The Waiting Grounds

by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009

Published: 1959
in »New Worlds«

Whether Henry Tallis, my predecessor at Murak Radio Observatory, knew about the Waiting Grounds I can't say. On the whole it seems obvious he must have done, and that the three weeks he spent handing the station over to me—a job which could easily have been done in three days were merely to give him sufficient time to decide whether or not to tell me about them. Certainly he never did, and the implied judgment against me is one I haven't yet faced up to.

I remember that on the first evening after my arrival at Murak he asked me a question I've been puzzling over ever since.

We were up on the lounge deck of the observatory, looking out at the sand-reefs and fossil cones of the volcano jungle glowing in the false dusk, the great 250-foot steel bowl of the telescope humming faintly in the air above us.

„Tell me, Quaine," Tallis suddenly asked, „where would you like to be when the world ends?"

„I haven‘t really thought about it,“ I admitted. „Is there any urgency?“

„Urgency?“ Tallis smiled at me thinly, his eyes amiable but assessing me shrewdly. „Wait until you‘ve been here a little longer.“

He had almost finished his last tour at the observatory and I assumed he was referring to the desolation around us which he, after fifteen years, was leaving thanklessly to my entire care. Later, of course, I realized how wrong I was, just as I misjudged the whole of Tallis‘s closed, complex personality.

He was a lean, ascetic-looking man of about fifty, withheld and moody, as I discovered the moment I debarked from the freighter flying me in to Murak—instead of greeting me at the ramp he sat in the half-track a hundred yards away at the edge of the port, watching silently through dark glasses as I heaved my suitcases across the burning, lava-thick sunlight, legs weary after the massive deceleration, stumbling in the unfamiliar gravity.

The gesture seemed characteristic. Tallis‘s manner was aloof and sardonic; everything he said had the same deliberately ambiguous overtones, that air of private mystery recluses and extreme introjects assume as a defence. Not that Tallis was in any way pathological—no one could spend fifteen years, even with six-monthly leaves, virtually alone on a remote planetary clinker like Murak without developing a few curious mannerisms. In fact, as I all too soon realized, what was really remarkable about Tallis was the degree to which he had preserved his sanity, not surrendered it.

He listened keenly to the latest news from Earth.

„The first pilotless launchings—to Proxima Centauri are scheduled for 2250… the UN Assembly at Lake Success have just declared themselves a sovereign state… V-R Day celebrations are to be discontinued—you must have heard it all on the radiocasts.“

„I haven‘t got a radio here,“ Tallis said. „Apart from the one up there, and that‘s tuned to the big spiral networks in Andromeda. On Murak we listen only to the important news.“

I nearly retorted that by the time it reached Murak the news, however important, would be a million years old, but on that first evening I was preoccupied with adjusting myself to an unfamiliar planetary environment—notably a denser atmosphere, slightly higher (1.2 E) gravity, vicious temperature swings from –30° to +160°—and programming new routines to fit myself into Murak‘s 18-hour day.

Above all, there was the prospect of two years of near-absolute isolation.

Ten miles from Murak Reef, the planet‘s only settlement, the observatory was sited among the first hills marking the northern edge of the inert volcano jungle which spread southward to Murak‘s equator. It consisted of the giant telescope and a straggling nexus of twenty or thirty asbestos domes which housed the automatic data processing and tracking units, generator and refrigerating plant, and a miscellany of replacement and vehicle stores, workshops and ancillary equipment.

The observatory was self-sufficient as regards electric power and water. On the near-by slopes farms of solar batteries had been planted out in quarter-mile strips, the thousands of cells winking in the sunlight like a field of diamonds, sucking power from the sun to drive the generator dynamos. On another slope, its huge

mouth permanently locked into the rock face, a mobile water synthesizer slowly bored its way through the desert crust, mining out oxygen and hydrogen combined into the surface minerals.

„You'll have plenty of spare time on your hands," the Deputy Director of the Astrographic Institute on Ceres had warned me when I initialled the contract. „There's a certain amount of routine maintenance, checking the power feeds to the reflector traverses and the processing units, but otherwise you won't need to touch the telescope. A big digital does the heavy thinking, tapes all the data down in 2000-hour schedules. You fly the cans out with you when you go on leave."

„So apart from shovelling the sand off the doorstep there's virtually nothing for me to do?" I'd commented.

„That's what you're being paid for. Probably not as much as you deserve. Two years will seem a long time, even with three leave intervals. But don't worry about going crazy. You aren't alone on Murak. You'll just be bored. £2000 worth, to be exact. However, you say you have a thesis to write. And you never know, you may like it there. Tallis, the observer you're taking over from, went out in '03 for two years like yourself, and stayed fifteen. He'll show you the ropes. Pleasant fellow, by all accounts, a little whimsical, probably try to pull your leg."

Tallis drove me down to the settlement the first morning to collect my heavy vacuum baggage that had travelled spacehold.

„Murak Reef," he pointed out as the old '95 Chrysler half-track churned through the thick luminous ash silted over the metal road. We crossed a system of ancient lava lakes, flat grey disks half a mile wide, their hard crusts blistered and pocked by the countless meteor showers that had driven into Murak during the past million years. In the distance a group of long flat-roofed sheds and three high ore elevators separated themselves from the landscape.

„I suppose they warned you. One supplies depot, a radio terminal and the minerals concession. Latest reliable estimates put the total population at seven."

I stared out at the surrounding desert floor, cracked and tiered by the heat swings into what looked like huge plates of rusted iron, and at the massed cones of the volcano jungle yellowing in the sand haze. It was 4 o'clock local time early morning—but the temperature was already over 80°. We drove with windows shuttered, sun curtain down, refrigerating unit pumping noisily.

„Must be fun on Saturday night," I commented. „Isn't there anything else?"

„Just the thermal storms, and a mean noon temperature of 160°."

„In the shade?"

Tallis laughed. „Shade? You must have a sense of humour. There isn't any shade on Murak. Don't ever forget it. Half an hour before noon the temperature starts to go up two degrees a minute. If you're caught out in it you'll be putting a match to your own pyre."

Murak Reef was a dust hole. In the sheds backing onto the depot the huge ore crushers and conveyors of the extraction plants clanked and slammed. Tallis introduced me to the agent, a morose old man called Pickford, and to two young engineers taking the wraps off a new grader. No one made any attempt at small talk. We nodded briefly, loaded my luggage onto the half-track and left.

„A taciturn bunch," I said. „What are they mining?"

