

THE ALTERNATIVE

by
Richard Dante

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PREFACE

Where do horror stories come from? THE ALTERNATIVE was inspired by a nightmare I suffered on taking a sleeping pill. If so, that was the force that started me writing in the first place. The work started out as a scenario for a motion picture, in fact, a movie within a movie. A friend at ABC suggested I turn it into a novel first then submit it to the Network. I did and got a note back -- they felt it was too violent for their viewers. That was a few years ago and I recently decided to update it and turn it into an E-book. Without giving away the plot line, the story deals with a future world in trouble and a grim Alternative to solve the problem-- Enjoy!

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THE ALTERNATIVE

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ONE

The Sun held its position high above Maryland. It's somber light tarnished the white buildings of the city a dirty beige. There was a dusty, gritty feel about the place. Occasional gusts of warm wind sent dust devils kicking up across dead lawns. Where grass once grew, large areas were laid bare and the baked earth was patterned with a network of fine cracks and crevices.

A river divided the city. At one time it ran cool and deep down around Mount Vernon and on into Chesapeake Bay. Now its water was shallow and still, an unwholesome shade of green. Rushes and salt grass choked the banks. Weeds dammed the brackish central channel, where not long ago boats and ships scuttled in and out of the harbor. There was little sign of life. Only a few dragonflies darted about, the plated sections of their slim bodies glistened like steel in the amber light.

Some seemed to hang motionless as their compound eyes searched the murky waters.

Though it was late Spring, the cherry trees along the mall hadn't bothered to blossom this year, and between the two monuments, the reflection pool was empty.

Farther up Pennsylvania Avenue stood the Capitol Building. The bright symbol of Democracy looked dingy in the ochre light. Inside the Senate chamber, a pall of gloom hung over the proceedings.

"Missouri?"

"Missouri votes, Yes!"

"New York?"

"No!"

A meandering beam of sunlight caught the polished surface of a brass plate. The name *John Shipley* was engraved upon it.

The old man sat erect at his desk, his handsome head topped with an amazing shock of white hair. One of the television cameras moved in for a tight close-up. The unrelenting eye of the camera examined the face. It was marked by creases and lines that told of the happiness and the heartaches of a great man. On his magnificent face one could almost read the last fifty years of the nation's history.

His eyes were closed.

Suddenly, they opened! Bright blue and alive! The camera remained focused on them--searching.

The clerk droned on. "Wyoming. How do you vote?"

"Mr. Vice President, the State of Wyoming votes NO on the initiative!"

The merciless camera held tight to the beloved old face. Another defeat. It could be one too many. The camera registered no change in expression except, maybe, deep in his eyes it could see a great man who's last dream was dying.

There was a visible release of breath as the Senator slowly reached into his vest pocket and withdrew a small silver box. He extracted a tiny white pill and washed it down with a glass of water. During the roar of assent and dissent following the negative and deciding vote, the old man looked up toward the ceiling.

High above the proud old head, beyond the curve of the Capitol dome, the foul atmosphere that imprisoned the city began to stir. Through most of the day, the Capitol was choked by smoke from Appalachia where forest fires burned out of control. Then, by some miracle, in late afternoon, a fresh sea breeze from Chesapeake Bay blew the smoke back toward the west, and the city breathed a sigh of relief. In the warm glow of twilight, Washington began to resemble the historic Capitol of happier days. Scattered solar-charged street lights came on, and the scene took on a festive glitter.

TWO

Night poured across the city. Suddenly, beyond the lit Capitol area, in a dark, almost deserted business district, a brilliant pool shimmered like a jewel in the blackness. Fingers of light shot into the air and moved about as if searching for something in the sky. On closer observation, one could see the display lit a gigantic old movie house. A theater whose baroque architecture reflected the late nineteen-

thirties, the golden age of motion pictures. The building was all white and in the swirling light became dazzling in its whiteness.

At street level, many of the small solar-electric cabs arriving at the theater were competing for space. They inched their way through the heavy traffic. Their tinny horns raised a cacophony of protest as elegant and distinguished men and women descended from them into a flood of digital camera flashes.

A police cordon stood protectively around the courtyard. There seemed to be good reason for this added precaution. The activity in front of the theater contrasted sharply with the squalor on the opposite side of the street. Across from the splendor, the shop and store windows were boarded over; sealed against another element which had moved into the area. They had no business there--except survival. Dirty children played in the littered gutters, while in the shadows, their faces lit by the miraculous spectacle, transient slum dwellers stood -- watching.

Inside the movie palace, the lobby was jammed as the smart black-tie crowd milled about, calling greetings to one another. Though many of the gowns were last years haute couture, most of the ladies had managed to take a hitch here, and add an accessory there to give at least a semblance of high fashion. Movement was difficult as the crowd flowed up the wide staircase to fill the balcony mezzanine. It was a pleasant, balmy night. and many decided to gather in small groups in the spacious courtyard. They sipped champagne as waiters moved among them with hors d'oeuvres. The throng laughed and chatted, glad to be out on the town after so many months of social inactivity. Washington's elite were enjoying themselves.

