘Russian sleep’ and/ or tap into the sensory nerves so you’d perceive or control the device as if you were there... conscious transfer of point of view.”

Talbot looked at him expectantly.

“No. Forget it,” said Victor. “It won’t do.”

He continued to think. Talbot reached into the other’s jacket pocket and brought out the Sobranies. He lit one and stood silently, waiting. It was always thus with Victor. He had to worm his way through the analytical labyrinth.

“Maybe the biotechnic equivalent: a tailored microorganism or slug... injected... telepathic link established. No. Too many flaws: possible ego/control conflict. Impaired perceptions. Maybe it could be a hive creature injected for multiple p.o.v.” A pause, then, “No. No good.”

Talbot drew on the cigarette, letting the mysterious Eastern smoke curl through his lungs. “How about... say, just for the sake of discussion,” Victor said, “say the ego/id exists to some extent in each sperm. It’s been ventured. Raise the consciousness in one cell and send it on a mission to... forget it, that’s metaphysical bullshit. Oh, damn damn damn... this will take time and thought, Larry. Go away, let me think on it. I’ll get back to you.”

Talbot butted the Sobranie on the railing, and exhaled the final stream of smoke. “Okay, Victor. I take it you’re interested sufficiently to work at it.”

“I’m a scientist, Larry. That means I’m hooked. I’d have to be an idiot not to be... this speaks directly to what... to what my father...”

“I understand. I’ll let you alone. I’ll wait.”

They rode across in silence, the one thinking of solutions, the other considering problems. When they parted, it was with an embrace.

Talbot flew back the next morning, and waited through the nights of the full moon, knowing better than to pray. It only muddied the waters. And angered the gods.

When the phone rang, and Talbot lifted the receiver, he knew what it would be. He had known every time the phone had rung, for over two months. “Mr. Talbot? Western Union. We have a cablegram for you, from Moldava, Czechoslovakia.”

“Please read it.”

“It’s very short, sir. It says, ‘Come immediately. The trail has been marked.’ It’s signed, *Victor*.”

He departed less than an hour later. The Learjet had been on the ready line since he had returned from Budapest, fuel tanks regularly topped-off and flight-plan logged. His suitcase had been packed for seventy-two days, waiting beside the door, visas and passport current, and handily stored in an inner pocket. When he departed, the apartment continued to tremble for some time with the echoes of his leaving.

The flight seemed endless, interminable, he *knew* it was taking longer than necessary.

Customs, even with high government clearances (all masterpieces of forgery) and bribes, seemed to be drawn out sadistically by the mustachioed trio of petty officials; secure, and reveling in their momentary power.

The overland facilities could not merely be called slow. They were reminiscent of the Molasses Man who cannot run till he's warmed-up and who, when he's warmed-up, grows too soft to run.

Expectedly, like the most suspenseful chapter of a cheap gothic novel, a fierce electrical storm suddenly erupted out of the mountains when the ancient touring car was within a few miles of Talbot's destination. It rose up through the steep mountain pass, hurtling out of the sky, black as a grave, and swept across the road obscuring everything.

The driver, a taciturn man whose accent had marked him as a Serbian, held the big saloon to the center of the road with the tenacity of a rodeo rider, hands at ten till and ten after midnight on the wheel.

"Mister Talbot."

"Yes?"

"It grows worse. Will I turn back?"

"How much farther?"

"Perhaps seven kilometer."

Headlights caught the moment of uprootment as a small tree by the roadside toppled toward them. The driver spun the wheel and accelerated. They rushed past as naked branches scraped across the boot of the touring car with the sound of fingernails on a blackboard. Talbot found he had been holding his breath. Death was beyond him, but the menace of the moment denied the knowledge.

"I have to get there."

"Then I go on. Be at ease."

Talbot settled back. He could see the Serb smiling in the rearview mirror. Secure, he stared out the window. Branches of lightning shattered the darkness, causing the surrounding landscape to assume ominous, unsettling shapes.

Finally, he arrived.

The laboratory, an incongruous modernistic cube—bone white against the—again—ominous basalt of the looming prominences—sat high above the rutted road. They had been climbing steadily for hours and now, like carnivores waiting for the most opportune moment, the Carpathians loomed all around them.

The driver negotiated the final mile and a half up the access road to the laboratory with difficulty: tides of dark, topsoil-and-twigs-laden water rushed past them.

Victor was waiting for him. Without extended greetings he had an associate take the suitcase, and he hurried Talbot to the sub-ground-floor theater where a half

dozen technicians moved quickly at their tasks, plying between enormous banks of controls and a huge glass plate hanging suspended from guy-wires beneath the track-laden ceiling.

The mood was one of highly charged expectancy; Talbot could feel it in the sharp, short glances the technicians threw him, in the way Victor steered him by the arm, in the uncanny racehorse readiness of the peculiar-looking machines around which the men and women swarmed. And he sensed in Victor's manner that something new and wonderful was about to be born in this laboratory. That perhaps... at last... after so terribly, lightlessly long... peace waited for him in this white-tiled room. Victor was fairly bursting to talk.

"Final adjustments," he said, indicating two female technicians working at a pair of similar machines mounted opposite each other on the walls facing the glass plate. To Talbot, they looked like laser projectors of a highly complex design. The women were tracking them slowly left and right on their gimbals, accompanied by soft electrical humming. Victor let Talbot study them for a long moment, then said, "Not lasers. *Grasers*. Gamma Ray Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation. Pay attention to them, they're at least half the heart of the answer to your problem."