„Tantalum, Columbium, the Rare Earths. A heartbreaking job, the concentrations are barely workable. They‘re tempted to Murak by fabulous commission rates, but they‘re lucky if they can even fill their norms.“

„You can‘t be sorry you‘re leaving. What made you stay here fifteen years?“

„It would take me fifteen years to tell you,“ Tallis rejoined. „I like the empty hills and the dead lakes.“

I murmured some comment, and aware that I wasn‘t satisfied he suddenly scooped a handful of grey sand off the seat, held it up and let it sift away through his fingers. „Prime archezoic loam. Pure bedrock. Spit on it and anything might happen. Perhaps you‘ll understand me if I say I‘ve been waiting for it to rain.“

„Will it?“

Tallis nodded. „In about two million years, so someone who came here told me.“

He said it with complete seriousness.

During the next few days, as we checked the stores and equipment inventories and ran over the installation together, I began to wonder if Tallis had lost his sense of time. Most men left to themselves for an indefinite period develop some occupational interest: chess or an insoluble dream-game or merely a compulsive wood-whittling. But Tallis, as far as I could see, did nothing. The cabin, a three-storey drum built round a central refrigerating column, was spartan and comfortless. Tallis‘s only recreation seemed to be staring out at the volcano jungle. This was an almost obsessive activity—all evening and most of the afternoon he would sit up on the lounge deck, gazing out at the hundreds of extinct cones visible from the observatory, their colours running the spectrum from red to violet as the day swung round into night.

The first indication of what Tallis was watching for came about a week before he was due to leave. He had crated up his few possessions and we were clearing out one of the small storage domes near the telescope. In the darkness at the back, draped across a pile of old fans, track links and beer coolers, were two pedal-powered refrigerator suits, enormous unwieldy sacks equipped with chest pylons and hand-operated cycle gears.

„Do you ever have to use these?“ I asked Tallis, glumly visualizing what a generator failure could mean.

He shook his head. „They were left behind by a survey team which did some work out in the volcanoes. There‘s an entire camp lying around in these sheds, in case you ever feel like a weekend on safari.“

Tallis was by the door. I moved my flashlight away and was about to switch it off when something flickered up at me from the floor. I stepped over the debris, searched about and found a small circular aluminium chest, about two feet across by a foot deep. Mounted on the back was a battery pack, thermostat and temperature selector. It was a typical relic of an expensively mounted expedition, probably a cocktail cabinet or hat box. Embossed in heavy gold lettering on the lid were the initials „C. F. N.“

Tallis came over from the door.

„What‘s this?“ he asked sharply, adding his flash to mine.

I would have left the case where it lay, but there was something in Tallis‘s voice, a distinct inflection of annoyance, that made me pick it up and shoulder past into the sunlight.

I cleaned off the dust, Tallis at my shoulder. Keying open the vacuum seals I sprung back the lid. Inside was a small tape recorder, spool racks and a telescopic boom mike that cantilevered three feet up into the air, hovering a few inches from my mouth. It was a magnificent piece of equipment, a singleorder job hand-made by a specialist, worth at least £500 apart from the case.

„Beautifully tooled," I remarked to Tallis. I tipped the platform and watched it spring gently. „The air bath is still intact."

I ran my fingers over the range indicator and the selective six-channel reading head. It was even fitted with a sonic trip, a useful device which could be set to trigger at anything from a fly's foot-fall to a walking crane's.

The trip had been set; I wondered what might have strayed across it when I saw that someone had anticipated me. The tape between the spools had been ripped out, so roughly that one spool had been torn off its bearings. The rack was empty, and the two frayed tabs hooked to the spool axles were the only pieces of tape left.

„Somebody was in a hurry," I said aloud. I depressed the lid and polished the initials with my fingertips. „This must have belonged to one of the members of the survey. C. F. N. Do you want to send it on to him?"

Tallis watched me pensively. „No. I'm afraid the two members of the team died here. Just over a year ago."

He told me about the incident. Two Cambridge geologists had negotiated through the Institute for Tallis's help in establishing a camp ten miles out in the volcano jungle, where they intended to work for a year, analysing the planet's core materials. The cost of bringing a vehicle to Murak was prohibitive, so Tallis had transported all the equipment to the camp site and set it up for them.

„I arranged to visit them once a month with power packs, water and supplies. The first time everything seemed all right. They were both over sixty, but standing up well to the heat. The camp and laboratory were running smoothly, and they had a small transmitter they could have used in an emergency.

„I saw them three times altogether. On my fourth visit they had vanished. I estimated that they'd been missing for about a week. Nothing was wrong. The transmitter was working, and there was plenty of water and power. I assumed they'd gone out collecting samples, lost themselves and died quickly in the first noon high."

„You never found the bodies?"

„No. I searched for them, but in the volcano jungle the contours of the valley floors shift from hour to hour. I notified the Institute and two months later an inspector flew in from Ceres and drove out to the site with me. He certified the deaths, told me to dismantle the camp and store it here. There were a few personal things, but I've heard nothing from any friends or relatives."

„Tragic," I commented. I closed the tape recorder and carried it into the shed. We walked back to the cabin. It was an hour to noon, and the parabolic sun bumper over the roof was a bowl of liquid fire.

I said to Tallis: „What on earth were they hoping to catch in the volcano jungle? The sonic trip was set."

„Was it?" Tallis shrugged. „What are you suggesting?"

„Nothing. It's just curious. I'm surprised there wasn't more of an investigation."

„Why? To start with, the fare from Ceres is £800, over £3000 from Earth. They were working privately. Why should anyone waste time and money doubting the obvious?“

I wanted to press Tallis for detail, but his last remark seemed to close the episode. We ate a silent lunch, then went out on a tour of the solar farms, replacing burnt-out thermo-couples. I was left with a vanished tape, two deaths, and a silent teasing suspicion that linked them neatly together.

Over the next days I began to watch Tallis more closely, waiting for another clue to the enigma growing around him.

I did learn one thing that astonished me.

I had asked him about his plans for the future; these were indefinite—he said something vague about a holiday, nothing he anticipated with any eagerness, and sounded as if he had given no thought whatever to his retirement. Over the last few days, as his departure time drew closer, the entire focus of his mind became fixed upon the volcano jungle; from dawn until late into the night he sat quietly in his chair, staring out at the ghostless panorama of disintegrating cones, adrift in some private time sea.

„When are you coming back?“ I asked with an attempt at playfulness, curious why he was leaving Murak at all.

He took the question seriously. „I‘m afraid I won‘t be. Fifteen years is long enough, just about the limit of time one can spend continuously in a single place. After that one gets institutionalized—“

„Continuously?“ I broke in. „You‘ve had your leaves?“

„No, I didn‘t bother. I was busy here.“

„Fifteen years!“ I shouted. „Good God, why? In this of all places! And what do you mean, *busy?* You‘re just sitting here, waiting for nothing. What are you supposed to be watching for, anyway?“

Tallis smiled evasively, started to say something and then thought better of it.