Jim Paulson, UPN correspondent, clad in formal attire, stood in the center of the brightly lit courtyard, Suddenly the cameraman threw him a cue and Paulson began his coverage of the event.

"Good evening. This is Jim Paulson reporting from the courtyard of the old Orpheum Theater in Washington, D.C.. Once a giant of the Orpheum circuit the movie house has been closed for years, But it's certainly open tonight for the world premiere of THE Movie!

"Most of our nation's leaders and other celebrities are just arriving to enjoy the limelight and glamour of this premiere atmosphere. The guest list must include nearly all the Washington establishment, with only the President missing from the glittering crowd of political luminaries and their ladies.

"We're here because it's news, and because this is just about the only bright spot anywhere these days. Pantheon films, producers of THE Movie brought along their own power. In fact, due to the shortage of both power and food, they were required to supply everything in order to bring the presentation into Washington.

"THE Movie is billed as the most extraordinary motion picture event of all time. Reportedly, hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent. But on what? Who are the stars? Another mystery. And why the odd title? About all we were able to gather is, it's in a new process of 3-D and there's even talk of the fourth dimension! In spite of all the ballyhoo, it's not costing the politicians or taxpayers one thin dime. Presumably, just a generous gift from the film's producers.

"Be sure to tune in tomorrow to UPN's noon news for a complete review."

Paulson signed off with a blurb to continue watching as UPN anchorman, Jesse

Patterson gave a recap of the days news.

The television picture switched to show a group of fisherman and other seaman. Some were harvesting seaweed The newsman's voice-over described the scene:

"Across the nation, including Washington D.C., food rationing reached a new high this morning. The Secretary of Agriculture announced we may have to depend more and more on the sea for our food supply.

"Also in the news: Global warming has brought the world to it's knees with no relief in site. The hope to utilize water from the polar ice caps to irrigate crops and supply water for drinking and industry has proved impractical.

The picture changed to forest fires blazing and men struggling to control them.

"Water is the main priority everywhere, and the shortage has left hundreds of fires across the nation burning out of control."

The network picture dissolved to a shot of the Senate in session.

"What many consider a tragedy, occurred earlier today in the nation's capitol. The Senate defeated Senator John Shipley's initiative to provide additional funding for the Chesapeake Bay Project. This was a victory for Senator Roger Bracken's Desalinization Committee as the Bay Project suffered another setback"

The picture on the screen dissolved into a dizzying, stroboscopic blur. The camera moved back to reveal the swirling blades of a monster wind turbine, one of four clinging to the cliffs above Chesapeake Bay, Two giant structures stood nearby and seems to vie with one another to dominate the complex. The tower won easily in height as it soared nearly a quarter mile into the air, and looked like an enormous slender funnel held erect by a system of steel girders and guy wires. The building too was impressive. It's sides stretched in each direction for hundred of meters and stood a dozen stories high. It's size made one wonder what could possibly fill such a container. As the cameras moved inside, however, the viewer got the impression the architect had made a mistake and it wasn't large enough to hold the contents. It was crammed with very conceivable device. All designed to capture salt-sea water from the Bay and propel it into the sky as freshwater rain.

As the cameras moved through the plant, a countdown was heard and project manager Dr. Glen Donovan explained:

"For this test we will increase the lift factor by fifteen percent. Our calculations indicate we've been on target for each test, but possibly some atmospheric aberration has caused our recurring malfunctions."

"Three...Two...One!" a technician pressed a button.

A whirlpool began to form in the bay as water was drawn into the system. Another camera moved to take a dramatic, low angle shot of the tall tower silhouetted against the sun. All at once a great gray shape rolled forth from the high tower's funnel opening. In seconds it formed what looked like a massive thunderhead. More clouds were born in the same way and began to extend away to blot out the sky.

Then -- without warning -- a bolt of lightning roared down the tower, into the plant and shot just above the the heads of the shocked technicians! The cameras showed the Project personal, so triumphant moments before, staring around in bewilderment -- deafened by the roar of thunder that followed the flame from the sky. The report ended with a tight close-up of a discouraged looking blond man with the name *Dr. Kirk Miller-Bay Project Director*, supered lower screen.

Jim Paulson had also reported the earlier *Bay Project* disaster. Standing in the UPN broadcast van watching his report, he tried to digest the implications of what he'd just seen. What would the next year bring: or even the next few months? His news assignments had taken him to the far corners of the world, to cover a multitude of tragedies. In recent months he's stared famine the face. He'd seen pain and the vacant stare of death--More horrible than any war, with no *cease fire* solution. He paused and looked down fondly at Sally Merriwhether, the assistant director. He was concerned about her. About both their futures. Still, though there might be hardships and rationing, at least in Washington, there was a chance for survival.

