

The Awakening

by Jack Sharkey, 1931-1992

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They awoke after ages of hiding—to emerge into
a world richer than they had dared to dream of!

Rik's first impressions were an uncomfortable chill creeping along his bare flesh, and a bright milky swirling of light that encompassed his entire vision. He shivered and blinked his eyes a few times, and then the swirling settled down and became the vault. The chill, he realized, was due to the body warmth being methodically sucked away by the cold slab on which he lay. Another shiver brought a gasp of breath into his lungs, and then he was wide awake.

When he sat up and swung his legs over the side, the interior of the vault began swirling again. He had to grip the edge of the slab to keep from falling. The air was humid, much too humid, and he could taste the prickly presence of carbon dioxide when he breathed. „The pump,“ he mumbled, dropping to the floor on feet that he could barely control. „Something's happened to the pump.“

He pushed himself determinedly erect, then stumbled down the long corridor between the other slabs, hardly glancing at their silent tenants, until he got to

Zina's. She lay still as death, not flicking so much as an eyelid, and her flesh was like frozen wax beneath his exploring fingers.

There was nothing he could do for her until he got the pump working again...

Rik pushed away from the slab on which Zina lay, and went through the archway into the next chamber. Here another fifty of the group lay on their slabs, not so much as a muscle twitch betraying the fact that they were all quite alive. It seemed only a few hours since he had lain down on his slab in the other room and gotten his injection, but he could not, for a dizzy moment, recall in which direction the pump lay. His mind seemed to be plumbing dust-covered depths to dredge out his memories, one by one.

He suddenly remembered the War. The war that had driven the group to build this place, to try and safeguard a handful from the holocaust that would set fire to the surface of the world and turn the seas to steam. Was it possible the war had passed? Or had it ever come!

There was no way to know without going outside—Wait! There was! Rik thought hard, trying to get his sense of direction back. The atom-powered clock that marked off months instead of minutes was in the central vault, where the elders slept. The other nine vaults ringed that one, he recalled, veering at right angles to his first direction, which would have taken him on a circular tour of the nine vaults and back to his starting place again.

The archway to the vault of the elders was unaccountably blocked, and Rik realized suddenly that part of the ceiling there had fallen, carried by some fault in the granite of the mountain itself. But that was impossible! The elders had selected this site on the basis of the rigidity of the rocky strata that made it up. A fault could not have occurred for more years than Rik's own lifetime—

Or had that many years passed already?

There was no way of knowing; not until he had examined the clock. Rik moved away from the blockade and made his way into the next vault, and the next, finally finding an archway in the sixth vault from his own where the rock had not completely sealed the way into the elders' vault.

Here he had expected to find the air fresher, already having theorized that the staleness elsewhere was due to the poor circulation occasioned by the blockaded central vault. But in fact the air there was even worse, and laden with an odor that made Rik suddenly afraid to see its source.

Still, he was the first to awake. It was up to him to try and save himself and the others. Rik made an effort of will, and then squeezed through the narrow orifice into the main chamber. He looked once toward the slabs holding the bodies of the elders, then quickly away. It was true. All were in advanced stages of corruption already.

Choking, Rik went to the center of the high room and looked into the horizontal face of the clock. The broad indicator arm was at its utmost numeral, and was pocked with rust. They'd lain here beyond the time-of-awakening by at least four times the years they'd planned!

„It can't be right,“ Rik gasped, his brain reeling for want of clean, cool air. „The mechanism has failed somehow.“ Afraid to think about it, he tilted the clock up on its base until the pedestal which supported it lay on its side upon the floor. The square block of metal that based the pedestal was now uptilted beyond the vertical, exposing a gaping trap in the floor. Rik did not like the tarnished look of the metal underside of the pedestal-base, forged of an alloy supposed to be incorruptible. A sick thought took hold of his insides then, as

he placed one foot upon the rocky staircase under the floor. The clock-indicator had halted at its utmost numeral.

But what if they'd lain here even longer than that? There would be no way of knowing. No way at all.

He descended the staircase swiftly then, glad at least that the air was better down in the pump chamber. „It would be, of course,“ he reminded himself, „if the pump went off, even. This air would never be circulated, never have its chance to become corrupt with our exhalations.“ And then his musing was halted in midthought as he came upon the pump. Or upon what had been the pump.

Where rigid cylinders of gleaming metal had been, a few jagged teeth of brown corruption lay in a circle. The pistons were no better, though their thickness had preserved more of their original shape despite the inroads of age, so they could be recognized for what they were—had been. The central shaft was a long mound of flaking dust on the floor between the path of the pistons, and the wall-sized mass of the filters—woven of metal and powerful synthetic fibers—crumbled beneath the pressure of his finger.

He sought and found the ponderous casing in which the engine-empowering radioactive element had lain, and its thick walls tore away like wood pulp in his hands. The element, when he found it, was already become cold grey lead. And it had had a half-life of centuries...