The question pressed round him. What was he waiting for? Were the geologists still alive? Was he expecting them to return, or make some signal? As I watched him pace about the cabin on his last morning I was convinced there was something he couldn‘t quite bring himself to tell me. Almost melodramatically he watched out over the desert, delaying his departure until the thirty-minute take-off siren hooted from the port. As we climbed into the half-track I fully expected the glowing spectres of the two geologists to come looming out of the volcano jungle, uttering cries of murder and revenge.

He shook my hand carefully before he went aboard. „You‘ve got my address all right? You‘re quite sure?“ For some reason, which confused my cruder suspicions, he had made a special point of ensuring that both I and the Institute would be able to contact him.

„Don‘t worry,“ I said. „I‘ll let you know if it rains.“

He looked at me sombrely. „Don‘t wait too long.“ His eyes strayed past my head towards the southern horizon, through the sand-haze to the endless sea of cones. He added: „Two million years is a long time.“

I took his arm as we walked to the ramp. „Tallis,“ I asked quietly, „what are you watching for? There‘s something, isn‘t there?“

He pulled away from me, collected himself. „What?“ he said shortly, looking at his wristwatch.

„You‘ve been trying to tell me all week,“ I insisted. „Come on, man.“

He shook his head abruptly, muttered something about the heat and stepped quickly through the lock.

I started to shout after him: „Those two geologists are out there…“ but the five-minute siren shattered the air and by the time it stopped Tallis had disappeared down the companionway and crewmen were shackling on the launching gantry and sealing the cargo and passenger locks.

I stood at the edge of the port as the ship cleared its take-off check, annoyed with myself for waiting until the last impossible moment to press Tallis for an explanation. Half an hour later he was gone.

Over the next few days Tallis began to slide slowly into the back of my mind. I gradually settled into the observatory, picked out new routines to keep time continuously on the move. Mayer, the metallurgist down at the mine, came over to the cabin most evenings to play chess and forget his pitifully low extraction rates. He was a big, muscular fellow of thirty-five who loathed Murak‘s climate, geology and bad company, a little crude but the sort of tonic I needed after an overdose of Tallis.

Mayer had met Tallis only once, and had never heard about the deaths of the two geologists.

„Damned fools, what were they looking for? Nothing to do with geology, Murak hasn‘t got one.“

Pickford, the old agent down at the depot, was the only person on Murak who remembered the two men, but time had garbled his memories.

„Salesmen, they were,“ he told me, blowing into his pipe. „Tallis did the heavy work for them. Should never have come here, trying to sell all those books.“

„Books?“

„Cases full. Bibles, if I recall.“

„Textbooks,“ I suggested. „Did you see them?“

„Sure I did,“ he said, puttering to himself. „Guinea moroccos.“ He jerked his head sharply. „You won‘t sell them here, I told them.“

It sounded exactly like a dry piece of academic humour. I could see Tallis and the two scientists pulling Pickford‘s leg, passing off their reference library as a set of commercial samples.

I suppose the whole episode would eventually have faded, but Tallis‘s charts kept my interest going. There were about twenty of them, half million aerials of the volcano jungle within a fifteen-mile radius of the observatory. One of them was marked with what I assumed to be the camp site of the geologists and alternative routes to and from the observatory. The camp was just over ten miles away, across terrain that was rough but not over-difficult for a tracked car.

I still suspected I was getting myself wound up over nothing. A meaningless approach arrow on the charts, the faintest suggestion of a cryptic ‘X’, and I should have been off like a rocket after a geldspar mine or two mysterious graves. I was almost sure that Tallis had not been responsible, either by negligence or design, for the deaths of the two men, but that still left a number of unanswered questions.

The next clear day I checked over the half-track, strapped a flare pistol into my knee holster and set off, warning Pickford to listen out for a mayday call on the Chrysler‘s transmitter.

It was just after dawn when I gunned the half-track out of the observatory compound and headed up the slope between two battery farms, following the route mapped out on the charts. Behind me the telescope swung slowly on its bogies, tirelessly sweeping its great steel ear through the Cepheid talk. The temperature was in the low seventies, comfortably cool for Murak, the sky a fresh cerise, broken by lanes of indigo that threw vivid violet lights on the drifts of grey ash on the higher slopes of the volcano jungle.

The observatory soon fell behind, obscured by the exhaust dust. I passed the water synthesizer, safely pointed at ten thousand tons of silicon hydrate, and within twenty minutes reached the nearest cone, a white broad-backed giant two hundred feet high, and drove round it into the first valley. Fifty feet across at their summits, the volcanoes jostled together like a herd of enormous elephants, separated by narrow dust-filled valleys, sometimes no more than a hundred yards apart, here and there giving way to the flat mile-long deck of a fossil lava lake. Wherever possible the route took advantage of these, and I soon picked up the tracks left by the Chrysler on its trips a year earlier.

I reached the site in three hours. What was left of the camp stood on a beach overlooking one of the lakes, a dismal collection of fuel cylinders, empty cold stores and water tanks sinking under the tides of dust washed up by the low thermal winds. On the far side of the lake the violet-capped cones of the volcanoes ranged southwards. Behind, a crescent of sharp cliffs cut off half the sky.

I walked round the site, looking for some trace of the two geologists. A battered tin field-desk lay on its side, green paint blistered and scratched. I turned it over and pulled out its drawers, finding nothing except a charred notebook and a telephone, the receiver melted solidly into its cradle.

Tallis had done his job too well.

The temperature was over 1000 by the time I climbed back into the half-track and a couple of miles ahead I had to stop as the cooling unit was draining power from the spark plugs and stalling the engine. The outside temperature was 130°, the sky a roaring shield, reflected in the slopes around me so that they seemed to stream with molten wax. I sealed all the shutters and changed into neutral, even then having to race the ancient engine to provide enough current for the cooler. I sat there for over an hour in the dim gloom of the dashboard, ears deadened by the engine roar, right foot cramping, cursing Talus and the two geologists.

That evening I unfurled some crisp new vellum, flexed my slide rule and determined to start work on my thesis.

One afternoon, two or three months later, as we turned the board between chess games, Mayer remarked: „I saw Pickford this morning. He told me he had some samples to show you.“

„TV tapes?“

„Bibles, I thought he said.“

I looked in on Pickford the next time I was down at the settlement. He was hovering about in the shadows behind the counter, white suit dirty and unpressed.

He puffed smoke at me. „Those salesmen," he explained. „You were inquiring about. I told you they were selling Bibles."

I nodded. „Well?"

„I kept some."