Meanwhile, celebrities continued to arrive. After leaving their taxi, Kirk and Sharon Miller pressed their way into the theater lobby. Kirk looked uncomfortable in his tuxedo as he craned his neck to see over the mob.

"I...don't see them," he told Sharon, who was below his field of vision.

"Kirkland, my boy! Sharon!" Senator John Shipely and his wife approached them with faces beaming. After an affectionate greeting, the old statesman stood beside the scientist only half listening to their wives' banter.

The boy looks mighty tired, thought the old man. He reflected on how much he'd come to admire this brilliant young physicist. The scientific community knew Kirk Miller as a dreamer of great dreams. Both the Senator and the scientist had become slaves to a common goal, and had submerged themselves intirely in their work. Their devotion to duty had cost them both a great deal. The aging leader looked around at the laughing faces and asked himself, *What on earth are we doing here? Are we just grabbing for a moment of fun? How could there be such frivolity in the face of the obvious future.?*

The entire world faced impending ruin. It was always there, lurking in the background or blazing in the sky, devouring the very will to live. To compensate for the daily privation, there was a desperate grasping everywhere for a taste of pleasure. Those here tonight, the sophisticated, worldly Washingtonians were driven to near madness in search of anything to make them forget the trouble threatening them.

Mrs. Shipely asked Sharon if she'd like to join the crowd. The social lions were growling and it was a great opportunity to socialize.

Sharon begged off, saying she'd rather stay where she was and watch the show. She studied the crowd and although she nodded to some of her acquaintances, she made no move to join them. She recalled when she and Kirk had first come to the Capitol, the were invited everywhere and met everyone. But she found most of the Washington crowd to be either dull or stuffy, or gross and boorish: ordinary people, no better or often just a little bit worse than anyone else.

She did feel close to the Shipleys. they were interesting, intelligent, down-to-earth people, and she and Kirk often spent an evening with them.

She was shaken from her reverie by a voice speaking next to her.

"Mah goodness, isn't this somethin'?"

Sharon turned to see an elderly black lady standing beside her. The woman looked a bit out of place. Not because of her color, for there were many blacks in Washington's inner circle. It was only her, dress which contrasted sharply with the high fashion that flowed around her. The little woman was tastefully clad in a simple

dark -flowered acetate dress. There was a small flowered hat perched on her almost white, woolly head, and her white gloved hands clutched a patent leather purse. Her bright eyes sparkled as she looked first at Sharon and then at the dazzling crowd in the lobby. Sharon was immediately drawn to the woman, who was so obviously awed, and at the same time delighted by the scene.

“Ah’m sorry my deah, but this is so excitin’. It’s almost like a dream,” and as she spoke she gave Sharon a friendly, confiding smile.

“Of course, I wouldn’t be heah at all if it weren’t for mah son. He’s Henry Jackson, the Undah Secretary of Agriculture ya know.” She’d take a small liberty with the title. Henry Jackson was only one of the many undersecretaries, yet she wanted everyone to know she thought her son was the most important.

At that moment a handsome, middle-aged negro man joined them saying.

“I can’t find the Senator anywhere, Mother. he may already be in the theater. I’ll try to catch up with him later.”

Mrs. Jackson proudly introduced Sharon to her son. A bit aloof, he mentioned he’d met Sharon and her physicist husband at a reception several years earlier. Sharon smiled as he made vague compliments about her husband’s genius, before he excused his mother and himself and led the charming old lady away.

Alone again, Sharon elected to remain where she was, and watch the crowd. As she scanned the throng, her casual inspection came to a sudden, jarring halt as other eyes gripped hers. The dark brooding stare dared her to look away. No one had ever stared at her in that way before. The extraordinary eyes seemed to speak to her, and what they said disturbed her deeply. They promised, they urged, they demanded. Then her field of vision widened to encompass the handsomest face she’d ever seen. He was tall, broad-shouldered--the epitome of the dark handsome stranger in the fortune teller’s crystal ball. The eyes held hers for longer than was really respectable. Then the full lips smiled as he lifted his champagne glass and saluted her.

Just then she felt someone at her shoulder and turned to find Kirk beside her. He was looking toward the man in the crowd and there was a strange expression on his face. She glanced back, but the tall dark man had disappeared into the crowd. His presence had thrown her mind into a state of confusion. Sharon felt the blood rise to her face as she fought to compose herself. Trying to deny what had just happened, she took Kirk’s arm and smiled up at him.

“How did the *summit meeting* go, darling?” she asked.

“Things are looking better. The senator has been talking to some of his money friends. It looks like there may be more funds available after all. Enough to keep us going.”

His smile made him look more at ease. More like his old self.

“Too bad we have to stay for this *spook show*, but I promised John we’d join them later.”

“I think it might be fun,” she replied. “we haven’t had a chance to get out much these days.”