The technicians took sightings across the room, through the glass, and nodded at one another. Then the older of the two, a woman in her fifties, called to Victor.

"On line, Doctor."

Victor waved acknowledgment, and turned back to Talbot. "We'd have been ready sooner, but this damned storm. It's been going on for a week. It wouldn't have hampered us but we had a freak lightning strike on our main transformer. The power supply was on emergency for several days and it's taken a while to get everything up to peak strength again."

A door opened in the wall of the gallery to Talbot's right. It opened slowly, as though it was heavy and the strength needed to force it was lacking. The yellow baked enamel plate on the door said, in heavy black letters, in French, personnel monitoring devices are required beyond this entrance. The door swung fully open, at last, and Talbot saw the warning plate on the other side:

CAUTION  
RADIATION  
AREA

There was a three-armed, triangular-shaped design beneath the words. He thought of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. For no rational reason.

Then he saw the sign beneath, and had his rational reason: OPENING THIS DOOR FOR MORE THAN 30 SECONDS WILL REQUIRE A SEARCH AND SECURE.

Talbot's attention was divided between the doorway and what Victor had said. "You seem worried about the storm."

"Not worried," Victor said, "just cautious. There's no conceivable way it could interfere with the experiment, unless we had another direct hit, which I doubt—we've taken special precautions—but I wouldn't want to risk the power going out in the middle of the shot."

"The shot?"

"I'll explain all that. In fact, I *have* to explain it, so your mite will have the knowledge." Victor smiled at Talbot's confusion. "Don't worry about it." An old woman in a lab smock had come through the door and now stood just behind and to the right of Talbot, waiting, clearly, for their conversation to end so she could speak to Victor.

Victor turned his eyes to her. "Yes, Nadja?"

Talbot looked at her. An acid rain began falling in his stomach.

"Yesterday considerable effort was directed toward finding the cause of a high field horizontal instability," she said, speaking softly, tonelessly, a page of some specific status report. "The attendant beam blowup prevented efficient extraction." Eighty, if a day. Gray eyes sunk deep in folds of crinkled flesh the color of liver paste. "During the afternoon the accelerator was shut down to effect several repairs." Withered, weary, bent, too many bones for the sack. "The super pinger at C48 was replaced with a section of vacuum chamber; it had a vacuum leak." Talbot was in extreme pain. Memories came at him in ravaging hordes, a dark wave of ant bodies gnawing at everything soft and folded and vulnerable in his brain. "Two hours of beam time were lost during the owl shift because a solenoid failed on a new vacuum valve in the transfer hall

"Mother...?" Talbot said, whispering hoarsely.

The old woman started violently, her head coming around and her eyes of settled ashes widening. "Victor," she said, terror in the word.

Talbot barely moved, but Victor took him by the arm and held him. "Thank you, Nadja; go down to target station B and log the secondary beams. Go right now."

She moved past them, hobbling, and quickly vanished through another door in the far wall, held open for her by one of the younger women.

Talbot watched her go, tears in his eyes.

"Oh my God, Victor. It was..."

"No, Larry, it wasn't."

"It was. So help me God it *was!* But *how*, Victor, tell me *how?*"

Victor turned him and lifted his chin with his free hand. "Look at me, Larry. *Damn it*, I said *look at me*: it wasn't. You're wrong."

The last time Lawrence Talbot had cried had been the morning he had awakened from sleep, lying under hydrangea shrubs in the botanical garden next to the Minneapolis Museum of Art, lying beside something bloody and still. Under his fingernails had been caked flesh and dirt and blood. That had been the time he learned about manacles and releasing oneself from them when in one state of consciousness, but not in another. Now, he felt like crying. Again. With cause.

"Wait here a moment," Victor said. "Larry? Will you wait right here for me? I'll be back in a moment."

He nodded, averting his face, and Victor went away. While he stood there, waves of painful memory thundering through him, a door slid open into the wall at the far side of the chamber, and another white-smocked technician stuck his head into the room. Through the opening, Talbot could see massive machinery in an enormous chamber beyond. Titanium electrodes. Stainless steel cones. He thought he recognized it: a Cockroft-Walton pre-accelerator.

Victor came back with a glass of milky liquid. He handed it to Talbot.

"Victor—" the technician called from the far doorway.



“Drink it,” Victor said to Talbot, then turned to the technician.

“Ready to run.”

Victor waved to him. “Give me about ten minutes, Karl, then take it up to the first phase shift and signal us.” The technician nodded understanding and vanished through the doorway; the door slid out of the wall and closed, hiding the imposing chamberful of equipment. “And that was part of the other half of the mystical, magical solution of your problem,” the physicist said, smiling now like a proud father.

“What was that I drank?”

“Something to stabilize you. I can’t have you hallucinating.”

“I wasn’t hallucinating. What was her name?”

“Nadja. You’re wrong; you’ve never seen her before in your life. Have I ever lied to you? How far back do we know each other? I need your trust if this is going to go all the way.”

“I’ll be all right.” The milky liquid had already begun to work. Talbot’s face lost its flush, his hands ceased trembling.