I put out my cigarette. „Can I see them?"

He gestured me round the counter with his pipe. „In the back."

I followed him between the shelves, loaded with fans, radios and TV-scopes, all outdated models imported years earlier to satisfy the boom planet Murak had never become.

„There it is," Pickford said. Standing against the back wall of the depot was a three-by-three wooden crate, taped with metal bands. Pickford ferreted about for a wrench. „Thought you might like to buy some."

„How long has it been here?"

„About a year. Tallis forgot to collect it. Only found it last week."

Doubtful, I thought: more likely he was simply waiting for Tallis to be safely out of the way. I watched while he prised off the lid. Inside was a tough brown wrapping paper. Pickford broke the seals and folded the sides back carefully, revealing a layer of black morocco-bound volumes.

I pulled out one of them and held the heavily ribbed spine up to the light.

It was a Bible, as Pickford had promised. Below it were a dozen others.

„You're right," I said. Pickford pulled up a radiogram and sat down, watching me.

I looked at the Bible again. It was in mint condition, the King James Authorized Version. The marbling inside the endboards was unmarked. A publisher's ticket slipped out onto the floor, and I realized that the copy had hardly come from a private library.

The bindings varied slightly. The next volume I pulled out was a copy of the Vulgate.

„How many crates did they have altogether?" I asked Pickford.

„Bibles? Fourteen, fifteen with this one. They ordered them all after they got here. This was the last one." He pulled out another volume and handed it to me. „Good condition, eh?"

It was a Koran.

I started lifting the volumes out and got Pickford to help me sort them on the shelves. When we counted them up there were ninety in all: thirty-five Holy Bibles (twenty-four Authorized Versions and eleven Vulgates), fifteen copies of the Koran, five of the Talmud, ten of the Bhagavat Gita and twenty-five of the Upanishads.

I took one of each and gave Pickford a £10 note.

„Any time you want some more," he called after me. „Maybe I can arrange a discount." He was chuckling to himself, highly pleased with the deal, one up on the salesmen.

When Mayer called round that evening he noticed the six volumes on my desk.

„Pickford's samples," I explained. I told him how I had found the crate at the depot and that it had been ordered by the geologists after their arrival. „According to Pickford they ordered a total of fifteen crates. All Bibles."

„He's senile."

„No. His memory is good. There were certainly other crates because this one was sealed and he knew it contained Bibles."

„Damned funny. Maybe they were salesmen."

„Whatever they were they certainly weren't geologists. Why did Tallis say they were? Anyway, why didn't he ever mention that they had ordered all these Bibles?"

„Perhaps he'd forgotten."

„Fifteen crates? Fifteen crates of Bibles? Heavens above, what did they do with them?"

Mayer shrugged. He went over to the window. „Do you want me to radio Ceres?"

„Not yet. It still doesn't add up to anything."

„There might be a reward. Probably a big one. God, I could go home!"

„Relax. First we've got to find out what these so-called geologists were doing here, why they ordered this fantastic supply of Bibles. One thing: whatever it was, I swear Tallis knew about it. Originally I thought they might have discovered a geldspar mine and been double-crossed by Tallis—that sonic trip was suspicious. Or else that they'd deliberately faked their own deaths so that they could spend a couple of years working the mine, using Talus as their supply source. But all these Bibles mean we must start thinking in completely different categories."

Round the clock for three days, with only short breaks for sleep hunched in the Chrysler's driving seat, I systematically swept the volcano jungle, winding slowly through the labyrinth of valleys, climbing to the crest of every cone, carefully checking every exposed quartz vein, every rift or gulley that might hide what I was convinced was waiting for me.

Mayer deputized at the observatory, driving over every afternoon. He helped me recondition an old diesel generator in one of the storage domes and we lashed it on to the back of the half-track to power the cabin heater needed for the 30° nights and the three big spotlights fixed on the roof, providing a 360° traverse. I made two trips with a full cargo of fuel out to the camp site, dumped them there and made it my base.

Across the thick glue-like sand of the volcano jungle, we calculated, a man of sixty could walk at a maximum of one mile an hour, and spend at most two hours in 70° or above sunlight. That meant that whatever there was to find would be within twelve square miles of the camp site, three square miles if we included a return journey.

I searched the volcanoes as exactingly as I could, marking each cone and the adjacent valleys on the charts as I covered them, at a steady five miles an hour, the great engine of the Chrysler roaring ceaselessly, from noon, when the valleys filled with fire and seemed to run with lava again, round to midnight, when the huge cones became enormous mountains of bone, sombre graveyards presided over by the fantastic colonnades and hanging galleries of the sand reefs, suspended from the lake rims like inverted cathedrals.

I forced the Chrysler on, swinging the bumpers to uproot any suspicious crag or boulder that might hide a mine shaft, ramming through huge drifts of fine white sand that rose in soft clouds around the half-track like the dust of powdered silk.

I found nothing. The reefs and valleys were deserted, the volcano slopes untracked, craters empty, their shallow floors littered with meteor debris, rock sulphur and cosmic dust.

I decided to give up just before dawn on the fourth morning, after waking from a couple of hours of cramped and restless sleep.

„I'm coming in now," I reported to Mayer over the transmitter. „There's nothing out here. I'll collect what fuel there is left from the site and see you for breakfast."

Dawn had just come up as I reached the site. I loaded the fuel cans back onto the half-track, switched off the spotlights and took what I knew would be my last look round. I sat down at the field desk and watched the sun arching upward through the cones across the lake. Scooping a handful of ash off the desk, I scrutinized it sadly for geldspar.

„Prime archezoic loam," I said, repeating Tallis's words aloud to the dead lake. I was about to spit on it, more in anger than in hope, when some of the tumblers in my mind started to click.

About five miles from the far edge of the lake, silhouetted against the sunrise over the volcanoes, was a long 100foot-high escarpment of hard slate-blue rock that lifted out of the desert bed and ran for about two miles in a low clean sweep across the horizon, disappearing among the cones in the south-west. Its outlines were sharp and well defined, suggesting that its materials pre-dated the planet's volcanic period. The escarpment sat squarely across the desert, gaunt and rigid, and looked as if it had been there since Murak's beginning, while the soft ashy cones and grey hillocks around it had known only the planet's end.

It was no more than an uninformed guess, but suddenly I would have bet my entire two years' salary that the rocks of the escarpment were archezoic. It was about three miles outside the area I had been combing, just visible from the observatory.

The vision of a geldspar mine returned sharply!

The lake took me nearly halfway there. I raced the Chrysler across it at forty, wasted thirty minutes picking a route through an elaborate sand reef, and then entered a long steeply walled valley which led directly towards the escarpment.