“Okay, honey, I won’t spoil your evening. I know how this *goulish goulash* turns you on. I suppose I’ll survive a little lightweight entertainment.”:

“A little lightweight entertainment, young man?!”

Kirk and Sharon turned to face a tall, slim man who appeared to be in his mid sixties. There was an amused smile on his full lips as he regarded them. He appeared very friendly and outgoing, yet there was something almost bizarre about his looks. His head was so narrow, it had an almost skull-like quality. A dab of rouge on each cheek added a touch of color to his otherwise pasty complexion. His thinning, obviously died, black hair was pomaded to his skull, and glistened like patent leather--accentuating the high widow's peak. He was impeccably dressed, but his tuxedo looked a bit out of style. Kirk decided he was certainly an unusual looking man, yet he smiled engagingly as he continued:

"It's obvious you haven't read much about this particular film. Oh, I *am* sorry, My name is Parker...Amos Parker."

Sharon offered the stranger her hand. "How do you do Mr. Parker. We're Kirk and Sharon Miller."

Kirk chuckled to himself. Sharon had put on her pseudo-sophisticated manner she used when she first met someone. Actually meeting new people was one of the things she enjoyed most. If opposites attract, this was one more reason why the blond scientist and his dark haired wife were so well suited to one another. He was always shy and uncomfortable with strangers. *She* loved a good party and was usually the center of attention. While he usually found a quiet corner and a drink to nurse through the evening, he watched Sharon play her social butterfly game. Actually *moths* might be more accurate than butterflies. Men seemed to flock around her like moths around a flame.

The courtly Mr. Parker made a slight bow over Sharon's hand.

"A pleasure, my dear. I hope you won't mind an old man butting in? But I do get enthusiastic when a really interesting horror movie comes to town. I'm a real buff you might say. I've seen them all."

Score a big one for you, Mr. Parker! thought Kirk. Sharon had an almost childlike love for horror melodramas. As a young girl, she'd preferred ghost stories to fairy tales, and as she grew older, she read books on the occult and witchcraft. She could sit for hours watching some antique horror film on TV while Kirk dozed beside her.

"Mr., Parker, I'm glad you're here this evening. Horror films are a passion with me too, but I'm afraid that's one thing my husband and I don't have in common.

Parker eyed Kirk, who was trying his best to appear friendly and at ease.

"How can that be, young man? Why this film is in a new 3-D process. You don't even have to wear those annoying glasses."

Almost rubbing his hands in anticipation he continued. "Why there's even talk of throwing in a little of the 4th dimension. And the new rating they made up...DG for *Doctor's Guidance recommended!* it makes the whole thing sound absolutely delicious!"

A strange premonition about this *friendly* man suddenly passed over Kirk. Although he couldn't put a finger on it, an eerie coolness invaded his body despite the warmth of the crowded lobby.

He realized Parker and Sharon were looking at him as if waiting for some sort of reply.

He stammered awkwardly. "You...you seem very sure of that."

"I'm sorry you don't share our enthusiasm, Dr. Miller."

“Not Kirk,” Sharon broke in. “No imagination for this sort of thing, poor dear. He’s a scientist with nothing in his head but numbers.” Then she looked up admiringly at Kirk before adding. “It’s a nice head though, don’t you think so, Mr. Parker?”

“Charming,” Parker agreed. “You make a most handsome couple.”

Outwardly, Kirk was trying to appear friendly toward the foppish old movie buff, yet inside he grew more and more uneasy about the older man who seemed to be making such a hit with his wife. Amos Parker’s manner exuded warmth and charm, but there was something-- something in his face that disturbed Kirk. His eyes protruded slightly and were light gray in color with the look of cut glass. It was Kirk’s habit to think only the best of everyone, yet his good sense now warned him to be wary.

“THE Movie, such a mysterious title.” continued Parker, “... and what’s it all about? The story content? The stars?...It’s all been kept a deep, dark secret.”

Sharon looked around her. “I simply love this old theater. Really baroque”

“Yes, I remember it in its heyday, back when Bela Logosi portrayed Dracula.

“A real classic,” murmured Sharon.

“The Orpheum was certainly lavish at that time. Of course you know they reopened it because it’s the only theater in Washington large enough to house the new special effects. I must say, they’ve done a beautiful job of restoring the place. But did you notice what’s happened to the neighborhood? I guess they couldn’t restore that, eh?”

The hubbub in the lobby had softened somewhat as the crowd drifted into the auditorium. Now there was a persistent chiming sound.

“Well, it’s been pleasant talking to you folks, but I believe they want us to take our seats,” Parker said. “In case we get separated, I do hope I’ll see you at intermission. I’d particularly like to hear your reactions to it, Mrs. Miller.”

“That would be nice. You seem to be such a connoisseur of the *finer things*.” laughed Sharon as she extended her hand in farewell.

Kirk said nothing, but forced a smile.