Victor was very stern suddenly, a scientist without the time for sidetracks; there was information to be imparted. “Good. For a moment I thought I’d spent a great deal of time preparing... well,” and he smiled again, quickly, “let me put it this way: I thought for a moment no one was coming to my party.”

Talbot gave a strained, tiny chuckle, and followed Victor to a bank of television monitors set into rolling frame-stacks in a corner. “Okay. Let’s get you briefed.” He turned on sets, one after another, till all twelve were glowing, each one holding a scene of dull-finished and massive installations.

Monitor #1 showed an endlessly long underground tunnel painted eggshell white. Talbot had spent much of his two-month wait reading; he recognized the tunnel as a view down the “straightaway” of the main ring. Gigantic bending magnets in their shock-proof concrete cradles glowed faintly in the dim light of the tunnel.

Monitor #2 showed the linac tunnel.

Monitor #3 showed the rectifier stack of the Cockroft-Walton pre-accelerator.

Monitor #4 was a view of the booster. Monitor #5 showed the interior of the transfer hall. Monitors #6 through #9 revealed three experimental target areas and, smaller in scope and size, an internal target area supporting the meson, neutrino and proton areas.

The remaining three monitors showed research areas in the underground lab complex, the final one of which was the main hall itself, where Talbot stood looking into twelve monitors, in the twelfth screen of which could be seen Talbot standing looking into twelve...

Victor turned off the sets.

“What did you see?”

All Talbot could think of was the old woman called Nadja. It *couldn’t* be. “Larry! What did you see?”

“From what I could see,” Talbot said, “that looked to be a particle accelerator. And it looked as big as CERN’S proton synchrotron in Geneva.”

Victor was impressed. “You’ve been doing some reading.”

“It behooved me.”

“Well, well. Let’s see if I can impress *you*. CERN’S accelerator reaches energies up to 33 BeV; the ring underneath this room reaches energies of 15 GeV.”

“Giga meaning billion.”

“You *have* been reading up, haven’t you! Fifteen *billion* electron volts. There’s simply no keeping secrets from you, is there, Larry?”

“Only one.”

Victor waited expectantly.

“Can you do it?”

“Yes. Meteorology says the eye is almost passing over us. We’ll have better than an hour, more than enough time for the dangerous parts of the experiment.”

“But you *can* do it.”

“Yes, Larry. I don’t like having to say it twice.” There was no hesitancy in his voice, none of the “yes but” equivocations he’d always heard before. Victor had found the trail.

“I’m sorry, Victor. Anxiety. But if we’re ready, why do I have to go through an indoctrination?”

Victor grinned wryly and began reciting, “As your Wizard, I am about to embark on a hazardous and technically unexplainable journey to the upper stratosphere. To confer, converse, and otherwise hobnob with my fellow wizards.”

Talbot threw up his hands. “No more.”

“Okay, then. Pay attention. If I didn’t have to, I wouldn’t; believe me, nothing is more boring than listening to the sound of my own lectures. But your mite has to have all the data you have. So listen. Now comes the boring—but incredibly informative—explanation.”

Western Europe’s CERN—*Council European pour la Recherche Nucleaire*—had settled on Geneva as the site for their Big Machine. Holland lost out on the rich plum because it was common knowledge the food was lousy in the Lowlands. A small matter, but a significant one.

The Eastern Bloc’s CEERN—*Conseil de VEurope de VEst pour la Recherche Nucleaire*—had been forced into selecting this isolated location high in the White Carpathians (over such likelier and more hospitable sites as Cluj in Rumania, Budapest in Hungary and Gdansk in Poland) because Talbot’s friend Victor had selected this site, CERN had had Dahl and Wideroe and Goward and Adams and Reich; CEERN had Victor. It balanced. He could call the tune.

So the laboratory had been painstakingly built to his specifications, and the particle accelerator dwarfed the CERN Machine. It dwarfed the four-mile ring at the Fermi National Accelerator Lab in Batavia, Illinois. It was, in fact, the world’s largest, most advanced “synchrotron.”

Only seventy per cent of the experiments conducted in the underground laboratory were devoted to projects sponsored by CEERN. One hundred per cent of the staff of Victor’s complex was personally committed to him, not to CEERN, not to the Eastern Bloc, not to philosophies or dogmas... to the man. So thirty per cent of the experiments run on the sixteen-mile-diameter accelerator ring were Victor’s own. If CEERN knew—and it would have been difficult for them to find out—it said nothing. Seventy per cent of the fruits of genius was better than no per cent.

Had Talbot known earlier that Victor's research was thrust in the direction of actualizing advanced theoretical breakthroughs in the nature of the structure of fundamental particles, he would never have wasted his time with the pseudos and dead-enders who had spent years on his problem, who had promised everything and delivered nothing but dust. But then, until Information Associates had marked the trail—a trail he had previously followed in every direction but the unexpected one that merged shadow with substance, reality with fantasy—until then, he had no need for Victor's exotic talents.

While CEERN basked in the warmth of secure knowledge that their resident genius was keeping them in front in the Super Accelerator Sweepstakes, Victor was briefing his oldest friend on the manner in which he would gift him with the peace of death; the manner in which Lawrence Talbot would find his soul; the manner in which he would precisely and exactly go inside his own body.

"The answer to your problem is in two parts. First, we have to create a perfect simulacrum of you, a hundred thousand or a million times smaller than you, the original. Then, second, we have to *actualize* it, turn an image into something corporeal, substantial, material; something that *exists*. A miniature *you* with all the reality you possess, all the memories, all the knowledge."