A mile away I saw that the escarpment was not, as it first seemed, a narrow continuous ridge, but a circular horizontal table. A curious feature was the almost perfect flatness of the table top, as if it had been deliberately levelled by a giant sword. Its sides were unusually symmetrical; they sloped at exactly the same angle, about 35°, and formed a single cliff unbroken by fissures or crevices.

I reached the table in an hour, parked the half-track at its foot and looked up at the great rounded flank of dull blue rock sloping away from me, rising like an island out of the grey sea of the desert floor.

I changed down into bottom gear and floored the accelerator. Steering the Chrysler obliquely across the slope to minimize the angle of ascent, I roared slowly up the side, tracks skating and racing, swinging the half-track around like a frantic pendulum.

Scaling the crest, I levelled off and looked out over a plateau about two miles in diameter, bare except for a light blue carpet of cosmic dust.

In the centre of the plateau, at least a mile across, was an enormous metallic lake, heat ripples spiralling upwards from its dark smooth surface.

I edged the half-track forward, head out of the side window, watching carefully, holding down the speed that picked up too easily. There were no meteorites or

rock fragments lying about; presumably the lake surface cooled and set at night, to melt and extend itself as the temperature rose the next day.

Although the roof seemed hard as steel I stopped about 300 yards from the edge, cut the engine and climbed up onto the cabin.

The shift of perspective was slight but sufficient. The lake vanished, and I realized I was looking down at a shallow basin, about half a mile wide, scooped out of the roof.

I swung back into the cab and slammed in the accelerator. The basin, like the table top, was a perfect circle, sloping smoothly to the floor about one hundred feet below its rim, in imitation of a volcanic crater.

I braked the half-track at the edge and jumped out.

Four hundred yards away, in the basin's centre, five gigantic rectangular slabs of stone reared up from a vast pentagonal base.

This, then, was the secret Tallis had kept from me.

The basin was empty, the air warmer, strangely silent after three days of the Chrysler's engine roaring inside my head.

I lowered myself over the edge and began to walk down the slope towards the great monument in the centre of the basin. For the first time since my arrival on Murak I was unable to see the desert and the brilliant colours of the volcano jungle. I had strayed into a pale blue world, as pure and exact as a geometric equation, composed of the curving floor, the pentagonal base and the five stone rectangles towering up into the sky like the temple of some abstract religion.

It took me nearly three minutes to reach the monument. Behind me, on the sky-line, the half-track's engine steamed faintly. I went up to the base stone, which was a yard thick and must have weighed over a thousand tons, and placed my palms on its surface. It was still cool, the thin blue grain closely packed. Like the megaliths standing on it, the pentagon was unornamented and geometrically perfect.

I heaved myself up and approached the nearest megalith. The shadows around me were enormous parallelograms, their angles shrinking as the sun blazed up into the sky. I walked slowly round into the centre of the group, dimly aware that neither Tallis nor the two geologists could have carved the megaliths and raised them onto the pentagon, when I saw that the entire inner surface of the nearest megalith was covered by row upon row of finely chiselled hieroglyphs.

Swinging round, I ran my hands across its surface. Large patches had crumbled away, leaving a faint indecipherable tracery, but most of the surface was intact, packed solidly with pictographic symbols and intricate cuneiform glyphics that ran down it in narrow columns.

I stepped over to the next megalith. Here again, the inner face was covered with tens of thousands of minute carved symbols, the rows separated by finely cut dividing rules that fell the full fifty-foot height of the megalith.

There were at least a dozen languages, all in alphabets I had never seen before, strings of meaningless ciphers among which I could pick odd cross-hatched symbols that seemed to be numerals, and peculiar serpentine forms that might have represented human figures in stylized poses.

Suddenly my eye caught:

CYR*RK VII A*PHA LEP**IS *D 1317

Below was another, damaged but legible.

AMEN*TEK LG*V *LPHA LE*ORIS AD 13**

There were blanks among the letters, where time had flaked away minute grains of the stone.

My eyes raced down the column. There were a score more entries:

PONT*AR*H*CV ALPH* L*PORIS A* *318 MYR*K LV* A**HA
LEPORI* AD 13*6 KYR** XII ALPH* LEP*RIS AD 1*19

The list of names, all from Alpha Leporis, continued down the column. I followed it to the base, where the names ended three inches from the bottom, then moved along the surface, across rows of hieroglyphs, and picked up the list three or four columns later.

M*MARYK XX*V A*PHA LEPORI* AD 1389
CYRARK IX ALPHA *EPORIS AD 1390

I went over to the megalith on my left and began to examine the inscriptions carefully.

Here the entries read:

MINYS-259 DELT* ARGUS AD 1874 TYLNYS-413
DELTA ARGUS *D 1874

There were fewer blanks; to the right of the face the entries were more recent, the lettering sharper. In all there were five distinct languages, four of them, including Earth's, translations of the first entry running down the left-hand margin of each column.

The third and fourth megaliths recorded entries from Gamma Grus and Beta Trianguli. They followed the same pattern, their surfaces divided into eighteen-inch-wide columns, each of which contained five rows of entries, the four hieroglyphic languages followed by Earth's, recording the same minimal data in the same terse formula: Name—Place—Date.

I had looked at four of the megaliths. The fifth stood with its back to the sun, its inner face hidden.

I walked over to it, crossing the oblique panels of shadow withdrawing to their sources, curious as to what fabulous catalogue of names I should find.

The fifth megalith was blank.

My eyes raced across its huge unbroken surface, marked only by the quarter-inch-deep grooves of the dividing rules some thoughtful master mason from the stars had chiselled to tabulate the entries from Earth that had never come.

I returned to the other megaliths and for half an hour read at random, arms outstretched involuntarily across the great inscription panels, fingertips tracing

the convolutions of the hieroglyphs, seeking among the thousands of signatures some clue to the identity and purpose of the four stellar races.

COPT*C LEAGUE MILV BETA TRIANGULI *D 1723
ISARI* LEAGUE *VII BETA *RIANGULI AD 1724
MAR-5-GO GAMMA GRUS AD 1959 VEN-7GO
GAMMA GRUS AD 1960
TETRARK XII ALPHA LEPORIS AD 2095

Dynasties recurred again and again, Cyrark's, Minys's—Go's, separated by twenty- or thirty-year intervals that appeared to be generations. Before AD 1200 all entries were illegible. This represented something over half the total. The surfaces of the megaliths were almost completely covered, and initially I assumed that the first entries had been made roughly 2200 years earlier, shortly after the birth of Christ. However, the frequency of the entries increased algebraically: in the 15th century there were one or two a year, by the 20th century there were five or six, and by the present year the number varied from twenty entries from Delta Argus to over thirty-five from Alpha Leporis.