“Au Revoir, then,” said Parker, but instead of going to the nearest auditorium entrance he went off toward the front doors to the theater itself.

Sharon looked up at Kirk and her eyes were sparkling with humor.

“Such a nice man. A real gentleman.”

Kirk could find nothing to say. He was still aware of the feelings he’d experienced in the man’s presence. The lobby was almost empty as he took Sharon’s arm and led her to the auditorium entrance.

THREE

The double doors to the auditorium were situated in a deep archway, and as they stepped through it, Kirk and Sharon were bombarded by bright spot lights. The brilliant lighting seemed excessive to the young physicist and he shaded his eyes until they adjusted to the glare.

In the entryway stood a very straight, very correct middle aged usher who held a heavy velvet rope barring their way.

“Just a few moments, please,” the man said a bit patronizingly. “The seating must

be done very precisely.”

Kirk and Sharon stood patiently in the pool of brilliance. Inside the auditorium they could see other ushers seating other guests. Again Kirk had an uneasy feeling. So far the evening had been filled with odd premonitions--something he wasn't used to.

What they couldn't see was everywhere around them: in the eyes of the statues, the guilt moldings and even in the folds of the red velvet draperies were the lenses of hidden cameras. Cameras which were trained on the couple from every conceivable angle--studying them. The images of the young couple were reflected in the lenses of the cameras--cameras of an unusual design. They resembled neither television nor motion picture paraphernalia.

Finally the usher spoke again. “May I have your names please”.

Puzzled by the unusual request, Kirk offered: “Mr...uh...and Mrs. Kirkland Miller.

“*Doctor.* and Mrs. Kirkland Miller,” Sharon corrected him.

Kirk ignored his wife's amendment. He preferred to leave titles to others.

“Not *THE Dr . Miller?*” gushed the usher, making an attempt to look impressed.

As they stood there chatting, suddenly elsewhere in the fabulous old building, surprising things began to take place. The young couple began to divide like cells. In two's, four's, eight, sixteen--and continued to separate and multiply into dozens of Sharon's and Kirk's. Images that revealed every conceivable view of the young physicist and his wife. Some of the images were close up, others full length. Some were individual and some together: backs, fronts, sides and three- quarter shots. Each picture apparently served a particular and unique function. The couple was not only shown realistically in three dimensions on hundreds of view screens, but in some cases they were viewed in the abstract. There were close cropped pictures of skulls in silhouette. These forms reveal no recognizable external features, but were more like highly detailed X-rays. They seemed to concentrate on the modulations of the sense organs and even the brain itself inside the cranium. Within the brain pan, strange and mysterious colors glowed. bright reds, blues, greens and yellows pulsed within the minds of the young couple.

One of the view screens showed a greatly magnified reproduction of the young Nobel Prize winner's right eye. It was huge and exceptionally detailed as the apparatus set about learning not only *what* the young man saw, but exactly *how* he saw things.

Almost as astonishing as the equipment itself was the huge darkened room that contained it. One end was taken up with hundreds of view screens. In front of the screens, shadowy figures worked at a mammoth console. At the moment, the multi-images of the physicist and his wife seemed to be their only concern.

From somewhere in the darkened room, a voice whispered delightedly,

“Ah, yes...yes! most assuredly, those two!”

A finger pushed a button and elsewhere in the room amazing and exotic computers and recorders began to whirr.

The voices of the trio on the screen took on an amplified quality, as if their words were issuing from ultra high-fidelity speakers. Other machines read out the electronic impulses of the voices and words being uttered by the threesome in the entrance. Oscilloscopes and meters jumped and wavered as each word was spoken.

“What have you heard about our movie, Mrs. Miller? questions the usher.

"She giggled slightly. "Just that THE Movie is *the* movie to see."

The voice whispered again. "Perfect!"

As the pictures moved and changed there was the constant impression that all these unusual instruments combined to plumb the very souls of this man and his wife. Searching out the most suppressed or enshrouded thoughts or memories of the individual under study; recording, analyzing, digesting the privileged information being fed into the computers by the miraculous equipment

"I'm certainly looking forward to tonight's showing" continued the wife of the young scientist.

"We're certain you won't be disappointed," the usher replied with an odd smile.

"Oh, I think we can seat you now."

Another usher had come to the entrance and the head usher lowered the rope and let the couple pass.

The commanding voice in the darkened whispered again.

"Yes. They 'll do very nicely!"

FOUR

Kirk and Sharon were directed to seats near the center of the auditorium. They resembled armchairs and looked soft and inviting. The arms, however, were of an unusual metallic material, but when they had settled themselves, they found the arms soothingly warm to the touch and perfectly contoured for comfort. The remarkable seats produced a feeling of well being.

Many in the audience were gawking around them. There was no sign of the antique splendor that had surrounded them in the lobby. In fact, now they were encircled by a curved wall that was completely curtained. The immense round room had a domed ceiling that appeared to be fabricated of a silver-white cellular material.