Talbot felt very mellow. The milky liquid had smoothed out the churning waters of his memory. He smiled. "I'm glad it wasn't a difficult problem."

Victor looked rueful. "Next week I invent the steam engine. Get serious, Larry."

"It's that Lethe cocktail you fed me."

Victor's mouth tightened and Talbot knew he had to get hold of himself. "Go on, I'm sorry."

Victor hesitated a moment, securing his position of seriousness with a touch of free-floating guilt, then went on, "The first part of the problem is solved by using the grasers we've developed. We'll shoot a hologram of you, using a wave generated not from the electrons of the atom, but from the nucleus... a wave a million times shorter, greater in resolution than that from a laser." He walked toward the large glass plate hanging in the middle of the lab, grasers trained on its center. "Come here."

Talbot followed him.

"Is this the holographic plate," he said, "it's just a sheet of photographic glass, isn't it?"

"Not this," Victor said, touching the ten-foot square plate, "*this!*" He put his finger on a spot in the center of the glass and Talbot leaned in to look. He saw nothing at first, then detected a faint ripple; and when he put his face as close as possible to the imperfection he perceived a light *moire* pattern, like the surface of a fine silk scarf. He looked back at Victor.

"Microholographic plate," Victor said. "Smaller than an integrated chip. That's where we capture your spirit, white-eyes, a million times reduced. About the size of a single cell, maybe a red corpuscle."

Talbot giggled.

"Come on," Victor said wearily. "You've had too much to drink, and it's my fault. Let's get this show on the road. You'll be straight by the time we're ready... I just hope to God your mite isn't cockeyed."

Naked, they stood him in front of the ground photographic plate. The older of the female technicians aimed the graser at him, there was a soft sound Talbot took to be some mechanism locking into position, and then Victor said, "All right, Larry, that's it."

He stared at them, expecting more.

"That's it?"

The technicians seemed very pleased, and amused at his reaction.

"All done," said Victor. It had been that quick. He hadn't even seen the graser wave hit and lock in his image. "That's it?" he said again. Victor began to laugh. It spread through the lab. The technicians were clinging to their equipment; tears rolled down Victor's cheeks; everyone gasped for breath; and Talbot stood in front of the minute imperfection in the glass and felt like a retard.

"That's it?" he said again, helplessly.

After a long time, they dried their eyes and Victor moved him away from the huge plate of glass. "All done, Larry, and ready to go. Are you cold?"

Talbot's naked flesh was evenly polka-dotted with goosebumps. One of the technicians brought him a smock to wear. He stood and watched. Clearly, he was no longer the center of attention.

Now the alternate graser and the holographic plate ripple in the glass were the focuses of attention. Now the mood of released tension was past and the lines of serious attention were back in the faces of the lab staff. Now Victor was wearing an intercom headset, and Talbot heard him say, "All right, Karl. Bring it up to full power."

Almost instantly the lab was filled with the sound of generators phasing up. It became painful and Talbot felt his teeth begin to ache. It went up and up, a whine that climbed till it was beyond his hearing.

Victor made a hand signal to the younger female technician at the graser behind the glass plate. She bent to the projector's sighting mechanism once, quickly, then cut it in. Talbot saw no light beam, but there was the same locking sound he had heard earlier, and then a soft humming, and a life-size hologram of himself, standing naked as he had been a few moments before, trembled in the air where he had stood. He looked at Victor questioningly. Victor nodded, and Talbot walked to the phantasm, passed his hand through it, stood close and looked into the clear brown eyes, noted the wide pore patterns in the nose, studied himself more closely than he had ever been able to do in a mirror. He felt: as if someone had walked over his grave.

Victor was talking to three male technicians, and a moment later they came to examine the hologram. They moved in with light meters and sensitive instruments that apparently were capable of gauging the sophistication and clarity of the ghost image. Talbot watched, fascinated and terrified. It seemed he was about to embark on the great journey of his life; a journey with a much desired destination: surcease.

One of the technicians signaled Victor.

"It's pure," he said to Talbot. Then, to the younger female technician on the second graser projector, "All right, Jana, move it out of there."

She started up an engine and the entire projector apparatus turned on heavy rubber wheels and rolled out of the way. The image of Talbot, naked and vulnerable, a little sad to Talbot as he watched it fade and vanish like morning mist, had disappeared when the technician turned off the projector.

“All right, Karl,” Victor was saying, “we’re moving the pedestal in now. Narrow the aperture, and wait for my signal.” Then, to Talbot, “Here comes your mite, old friend.”

Talbot felt a sense of resurrection.

The older female technician rolled a four-foot-high stainless steel pedestal to the center of the lab, positioned it so the tiny, highly-polished spindle atop the pedestal touched the very bottom of the faint ripple in the glass. It looked like, and was, an actualizing stage for the real test. The full-sized hologram had been a gross test to ensure the image’s perfection. Now came the creation of a living entity, a Lawrence Talbot, naked and the size of a single cell, possessing a consciousness and intelligence and memories and desires identical to Talbot’s own.

“Ready, Karl?” Victor was saying.

Talbot heard no reply, but Victor nodded his head as if listening. Then he said, “All right, extract the beam!”

It happened so fast, Talbot missed most of it.