The last of these, at the extreme right corner of the megalith, was:

CYRARK CCCXXIV ALPHA LEPORIS AD 2218

The letters were freshly incised, perhaps no more than a day old, even a few hours. Below, a free space of two feet reached to the floor.

Breaking off my scrutiny, I jumped down from the base stone and carefully searched the surrounding basin, sweeping the light dust carpet for vehicle or foot marks, the remains of implements or scaffolding.

But the basin was empty, the dust untouched except for the single file of prints leading down from the half-track.

I was sweating uncomfortably, and the thermo-alarm strapped to my wrist rang, warning me that the air temperature was 85°, ninety minutes to noon. I re-set it to 100°, took a last look round the five megaliths, and then made my way back to the half-track.

Heat waves raced and glimmered round the rim of the basin, and the sky was a dark inflamed red, mottled by the thermal pressure fields massing overhead like storm clouds. I jogged along at a half run, in a hurry to contact Mayer. Without his confirmation the authorities on Ceres would treat my report as the fantasy of a sand-happy lunatic. In addition, I wanted him to bring his camera; we could develop the reels within half an hour and radio a dozen stills as indisputable proof.

More important, I wanted someone to share the discovery, provide me with at least some cover in numbers. The frequency of entries on the megaliths, and the virtual absence of any further space—unless the reverse sides were used, which seemed unlikely—suggested a climax was soon to be reached, probably the climax for which Tallis had been waiting. Hundreds of entries had been made during his fifteen years on Murak; watching all day from the observatory he must have seen every landing.

As I swung into the half-track the emergency light on the transceiver above the windscreen was pulsing insistently. I switched to audio and Mayer‘s voice snapped into my ear.

„Quaine? Is that you Where the hell are you, man? I nearly put out a mayday for you!“

He was at the camp site. Calling in from the observatory when I failed to arrive, he assumed I had broken down and abandoned the half-track, and had come out searching for me.

I picked him up at the camp site half an hour later, retroversed the tracks in a squealing circle of dust and kicked off again at full throttle. Mayer pressed me all the way back but I told him nothing, driving the Chrysler hard across the lake, paralleling the two previous sets of tracks and throwing up a huge cloud of dust 150 feet into the air. It was now over 95°, and the ash hills in the valley at the end of the lake were beginning to look angry and boiled.

Eager to get Mayer down into the basin, and with my mind spinning like a disintegrating flywheel, it was only as the half-track roared up the table slope that I felt a first chilling pang of fear. Through the windscreen I hesitantly scanned the tilting sky. Soon after reaching the basin we would have to shut down for an hour, two of us crammed together in the fume-filled cabin, deafened by the engine, sitting targets with the periscope blinded by the glare.

The centre of the plateau was a pulsing blur, as the air trapped in the basin throbbed upward into the sun. I drove straight towards it, Mayer stiffening in his seat. A hundred yards from the basin‘s edge the air suddenly cleared and we could see the tops of the megaliths. Mayer leapt up and swung out of the door onto the running board as I cut the engine and slammed the half-track to a halt by the rim. We jumped down, grabbing flare pistols and shouting to each other, slid into the basin and sprinted through the boiling air to the megaliths looming up in the centre.

I half-expected to find a reception party waiting for us, but the megaliths were deserted. I reached the pentagon fifty yards ahead of Mayer, climbed up and waited for him, gulping in the molten sunlight.

I helped him up and led him over to one of the megaliths, picked a column and began to read out the entries. Then I took him round the others, recapitulating everything I had discovered, pointing out the blank tablet reserved for Earth.

Mayer listened, broke away and wandered off, staring up dully at the megaliths.

„Quaine, you‘ve really found something,“ he muttered softly. „Crazy, must be some sort of temple.“

I followed him round, wiping the sweat off my face and shielding my eyes from the glare reflected off the great slabs.

„Look at them, Mayer! They‘ve been coming here for ten thousand years! Do you know what this means?“

Mayer tentatively reached out and touched one of the megaliths. „Argive League XXV… Beta Tn—“ he read out. „There are others, then. God Almighty. What do you think they look like?“

„What does it matter? Listen. They must have levelled this plateau themselves, scooped out the basin and cut these tablets from the living rock. Can you even imagine the tools they used?“

We crouched in the narrow rectangle of shadow in the lee of the sunward megalith. The temperature climbed, fortyfive minutes to noon, 105°. „What is all this, though?“ Mayer asked. „Their burial ground?“

„Unlikely. Why leave a tablet for Earth? If they‘ve been able to learn our language they‘d know the gesture was pointless. Anyway, elaborate burial customs are a sure sign of decadence, and there‘s something here that suggests the exact opposite. I‘m convinced they expect that some time in the future we‘ll take an active part in whatever is celebrated here.“

„Maybe, but what? Think in new categories, remember?“ Mayer squinted up at the megaliths. „This could be anything from an ethnological bill of lading to the guest list at an all-time cosmic house party.“

He noticed something, frowned, then suddenly wrenched away from me. He leapt to his feet, pressed his hands against the surface of the slab behind us and ran his eyes carefully over the grain.

„What‘s worrying you?“ I asked.

„Shut up!“ he snapped. He scratched his thumbnail at the surface, trying to dislodge a few grains. „What are you talking about, Quaine, these slabs aren‘t made of stone!“

He slipped out his jack knife, sprung the blade and stabbed viciously at the megalith, slashing a two-foot-long groove across the inscriptions.

I stood up and tried to restrain him but he shouldered me away and ran his finger down the groove, collecting a few fragments.

He turned on me angrily. „Do you know what this is? Tantalum oxide!

„Pure ninety-nine per cent paygold. No wonder our extraction rates are fantastically small. I couldn‘t understand it, but these people—“ he jerked his thumb furiously at the megaliths „—have damn well milked the planet dry to build these crazy things!“

It was 115°. The air was beginning to turn yellow and we were breathing in short exhausted pants.

„Let‘s get back to the truck,“ I temporized. Mayer was losing control, carried away by his rage. With his big burly shoulders hunched in anger, staring up blindly at the five great megaliths, face contorted by the heat, he looked like an insane sub-man pinned in the time trophy of a galactic super-hunter.

He was ranting away as we stumbled through the dust towards the half-track.

„What do you want to do?“ I shouted. „Cut them down and put them through your ore crushers?“

Mayer stopped, the blue dust swirling about his legs. The air was humming as the basin floor expanded in the heart. The half-track was only fifty yards away, its refrigerated cabin a cool haven.