The lights began to dim and the large audience quieted expectantly. Sharon hugged Kirk's arm and snuggled closer to him. The curtain before them split open part way. the brief credits were shown on a curved, two dimensional screen, similar to that of conventional Cinema scope.

Other than the title, THE Movie, and that of the production company, Parthenon Films, only a few production names were shown. There was no mention of a cast of characters or the actors to play them.

The brief credits concluded and the screen and room faded to black. The audience heard the curtain open slowly with a soft swishing sound as it unveiled the screen that surrounded them. There was a moment of black silence.

Then out of the darkness appeared a miraculous scene! The audience gasped! The three dimensional realism was so astonishing, had they not known better, they would have sworn they were seated in the midst of a splendid forest. The verdant wood was lush and green, with ferns growing everywhere. Birds sang in the trees, a sound few had heard lately. The afternoon sun sent slanting rays through the tall trees.

A doe and fawn appeared to run down the right side aisle and pause to drink from a deep pool fed by a small waterfall. Then they trotted on into the trees.

A soft breeze began to rustle through the woods, and in fact, through the auditorium itself. Hair was ruffled and it was cool, and refreshing.

From overhead came the muffled sound of distant thunder. The late afternoon sun dimmed, and as they looked up, the assemblage could see heavy foliage overhead. Through the trees, clouds scurried across the darkening sky.

A bright flash of lighting was followed by another clap of thunder; only louder this time. Within minutes there was the sensation of light drops of rain spattering their faces--only a few droplets, as they were protected by the tree branches above them. The crowd once more murmured their approval.

Although everyone in the audience was shielded by the leafy cover, they could see the rain was falling heavily around them. They became aware of the small roadway that wound through the greenery, just to the left of center screen. The rain had made the roadway wet and muddy.

The scene continued to darken until it was the sort of twilight seen only in the forest. Up to the left, the headlamps of a car gleamed through the trees. The light cast long moving shadows and caused the falling raindrops to glitter.

The car crept slowly into full view, and they saw it was one of the familiar, small solar powered vehicles. Abruptly there was a crackling searing sound from overhead, and through the leafy ceiling crashed a bolt of lightning! It flashed close above the heads of the audience and smashed with great force into a tall pine that grew alongside the road on the screen. The sound of thunder was deafening. Those in the front seats screamed as the tree burst into flames and appeared as though it might fall forward into the third row seats of the auditorium.

The compact car stopped beside the burning tree. The rain had slackened somewhat, and yet the trees still dripped outside the protective shield. A man emerged from the driver's side of the vehicle and went around to let his passenger out. A woman emerged, carefully avoiding the shallow puddles.

It was quite dark now and the deep shadows made it difficult to see the faces of the pair until they stepped into the glow of the headlamps. As the light struck them, the movie-goers could see it was an attractive couple in evening clothes. The blond haired man had a pleasant, open face, and smiled reassuringly down at the pretty dark haired lady at his side.

In the audience, Sharon's breath caught in her throat. At her side Kirk let out an astonished: "Good God! How could they?!"

Indeed it was incredible, for standing before the small car, lit by the glow of the headlamps and the dying flicker of the burning tree were--Kirk and Sharon Miller!

The audience studied the pair in amazement. Two human beings stood there on the screen--living--breathing. So real and so tangible were they, that a few in the audience turned to stare in wonder at the scientist and his wife who sat in their midst, and at the same time stood in the dripping forest. From different places in the room came cries of astonishment as some recognized the couple on the screen.

"Dr. Miller! That's Dr. Miller!" the famous name buzzed around the room.

The woman on the screen spoke. "Kirk, This rain is marvelous, though a bit inconvenient. Where are we anyway?"

"I'm not sure," replied the man looking around him. "But I don't believe this road is leading us anywhere. The rain's stopped, anyway." He took the woman's hand.

“Come on, I think I saw lights off this way. Perhaps we can ask for directions.”

The on-screen Kirk turned off the car lights, took a large flashlight from the glove compartment and pocketed the keys. The pair started to make their way through the ferns and trees. The scene was now lit only by the glow from the flashlight and the tree fire which was about to smolder out.

The audience began to move, or *seemed* to move through the woods to follow the retreating figures. It was strictly illusionary, yet the special effects had drawn everyone in, and they became part of the action. At first it was a strange sensation and some nervous laughter passed through the audience, but soon they accepted the new phenomena. In complete awe, Kirk and Sharon could only look at each other and their images on the screen.

Sharon and Kirk’s screen counterparts had gone only a short way when lights from ahead began to dance on the wet foliage. As they moved closer, a magnificent mansion came into view. It was so large, in some countries it would have been called a palace.