The micropion beam was composed of particles a million times smaller than the proton, smaller than the quark, smaller than the muon or the pion. Victor had termed them micropions. The slit opened in the wall, the beam was diverted, passed through the holographic ripple and was cut off as the slit closed again.

It had all taken a billionth of a second.

“Done,” Victor said.

“I don’t see anything,” Talbot said, and realized how silly he must sound to these people. Of *course* he didn’t see anything. There was nothing to see... with the naked eye. “Is he... is it there?”

“You’re there,” Victor said. He waved to one of the male technicians standing at a wall hutch of instruments in protective bays, and the man hurried over with the slim, reflective barrel of a microscope. He clipped it onto the tiny needle-pointed stand atop the pedestal in a fashion Talbot could not quite follow. Then he stepped away, and Victor said, “Part two of your problem solved, Larry. Go look and see yourself.”

Lawrence Talbot went to the microscope, adjusted the knob till he could see the reflective surface of the spindle, and saw himself in infinitely reduced perfection staring up at himself. He recognized himself, though all he could see was a cyclopean brown eye staring down from the smooth glass satellite that dominated his sky.

He waved. The eye blinked.

Now it begins, *he thought*.

Lawrence Talbot stood at the lip of the huge crater that formed Lawrence Talbot’s navel. He looked down in the bottomless pit with its atrophied remnants of umbilicus forming loops and protuberances, smooth and undulant and

vanishing into utter darkness. He stood poised to descend and smelled the smells of his own body. First, sweat. Then the smells that wafted up from within. The smell of penicillin like biting down on tin foil with a bad tooth. The smell of aspirin, chalky and tickling the hairs of his nose like cleaning blackboard erasers by banging them together. The smells of rotted food, digested and turning to waste. All the odors rising up out of himself like a wild symphony of dark colors.

He sat down on the rounded rim of the navel and let himself slip forward.

He slid down, rode over an outcropping, dropped a few feet and slid again, tobogganing into darkness. He fell for only a short time, then brought up against the soft and yielding, faintly springy tissue plane where the umbilicus had been ligated. The darkness at the bottom of the hole suddenly shattered as blinding light filled the navel. Shielding his eyes, Talbot looked up the shaft toward the sky. A sun glowed there, brighter than a thousand novae. Victor had moved a surgical lamp over the hole to assist him. For as long as he could.

Talbot saw the umbra of something large moving behind the light, and he strained to discern what it was: it seemed important to know what it was. And for an instant, before his eyes closed against the glare, he thought he knew what it had been. Someone watching him, staring down past the surgical lamp that hung above the naked, anesthetized body of Lawrence Talbot, asleep on an operating table.

It had been the old woman, Nadja.

He stood unmoving for a long time, thinking of her.

Then he went to his knees and felt the tissue plane that formed the floor of the navel shaft.

He thought he could see something moving beneath the surface, like water flowing under a film of ice. He went down onto his stomach and cupped his hands around his eyes, putting his face against the dead flesh. It was like looking through a pane of isinglass. A trembling membrane through which he could see the collapsed lumen of the atretic umbilical vein. There was no opening. He pressed his palms against the rubbery surface and it gave, but only slightly. Before he could find the treasure, he had to follow the route of Demeter's map—now firmly and forever consigned to memory—and before he could set foot upon that route, he had to gain access to his own body.

But he had nothing with which to force that entrance.

Excluded, standing at the portal to his own body, Lawrence Talbot felt anger rising within him. His life had been anguish and guilt and horror, had been the wasted result of events over which he had had no control. Pentagrams and full moons and blood and never putting on even an ounce of fat because of a diet high in protein, blood steroids healthier than any normal adult male's, triglycerol and cholesterol levels balanced and humming. And death forever a stranger. Anger flooded through him. He heard an inarticulate little moan of pain, and fell forward, began tearing at the atrophied cord with teeth that had been used for just such activity many times before. Through a blood haze he knew he was savaging his own body, and it seemed exactly the appropriate act of self-flagellation.

An outsider; he had been an outsider all his adult life, and fury would permit him to be shut out no longer. With demonic purpose he ripped away at the clumps

of flesh until the membrane gave, at last, and a gap was torn through, opening him to himself...

And he was blinded by the explosion of light, by the rush of wind, by the passage of something that had been just beneath the surface writhing to be set free, and in the instant before he plummeted into unconsciousness, he knew Castaneda's Don Juan had told the truth: a thick bundle of white cobwebby filaments, tinged with gold, fibers of light, shot free from the collapsed vein, rose up through the shaft and trembled toward the antiseptic sky.

A metaphysical, otherwise invisible beanstalk that trailed away above him, rising up and up and up as his eyes closed and he sank away into oblivion.

He was on his stomach, crawling through the collapsed lumen, the center, of the path the veins had taken back from the amniotic sac to the fetus. Propelling himself forward the way an infantry scout would through dangerous terrain, using elbows and knees, frog-crawling, he opened the flattened tunnel with his head just enough to get through. It was quite light, the interior of the world called Lawrence Talbot suffused with a golden luminescence.