Mayer was watching me, nodding slowly. „It could be done. Ten tons of Hy-Dyne planted round those slabs would crack them into small enough pieces for a tractor to handle. We could store them out at the observatory, then sneak them later into my refining tanks.“

I walked on, shaking my head with a thin grin. The heat was hitting Mayer, welling up all the irrational bitterness of a year‘s frustration. „It‘s an idea. Why don‘t you get in touch with Gamma Grus? Maybe they‘ll give you the lease.“

„I‘m serious, Quaine,“ Mayer called after me. „In a couple of years we‘d be rich men.“

„You‘re crazy!“ I shouted back at him. „The sun‘s boiling your brains.“

I began to scale the slope up to the rim. The next hour in the cabin was going to be difficult, cooped up with a maniac eager to tear the stars apart. The butt of the flare pistol swinging on my knee caught my eye; a poor weapon, though, against Mayer‘s physique.

I had climbed almost up to the rim when I heard his feet thudding through the dust. I started to turn round just as he was on me, swinging a tremendous blow that struck me on the back of the head. I fell, watched him close in and then stood up, my skull exploding, and grappled with him. We stumbled over each other for a moment, the walls of the basin diving around us like a switchback, and then he knocked my hands away and smashed a heavy right cross into my face.

I fell on my back, stunned by the pain; the blow seemed to have loosened my jaw and damaged all the bones on the left side of my face. I managed to sit up and saw Mayer running past. He reached one hand to the rim, pulled himself up and lurched over to the halftrack.

I dragged the flare pistol out of its holster, snapped back the bolt and trained it at Mayer. He was thirty yards away, turning the nearside door handle. I held the butt with both hands and fired as he opened the door. He looked round at the sharp detonation and watched the silver shell soar swiftly through the air towards him, ready to duck.

The shell missed him by three feet and exploded against the cabin roof. There was a brilliant flash of light that resolved itself a fraction of a second later into a fireball of incandescent magnesium vapour ten feet in diameter. This slowly faded to reveal the entire driving cabin, bonnet and forward side-panels of the half-track burning strongly with a loud, heavy crackling. Out of this maelstrom suddenly plunged the figure of Mayer, moving with violent speed, blackened arms across his face. He tripped over the rim, catapulted down into the dust and rolled for about twenty yards before he finally lay still, a shapeless bundle of smoking rags.

I looked numbly at my wristwatch. It was ten minutes to noon. The temperature was 130°. I pulled myself to my feet and trudged slowly up the slope towards the half-track, head thudding like a volcano, uncertain whether I would be strong enough to lift myself out of the basin.

When I was ten feet from the rim I could see that the windscreen of the half-track had melted and was dripping like treacle onto the dashboard.

I dropped the flare pistol and turned round.

It was five minutes to noon. Around me, on all sides, enormous sheets of fire were cascading slowly from the sky, passing straight through the floor of the basin, and then rising again in an inverted torrent. The megaliths were no longer visible, screened by curtains of brilliant light, but I groped forward, following the slope, searching for what shade would still be among them.

Twenty yards farther on I saw that the sun was directly overhead. It expanded until the disc was as wide as the basin, and then lowered itself to about ten feet above my head, a thousand rivers of fire streaming across its surface in all directions. There was a terrifying roaring and barking noise, overlaid by a dull, massive pounding as all the volcanoes in the volcano jungle began to erupt again.

I walked on, in a dream, shuffling slowly, eyes closed to shut out the furnace around me. Then I discovered that I was sitting on the floor of the basin, which started to spin, setting up a high-pitched screaming.

A strange vision swept like a flame through my mind.

For aeons I plunged, spiralling weightlessly through a thousand whirling vortexes, swirled and buffeted down chasmic eddies, splayed out across the disintegrating matrix of the continuum, a dreamless ghost in flight from the cosmic Now. Then a million motes of light prickled the darkness above me, illuminating enormous curving causeways of time and space veering out past the stars to the rim of the galaxy. My dimensions shrank to a metaphysical extension of astral zero, I was propelled upward to the stars. Aisles of light broke and splintered around me, I passed Aldebaran, soared over Betelgeuse and Vega, zoomed past Antares, finally halted a hundred light years above the crown of Canopus.

Epochs drifted. Time massed on gigantic fronts, colliding like crippled universes. Abruptly, the infinite worlds of tomorrow unfolded before me ten thousand years, a hundred thousand, unnumbered millennia raced past me in a blur of light, an iridescent cataract of stars and nebulae, interlaced by flashing trajectories of flight and exploration.

I entered deep time.

Deep Time: 1,000,000 mega-years. I saw the Milky Way, a wheeling carousel of fire, and Earth‘s remote descendants, countless races inhabiting every stellar system in the galaxy. The dark intervals between the stars were a continuously flickering field of light, a gigantic phosphorescent ocean, filled with the vibrating pulses of electromagnetic communication pathways.

To cross the enormous voids between the stars they have progressively slowed their physiological time, first ten, then a hundred-fold, so accelerating stellar and galactic time. Space has become alive with transient swarms of comets and meteors,‘the constellations have begun to dislocate and shift, the slow majestic rotation of the universe itself is at last visible.

Deep Time: 10,000,000 mega-years. Now they have left the Milky Way, which has started to fragment and dissolve. To reach the island galaxies they have further slowed their time schemes by a factor of 10,000, and can thus communicate with each other across vast inter-galactic distances in a subjective period of only a few years. Continuously expanding into deep space, they have extended their physiological dependence upon electronic memory banks which store the atomic and molecular patterns within their bodies, transmit them outward at the speed of light, and later re-assemble them.

Deep Time: 100,000,000 mega-years. They have spread now to all the neighbouring galaxies, swallowing thousands of nebulae. Their time schemes have decelerated a million-fold, they have become the only permanent forms in an everchanging world. In a single instant of their lives a star emerges and dies, a sub-universe is born, a score of planetary lifesystems evolve and vanish. Around them the universe sparkles and flickers with myriad points of light, as untold numbers of constellations appear and fade.

Now, too, they have finally shed their organic forms and are composed of radiating electromagnetic fields, the primary energy substratum of the universe,

complex networks of multiple dimensions, alive with the constant tremor of the sentient messages they carry, bearing the life-ways of the race.

To power these fields, they have harnessed entire galaxies riding the wave-fronts of the stellar explosions out towards the terminal helixes of the universe.

Deep Time: 1,000,000,000 mega-years. They are beginning to dictate the form and dimensions of the universe. To girdle the distances which circumscribe the cosmos they have reduced their time period to 0.00000001 of its previous phase. The great galaxies and spiral nebulae which once seemed to live for eternity are now of such brief duration that they are no longer visible. The universe is now almost filled by the great vibrating mantle of ideation, a vast shimmering harp which has completely translated itself into pure wave form, independent of any generating source.