The splendid structure was erected in the French Renaissance style. In effect, it looked like a not-so-small version of Versailles. The gardens were equally spectacular, artistically arranged and precisely trimmed. Brilliantly hued flowers blossomed everywhere. Tiny rain droplets shimmered on the petals and their perfume wafted out over the spectators. A full moon broke through the thinning clouds and shed its light on the festive scene below.

Miraculous fountains danced and their waters glittered in the illumination that poured from the great house. The sound of music caressed their ears from the harmonious tones of a contemporary dance band. A host of people were laughing and talking on the broad terraces and at the windows.

The young couple were visibly impressed as they approached the massive front entrance. Two smiling liveried footmen in powdered wigs swung open the tall doors. The pair stepped hesitantly into the brightly lit entry.

By now the audience had entered into the story so completely, they were able to see everything through the on-screen Kirk’s eyes. Eyes that looked everywhere and were amazed at what they saw.

As Kirk gazed around the crowded entry hall, a rather large, stately woman moved majestically toward them. She was gowned in a splendid costume that appeared to represent a Renaissance queen. As she extended her plump hand, the wrist and stubby well-manicured fingers dripped with glittering antique stones.

“My dears,” she cried in a rich contralto. “You’re here at last. We’ve been waiting for you.”

The regal creature lowered the domino mask she held on a wand and the astonished couple saw a smiling friendly face and noble brow under the elaborate wig. Her eyes twinkled as she took Sharon’s hand and led her and Kirk through the high vaulted hall. Then a small frown flickered across her cheerful features as she apologized.

“I am sorry. We are completely out of costumes, but it’s almost time anyway.”

Time for what? Kirk wondered as he and Sharon followed their hostess, surprised to see this was not only a costume ball, but the partygoers were obviously clad to represent famous historical figures, men and women from many periods and

cultures. Each guest wore a domino mask similar to the one their hostess was holding.

Next, they entered an enormous ballroom, it was filled with a huge throng of men and women. Their stunning costumes shimmered and dazzled the eye as they reflected the hundreds of lights which made up the massive, crystal chandeliers.

Their hostess paused at the top of a short flight of steps that led down into the opulent room.

“My friends. Your attention please!” she bellowed in a loud voice.

The throng quieted and turned toward her, champagne glasses at half mast. the band stopped playing and those couples who were dancing, stopped and moved toward the grand dame.

“Now my friends, it is time. *They* are here at last. So it’s time to unmask. “ She signaled the orchestra, who immediately struck up the old Broadway tune: *Getting To Know You*.

“Please, *Everyone*, remove your masks so we can see you as you *really are*.”

As the woman spoke a little dwarf character jumped forward, leaping and bounding and tuning cartwheels. He was dressed in a the guise of a court jester. He turned, did a back-flip and landed at the feet of a personage who could only represent the South’s rebel general, Robert E. Lee.

As if shooting from the hip, the little man pointed a finger up at the gentleman.

“All right, General Lee, off with your mask!” screamed the jester in a high, piping squeak. He laughed with glee as he bounded away.

Carefully, the bogus Robert E. Lee removed his domino mask. For a moment, no one spoke, then from somewhere in the audience a voice gasped out,

“John?” It was Mrs. Shipley who first recognized the man in the rebel uniform as her husband. Other voices echoed hers.

“John Shipley!”

“Why, It’s Senator Shipley!”

There were some who laughed at the appropriateness of the costume, of one of histories most compassionate leaders.

The jester pointed to an elegantly garbed gentleman from a much earlier era.

“Cesare Borgia, remove your mask!”

Now the toothy smile of Roger Bracken was revealed. The senator appeared embarrassed; as though he had just learned he was disguised as Machiavelli’s ruthless prince.

There were mixed reactions as the spectators saw the significance of Bracken’s costume. Could it be that each raiment symbolized the character of the one who wore it?

And so it went as the gleeful dwarf cavorted about the room commanding, “Take off your mask!” The audience in the theater’s reaction varied as each on screen character was unveiled, but when the glittering party surrounding them was completely exposed, each saw him or herself standing there.

When at last everyone was accounted for, the *southern general* and his wife came forward to greet the on-screen Millers. The young couple looked oddly out of place in their modern evening clothes.

“Sharon, dear! Kirkland, my boy,” the two historic figures said as they greeted

them warmly.

“Well, Kirk, have you seen the wonders you’ve performed? It’s a miracle. The rain, the beautiful gardens. The world is back like it was, and you and your *rain machine* are responsible.” The General laughed as he clapped Kirk on the back.

The young physicist looked a little dazed. What was going on? He decided to go along with the Senator’s illusion because he was fond of the old man and his wife. As Kirk and the Shipleys talked about the miraculous return of the rain, Sharon excused herself.

Kirk gave her a squeeze, then watched her move away from them. He looked beyond her and saw an elegant, black-clad Satan smiling in her direction. Where had he seen the man before? Yes, of course the man in theater lobby. A feeling of uneasiness went through him, but it passed when he was distracted by what the Senator was saying.