The map had routed him out of this pressed tunnel through the inferior vena cava to the right atrium and thence through the right ventricle, the pulmonary arteries, through the valves, to the lungs, the pulmonary veins, crossover to the left side of the heart (left atrium, left ventricle), the aorta—bypassing the three coronary arteries above the aortic valves—and down over the arch of the aorta—bypassing the carotid and other arteries—to the celiac trunk, where the arteries split in a confusing array: the gastroduodenal to the stomach, the hepatic to the liver, the splenic to the spleen. And there, dorsal to the body of the diaphragm, he would drop down past the greater pancreatic duct to the pancreas itself. And there, among the islets of Langerhans, he would find, at the coordinates Information Associates had given him, he would find that which had been stolen from him one full-mooned night of horror so very long ago. And having found it, having assured himself of eternal sleep, not merely physical death from a silver bullet, he would stop his heart—how, he did not know, but he would—and it would all be ended for Lawrence Talbot, who had become what he had beheld. There, in the tail of the pancreas, supplied with blood by the splenic artery, lay the greatest treasure of all. More than doubloons, more than spices and silks, more than oil lamps used as djinn prisons by Solomon, lay final and sweet eternal peace, a release from monsterdom.

He pushed the final few feet of dead vein apart, and his head emerged into open space. He was hanging upside-down in a cave of deep orange rock.

Talbot wriggled his arms loose, braced them against what was clearly the ceiling of the cave, and wrenched his body out of the tunnel. He fell heavily, trying to twist at the last moment to catch the impact on his shoulders, and received a nasty blow on the side of the neck for his trouble.

He lay there for a moment, clearing his head. Then he stood and walked forward. The cave opened onto a ledge, and he walked out and stared at the landscape before him. The skeleton of something only faintly human lay tortuously crumpled against the wall of the cliff. He was afraid to look at it very closely.

He stared off across the world of dead orange rock, folded and rippled like a topographical view across the frontal lobe of a brain removed from its cranial casing.

The sky was a light yellow, bright and pleasant.

The grand canyon of his body was a seemingly horizonless tumble of atrophied rock, dead for millennia. He sought out and found a descent from the ledge, and began the trek.

There was water, and it kept him alive. Apparently, it rained more frequently here in this parched and stunned wasteland than appearance indicated. There was no keeping track of days or months, for there was no night and no day—always the same even, wonderful golden luminescence—but Talbot felt his passage down the central spine of orange mountains had taken him almost six months. And in that time it had rained forty-eight times, or roughly twice a week. Baptismal fonts of water were filled at every downpour, and he found if he kept the soles of his naked feet moist, he could walk without his energy flagging. If he ate, he did not remember how often, or what form the food had taken.

He saw no other signs of life.

Save an occasional skeleton lying against a shadowed wall of orange rock. Often, they had no skulls.

He found a pass through the mountains, finally, and crossed. He went up through foothills into lower, gentle slopes, and then up again, into cruel and narrow passages that wound higher and higher toward the heat of the sky. When he reached the summit, he found the path down the opposite side was straight and wide and easy. He descended quickly; only a matter of days, it seemed.

Descending into the valley, he heard the song of a bird. He followed the sound. It led him to a crater of igneous rock, quite large, set low among the grassy swells of the valley. He came upon it without warning, and trudged up its short incline, to stand at the volcanic lip looking down.

The crater had become a lake. The smell rose up to assault him. Vile, and somehow terribly sad. The song of the bird continued; he could see no bird anywhere in the golden sky. The smell of the lake made him ill.

Then as he sat on the edge of the crater, staring down, he realized the lake was filled with dead things, floating bellyup; purple and blue as a strangled baby, rotting white, turning slowly in the faintly rippled gray water; without features or limbs. He went down to the lowest outthrust of volcanic rock and stared at the dead things.

Something swam toward him. He moved back. It came on faster and as it neared the wall of the crater, it surfaced, singing its bluejay song, swerved to rip a chunk of rotting flesh from the corpse of a floating dead thing, and paused only a moment as if to remind him that this was not his, Talbot's, domain, but his own.

Like Talbot, the fish would not die.

Talbot sat at the lip of the crater for a long time, looking down into the bowl that held the lake, and he watched the corpses of dead dreams as they bobbed and revolved like maggoty pork in a gray soup.



After a time, he rose, walked back down from the mouth of the crater, and resumed his journey. He was crying.

When at last he reached the shore of the pancreatic sea, he found a great many things he had lost or given away when he was a child. He found a wooden machine gun on a tripod, painted olive drab, that made a rat-tat-tatting sound when a wooden handle was cranked. He found a set of toy soldiers, two companies, one Prussian and the other French, with a miniature Napoleon Bonaparte among them. He found a microscope kit with slides and petri dishes and racks of chemicals in nice little bottles, all of which bore uniform labels. He found a milk bottle filled with Indianhead pennies. He found a hand puppet with the head of a monkey and the name *Rosco* painted on the fabric glove with nail polish. He found a pedometer. He found a beautiful painting of a jungle bird that had been done with real feathers. He found a corn cob pipe. He found a box of radio premiums: a cardboard detective kit with fingerprint dusting powder, invisible ink and a list of police-band call codes; a ring with what seemed to be a plastic bomb attached, and when he pulled the red finned rear off the bomb, and cupped his hands around it in his palms, he could see little scintillas of light, deep inside the payload section; a china mug with a little girl and a dog running across one side; a decoding badge with a burning glass in the center of the red plastic dial.

But there was something missing.