As the universe pulses slowly, its own energy vortices flexing and dilating, so the force-fields of the ideation mantle flex and dilate in sympathy, growing like an embryo within the womb of the cosmos, a child which will soon fill and consume its parent.

Deep Time: 10,000,000,000 mega-years. The ideation-field has now swallowed the cosmos, substituted its own dynamic, its own spatial and temporal dimensions. All primary time and energy fields have been engulfed. Seeking the final extension of itself within its own bounds the mantle has reduced its time period to an almost infinitesimal 0.00000000…n of its previous interval. Time has virtually ceased to exist, the ideation-field is nearly stationary, infinitely slow eddies of sentience undulating outward across its mantles.

Ultimately it achieves the final predicates of time and space, eternity and infinity, and slows to absolute zero. Then with a cataclysmic eruption it disintegrates, no longer able to contain itself. Its vast energy patterns begin to collapse, the whole system twists and thrashes in its mortal agony, thrusting outwards huge cataracts of fragmenting energy. In parallel, time emerges.

Out of this debris the first proto-galactic fields are formed, coalescing to give the galaxies and nebulae, the stars encircled by their planetary bodies. Among these, from the elemental seas, based on the carbon atom, emerge the first living forms.

So the cycle renews itself.

The stars swam, their patterns shifting through a dozen constellations, novas flooded the darkness like blinding arcs, revealing the familiar profiles of the Milky Way, the constellations Orion, Coma Beren ices, Cygnus.

Lowering my eyes from the storm-tossed sky, I saw the five megaliths. I was back on Murak. Around me the basin was filled with a great concourse of silent figures, ranged upward along the darkened slopes, shoulder to shoulder in endless ranks, like spectators in a spectral arena.

Beside me a voice spoke, and it seemed to have told me everything I had witnessed of the great cosmic round.

Just before I sank into unconsciousness for the last time I tried to ask the question ever present in my drifting mind, but it answered before I spoke, the star-littered sky, the five megaliths and the watching multitude spinning and swirling away into a dream as it said „Meanwhile we wait here, at the threshold of time and space, celebrating the identity and kinship of the particles within our bodies with

those of the sun and the stars of our brief private times with the vast periods of the galaxies, with the total unifying time of the cosmos…“

I woke lying face downward in the cool evening sand, shadows beginning to fill the basin, the thermal winds blowing a crisp refreshing breeze across my head and back. Below, the megaliths rose up into the thin blue air, their lower halves cut by the shadow-line of the sinking sun. I lay quietly, stirring my legs and arms tentatively, conscious of the gigantic rifts that had driven through my mind. After a few minutes I pulled myself to my feet and gazed round at the slopes curving away from me, the memory of the insane vision vivid in my mind.

The vast concourse that had filled the basin, the dream of the cosmic cycle, the voice of my interlocutor—were still real to me, a world in parallel I had just stepped from, and the door to which hung somewhere in the air around me.

Had I dreamed everything, assembling the entire fantasy in my mind as I lay raving in the noon heat, saved by some thermodynamic freak of the basin’s architecture?

I held my thermo-alarm up to the fading light, checking the maximum and minimum levels. The maximum read 162°. Yet I had survived! I felt relaxed, restored, almost rejuvenated. My hands and face were unburnt—a temperature of over 160° would have boiled the flesh off my bones, left my skin a blackened crisp.

Over my shoulder I noticed the half-track standing on the rim. I ran towards it, for the first time remembering Mayer‘s death. I felt my cheek-bones, testing my jaw muscles. Surprisingly Mayer‘s heavy punches had left no bruise.

Mayer‘s body had gone! A single line of footsteps led down from the half-track to the megaliths, but otherwise the carpet of light blue dust was untouched. Mayer‘s prints, all marks of our scuffle, had vanished.

I quickly scaled the rim and reached the half-track, peering under the chassis and between the tracks. I flung open the cabin door, found the compartment empty.

The windscreen was intact. The paintwork on the door and bonnet was unmarked, the metal trim around the windows unscratched. I dropped to my knees, vainly searched for any flakes of magnesium ash. On my knee the flare pistol lodged securely in its holster, a primed star shell in the breach.

I left the Chrysler, jumped down into the basin and ran over to the megaliths. For an hour I paced round them, trying to resolve the countless questions that jammed my mind.

Just before I left I went over to the fifth tablet. I looked up at the top left corner, wondering whether I should have qualified for its first entry had I died that afternoon.

A single row of letters, filled with shadow by the falling light, stood out clearly.

I stepped back and craned up at them. There were the symbols of the four alien languages, and then, proudly against the stars: CHARLES FOSTER NELSON EARTH AD 2217 „Tell me, Quaine, where would you like to be when the world ends?“

In the seven years since Tallis first asked me this question I must have re-examined it a thousand times. Somehow it seems the key to all the extraordinary events that have happened on Murak, with their limitless implications for the people of Earth (to me a satisfactory answer contains an acceptable statement of

one‘s philosophy and beliefs, an adequate discharge of the one moral debt we owe ourselves and the universe).

Not that the world is about to „end“. The implication is rather that it has already ended and regenerated itself an infinite number of times, and that the only remaining question is what to do with ourselves in the meantime. The four stellar races who built the megaliths chose to come to Murak. What exactly they are waiting for here I can’t be certain. A cosmic redeemer, perhaps, the first sight of the vast mantle of ideation I glimpsed in my vision. Recalling the period of two million years Tallis cited for life to appear on Murak it may be that the next cosmic cycle will receive its impetus here, and that we are advance spectators, five kings come to attend the genesis of a super-species which will soon outstrip us.

That there are others here, invisible and sustained by preternatural forces, is without doubt. Apart from the impossibility of surviving a Murak noon, I certainly didn‘t remove Mayer‘s body from the basin and arrange to have him electrocuted by one of the data-processing units at the observatory. Nor did I conceive the vision of the cosmic cycle myself.

It looks as if the two geologists stumbled upon the Waiting Grounds, somehow divined their significance, and then let Tallis in on their discovery. Perhaps they disagreed, as Mayer and I did, and Nelson may have been forced to kill his companion, to die himself a year later in the course of his vigil.

Like Tallis I shall wait here if necessary for fifteen years. I go out to the Grounds once a week and watch them from the observatory the rest of the time. So far I have seen nothing, although two or three hundred more names have been added to the tablets. However, I am certain that whatever we are waiting for will soon arrive. When I get tired or impatient, as I sometimes do, I remind myself that they have been coming to Murak and waiting here, generation upon generation, for 10,000 years. Whatever it is, it must be worth waiting for.