Rik crumpled slowly to the floor, shutting his eyes, trying not to think of the eons which must have passed while they all lay sleeping the pseudodeath in the vaults. What might the world have become in the interim!

A current of cool air suddenly touched his face. His head came up instantly, his eyes seeking the source.

A feathery motion of torn edges in the filter showed him that it came through the gap he had torn there. Rik sprang to his feet then, leaped at the filter and tore out chunks by the armful, letting the pulverized material float in spinning clouds of dust motes behind him. The air grew stronger, came faster, as he ripped away the corruption, and then he could see the tunnel beyond.

Gasping at the effort—how long since he had eaten?—he staggered back from the opening then back up the stairs into the chamber of the elders. Now that his nostrils had been stimulated by the clean air the smell of corruption was violently repelling; but he held his breath and ran to the gap in the tumbled rock about the archway, and squeezed his way into the area of subsidiary vaults.

Without the pump in operation, the air could not circulate to this point, but he hoped to drag some of his companions down to the torn filter and revive them—then, with their help, bring the others.

It would be all right. They would be saved, as planned. He regretted the loss of the elders. But no matter. They were but the rulers. He and the others were the chemists, the scientists, the engineers. New elderships could be created when they had become settled again, and could rebuild their civilization.

He went to Zina's slab first. She would not be as much help as some of the others, but Zina and he were too close for him to delay her revival any longer. Life was not worth having without Zina. He carried her out of the vault, through the gap and thick miasma of corruption, then down into the pump chamber. Leaving her lying on her back, with the breeze ruffling her hair about her face, Rik went back up for the next person.

Three exhausting trips later, he sat among the bodies of his friends, listening with joy to their returning quiver of breath and life. Zina was the first to open her eyes. She seemed startled to find she was no longer on the slab, and then joyous when her glance fell upon his eager face.

„We’ve done it!“ she sighed. „We came through!“ She tried to sit up, then lay down heavily. „Rik—I’m so weak...”

„We need food, all of us,“ he said. „I’m weak myself.“ He arose from his crouch at her side and stared down the tunnel to the outer world. „I don’t know what it’s like out there,“ he said. „There may be no food at all. If the War was as devastating as predicted, it may be barren rock, burning sun and overall death.“

„How long—?“ Zina began, and then her eyes fell upon the time-rotted hulk of the pump and she stopped, her face going pale. „As long as that!“ she whispered. „Oh, Rik! Do you think—?“

„I’ll know when I’ve looked,“ he said. Their eyes met for a long, silent moment, then he turned and started up the tunnel.

Three hundred strides brought him to the barrier, the thinly perforated shield of rock that had been left intact to hide the location of the vaults from their enemies. Rik put his shoulder to the shell. It cracked and fell away as he’d thought it would, with weather and erosion having weakened it for centuries. Bright yellow moonlight lay all about the land outside. Incredibly fine sand was everywhere, but a smell of fresh water and green growing things was mingled with the night air. The region had not been desert when the vaults were constructed. The War had left its mark of devastation here, Rik saw, looking in vain for a trace of the magnificent towered city that had once been just beyond this spot.

He shook off his dismay and set himself to the task for which he’d emerged.

The animals had to be alive, yet, or they were doomed. He’d always regretted the haste in their preparations that had precluded preparing survival vaults for the food animals. The best they’d been able to do, before the Day of Devastation, was herd the stupid beasts into caves and pile the entrances with loose rock, hoping the animals would dig themselves out only after the worst fury of the War had passed... Rik threw off the bitter memory, abruptly, as his ears detected a tiny buzz of sound.

He dropped to the ground and lay still, watching to see what sort of beast would appear. It sounded larger than the animals he remembered. „I must be near a waterhole,“ he reasoned. „There’s a pathway here, made by many animals passing this way...” he mused, studying the narrow, flattened track that he’d spotted in the night-chilled sand.

Then he saw something coming slowly up the trail, a thing much larger than the animals he remembered.

It was a long moment before he realized what it was, and smiled. Then he reached out his hands and had it. It buzzed loudly in his grip until he pounded it to silence on a rock. By the time he’d returned to the pump chamber, he’d managed to prise it open, but its contents—mangled by the smashing upon the rock—were barely fit to eat.

„It’s better than I could have hoped,“ he said to Zina, when they and the others had picked the thing clean. „Life promises to be much more exciting, infinitely more sporting in this new age outside the vaults. With care, we can survive until our engineers rig up some whip-rays and herding-claws again.“

„It will be fun,“ Zina agreed, smiling with grim anticipation. „I enjoy a challenge in the hunt. Who'd have thought the animals would have come so far from the caves!“

It was hours later that the bus company grew worried about their missing vehicle, and started an investigation. But they could find no trace of the bus, anywhere, and it remained a mystery until the day everybody suddenly knew what had happened.

But that was far too late.