He could not remember what it was, but he knew it was important. As he had known it was important to recognize the shadowy figure who had moved past the surgical lamp at the top of the navel shaft, he knew whatever item was missing from this cache... was very important.

He took the boat anchored beside the pancreatic sea, and put all the items from the cache in the bottom of a watertight box under one of the seats. He kept out the large, cathedral-shaped radio, and put it on the bench seat in front of the oarlocks.

Then he unbeached the boat, and ran it out into the crimson water, staining his ankles and calves and thighs, and climbed aboard, and started rowing across toward the islets. Whatever was missing was very important.

The wind died when the islets were barely in sight on the horizon. Looking out across the blood-red sea, Talbot sat becalmed at latitude 38° 54' N, longitude 77° 00' 13" W.

He drank from the sea and was nauseated. He played with the toys in the watertight box. And he listened to the radio.

He listened to a program about a very fat man who solved murders, to an adaptation of *The Woman in the Window* with Edward G. Robinson and Joan Bennett, to a story that began in a great railroad station, to a mystery about a wealthy man who could make himself invisible by clouding the minds of others so they could not see him, and he enjoyed a suspense drama narrated by a man named Ernest Chapell in which a group of people descended in a bathyscaphe

through the bottom of a mine shaft where, five miles down, they were attacked by pterodactyls. Then he listened to the news, broadcast by Graham MacNamee. Among the human interest items at the close of the program, Talbot heard the unforgettable MacNamee voice say:

“Datelined Columbus, Ohio; September 24th, 1973. Martha Nelson had been in an institution for the mentally retarded for 98 years. She is 102 years old and was first sent to Orient State Institute near Orient, Ohio, on June 25th, 1875. Her records were destroyed in a fire in the institution sometime in 1883, and no one knows for certain why she is at the institute. At the time she was committed it was known as the Columbus State Institute for the Feeble-Minded. ‘She never had a chance,’ said Dr. A. Z. Soforenko, appointed two months ago as superintendent of the institution. He said she was probably a victim of ‘eugenic alarm,’ which he said was common in the late 1800s. At that time some felt that because humans were made ‘in God’s image’ the retarded must be evil or children of the devil, because they were not whole human beings. ‘During that time,’ Dr. Soforenko said, ‘it was believed if you moved feeble-minded people out of a community and into an institution, the taint would never return to the community.’ He went on to add, ‘She was apparently trapped in that system of thought. No one can ever be sure if she actually was feeble-minded; it is a wasted life. She is quite coherent for her age. She has no known relatives and has had no contact with anybody but Institution staff for the last 78 or 80 years.’ “

Talbot sat silently in the small boat, the sail hanging like a forlorn ornament from its single centerpole.

“I’ve cried more since I got inside you, Talbot, than I have in my whole life,” he said, but could not stop. Thoughts of Martha Nelson a woman of whom he had never before heard, of whom he would never have heard had it not been by chance by chance by chance he had heard by chance, by chance thoughts of her skirled through his mind like cold winds.

And the cold winds rose, and the sail filled, and he was no longer adrift, but was driven straight for the shore of the nearest islet. By chance.

He stood over the spot where Demeter’s map had indicated he would find his soul. For a wild moment he chuckled, at the realization he had been expecting an enormous Maltese Cross or Captain Kidd’s “X” to mark the location. But it was only soft green sand, gentle as talc, blowing in dust-devils toward the blood-red pancreatic sea. The spot was midway between the low-tide line and the enormous Bedlam-like structure that dominated the islet.

He looked once more, uneasily, at the fortress rising in the center of the tiny blemish of land. It was built square, seemingly carved from a single monstrous black rock... perhaps from a cliff that had been thrust up during some natural disaster. It had no windows, no opening he could see, though two sides of its bulk were exposed to his view. It troubled him. It was a dark god presiding over an empty kingdom. He thought of the fish that would not die, and remembered Nietzsche’s contention that gods died when they lost their supplicants.

He dropped to his knees and, recalling the moment months before when he had dropped to his knees to tear at the flesh of his atrophied umbilical cord, he began digging in the green and powdery sand.

The more he dug, the faster the sand ran back into the shallow bowl. He stepped into the middle of the depression and began slinging dirt back between his legs with both hands, a human dog excavating for a bone.

When his fingertips encountered the edge of the box, he yelped with pain as his nails broke.

He dug around the outline of the box, and then forced his bleeding fingers down through the sand to gain purchase under the buried shape.

He wrenched at it, and it came loose. Heaving with tensed muscles, he freed it, and it came up.

He took it to the edge of the beach and sat down.

It was just a box. A plain wooden box, very much like an old cigar box, but larger. He turned it over and over and was not at all surprised to find it bore no arcane hieroglyphics or occult symbols. It wasn't that kind of treasure. Then he turned it right side up and pried open the lid. His soul was inside. It was not what he had expected to find, not at all. But it was what had been missing from the cache.

Holding it tightly in his fist, he walked up past the fast-filling hole in the green sand, toward the bastion on the high ground.

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

—T.S. Eliot

Once inside the brooding darkness of the fortress—and finding the entrance had been disturbingly easier than he had expected—there was no way to go but down. The wet, black stones of the switchback stairways led inexorably downward into the bowels of the structure, clearly far beneath the level of the pancreatic sea. The stairs were steep, and each step had been worn into smooth curves by the pressure of feet that had descended this way since the dawn of memory. It was dark, but not so dark that Talbot could not see his way. There was no light, however. He did not care to think about how that could be.

When he came to the deepest part of the structure, having passed no rooms or chambers or openings along the way, he saw a doorway across an enormous hall, set into the far wall. He stepped off the last of the stairs, and walked to the door. It was built of crossed iron bars, as black and moist as the stones of the bastion. Through the interstices he saw something pale and still in a far corner of what could have been a cell.

There was no lock on the door.

It swung open at his touch.

Whoever lived in this cell had never tried to open the door; or had tried and decided not to leave.

He moved into deeper darkness.

A long time of silence passed, and finally he stooped to help her to her feet. It was like lifting a sack of dead flowers, brittle and surrounded by dead air incapable of holding even the memory of fragrance.

He took her in his arms and carried her.

“Close your eyes against the light, Martha,” he said, and started back up the long stairway to the golden sky.

Lawrence Talbot sat up on the operating table. He opened his eyes and looked at Victor. He smiled a peculiarly gentle smile. For the first time since they had been friends, Victor saw all torment cleansed from Talbot’s face.

“It went well,” he said. Talbot nodded.

They grinned at each other.

“How’re your cryonic facilities?” Talbot asked.

Victor’s brows drew down in bemusement. “You want me to freeze you? I thought you’d want something more permanent... say, in silver.”

“Not necessary.”

Talbot looked around. He saw her standing against the far wall by one of the grasers. She looked back at him with open fear. He slid off the table, wrapping the sheet upon which he had rested around himself, a makeshift toga. It gave him a patrician look.

He went to her and looked down into her ancient face. “Nadja,” he said, softly. After a long moment she looked up at him. He smiled and for an instant she was a girl again. She averted her gaze. He took her hand, and she came with him, to the table, to Victor.

“I’d be deeply grateful for a running account, Larry,” the physicist said. So Talbot told him; all of it.

“My mother, Nadja, Martha Nelson, they’re all the same,” Talbot said, when he came to the end, “all wasted lives.”

“And what was in the box?” Victor said.

“How well do you do with symbolism and cosmic irony, old friend?”

“Thus far I’m doing well enough with Jung and Freud,” Victor said. He could not help but smile.

Talbot held tightly to the old technician’s hand as he said, “It was an old, rusted Howdy Doody button.”

Victor turned around.

When he turned back, Talbot was grinning. “That’s not cosmic irony, Larry . . . it’s slapstick,” Victor said. He was angry. It showed clearly.

Talbot said nothing, simply let him work it out.

Finally Victor said, “What the hell’s *that* supposed to signify, innocence?”

Talbot shrugged. “I suppose if I’d known, I wouldn’t have lost it in the first place. That’s what it was, and that’s what it is. A little metal pinback around an inch and a half in diameter, with that cockeyed face on it, the orange hair, the toothy grin, the pug nose, the freckles, all of it, just the way he always was.” He fell silent, then after a moment added, “It seems right.”

“And now that you have it back, you don’t *want* to die?”

“I don’t *need* to die.”

“And you want me to freeze you.”

“Both of us.”

Victor stared at him with disbelief. “For God’s sake, Larry!”

Nadja stood quietly, as if she could not hear them.

“Victor, listen: Martha Nelson is in there. A wasted life. Nadja is out here. I don’t know why or how or what did it... but... a wasted life. Another wasted life. I want you to create her mite, the same way you created mine, and send her inside. He’s waiting for her and he can make it right, Victor. All right, at last. He can be with her as she regains the years that were stolen from her. He can be—I can be—her father when she’s a baby, her playmate when she’s a child, her buddy when she’s maturing, her boyfriend when she’s a young girl, her suitor when she’s a young woman, her lover, her husband, her companion as she grows old. Let her be all the women she was never permitted to be, Victor. Don’t steal from her a second time. And when it’s over, it will start again...”

“*How*, for Christ sake, how the hell *how*? Talk sense, Larry. What is all this metaphysical crap?”

“I don’t *know* how; it just is! I’ve been there, Victor, I was there for months, maybe years, and I never changed, never went to the wolf, there’s no Moon there... no night and no day, just golden light and warmth, and I can try to make restitution. I can give back two lives. *Please*, Victor!”

The physicist looked at him without speaking. Then he looked at the old woman. She smiled up at him, and then, with arthritic fingers, removed her clothing.

When she came through the collapsed lumen, Talbot was waiting for her. She looked very tired, and he knew she would have to rest before they attempted to cross the orange mountains. He helped her down from the ceiling of the cave, and laid her down on soft, pale yellow moss he had carried back from the islets of Langerhans during the long trek with Martha Nelson. Side by side, the two old women lay on the moss, and Nadja fell asleep almost immediately. He stood over them, looking at their faces.

They were identical.

Then he went out on the ledge and stood looking toward the spine of the orange mountains. The skeleton held no fear for him now. He felt a sudden sharp chill in the air and knew Victor had begun the cryonic preservation.

He stood that way for a long time, the little metal button with the sly, innocent face of a mythical creature painted on its surface in four brilliant colors held tightly in his left hand.

And after a while, he heard the crying of a baby, just one baby, from inside the cave, and turned to return for the start of the easiest journey he had ever made.

Somewhere, a terrible devil-fish suddenly flattened its gills, turned slowly bellyup, and sank into darkness.