“I think the next step will be to design a more efficient way to store the rainwater run-off. We’re losing too much through evaporation.

Kirk looked away again in time to see Sharon dancing with the handsome stranger. Their bodies were pressed very close and Sharon was smiling up into the man’s face in a most disconcerting manner. Kirk followed them with his eyes for a few moments. They danced in the direction of the large French doors that led outside and disappeared into the night.

“Excuse me Senator, Mrs. Shipley”, Kirk said, breaking into the Senator’s conversation.

“We understand, my boy. Duty calls.”

With some difficulty Kirk made his way through the crowd. As he passed close to Senator Bracken, the man was in deep conversation with a black undersecretary who was costumed as a southern slave. Bracken was saying,

“Of course, I’ll be happy to help you Henry. The post is as good as yours.

Bracken’s voice faded out of earshot as Kirk reached the French doors. This particular entry led onto one of the many terraces. He crossed quickly under the portico and ran down the steps into the garden. Directly ahead was a formal hedge maze. He avoided it and took a path to the right.

Rounding a sharp bend, he came upon a clearing, brightly lit by the full moon. Across the open space in a corner shadowed by trees, he could make out two figures clasped in a tight embrace. He moved closer, keeping in the shadow of the well groomed hedge. The straps holding Sharon’s dress were pulled away and the man was caressing her breasts. Her head was thrown back; lips parted, eyes half closed slits and she looked like a cat being petted.

Infuriated, Kirk leaped forward; pulling the man away from his wife. He struck him with all his might. A surprised gasp escaped the dark clad Satan. He looked in astonishment at Kirk. For a split second he hung there then doubled forward, falling so his head slammed against the low wall. There was the sound of bone cracking against stone, and the man slumped down to sprawl across the bricked path.

In the ensuing silence there was only the sound of Kirk and Sharon’s labored breathing. Somewhere in the distance, a nightingale called to its mate, adding an incongruous note to the scene.

Sharon clasped the top of dress close to her. With her mouth agape she looked

first at Kirk and then at the inert body on the path. Finally she knelt to touch the man and let out a stifled sob before screaming,

“He’s dead...He’s dead!”

She drew erect and flung herself on Kirk, pummeling him with her fists. To protect himself, he pulled her close so she couldn’t strike out at him. Moments passed before she stopped her struggling and began to cry softly against his shoulder.

Kirk glanced back over his shoulder at the sound of questioning voices coming along the path.

“What’s happened?”

“Where are you?”

From around the corner of the hedge appeared some of the brightly clad guests led by their hostess.

“Ah, there you are,” she commented amiably. “What seems to be the trouble?”

Sharon, becoming hysterical once more; pulled away from Kirk with great effort, sobbing out almost incoherently,

“He’s dead...killed...and accident...” and she pointed to the body on the ground.

As if taking in the situation at a glance, their hostess responded,

“Oh...is that all? Don’t disturb yourselves. Do come back into the house. What we all need is a drink. My staff will clean up this mess.”.

FIVE

A small crowd had gathered to gawk. They stood silently like so many elegant, porcelain dolls; aloof and untouched by the drama they were witnessing. It all came to an abrupt end as liveried footmen roughly removed the body. The colorful party lost interest and returned to the house.

Their hostess took the distraught Sharon under her wing, and clucking like some majestic hen, she tried to soothe the woman’s sobs, as she led Sharon back to the house.

Kirk remained behind, stunned by what he’d done. He stared at the hand that had delivered the death blow, his mind trying to sort out a reason for having committed such a violent act. Certainly he’d been angry at his wife’s actions, but not angry enough to commit murder. And Sharon’s strange behavior. What could have prompted her to allow a stranger to take such liberties.

Yet, what shocked him most was the indifference displayed by their hostess and her guests. A man had been killed, yet, the affair was passed over as if it had been the mere squashing of a bug. For all intents and purposes, these grand personages had merely taken a breath of fresh air and then returned to their games as if nothing had happened. But then, perhaps they were just shadows, images in this remarkable masquerade.

Only the Shipley and several others seemed disturbed by the tragedy. The Senator and his wife took charge of the dazed Kirk while Sharon was led away to the hostess’ sumptuous boudoir. She was given a tranquilizing liquid and made to lie on a gigantic, silk-sheeted bed.

Mrs. Samantha Jackson, mother of the black undersecretary, costumed to represent a rather diminutive *Mammy*, straight out of a screening of *GONE WITH THE WIND*, volunteered to tend to Sharon. She mended the torn gown and watched over Sharon, who dozed as the magic elixir soothed away some of the horror of the scene in the garden. Soon Sharon found the unpleasantness was driven from her mind, leaving only the souvenir of a long ago dream. She was comforted by the presence of the warmhearted black woman who helped her dress and escorted her back to the gaiety below.

Sharon thanked the woman as they descended the grand staircase together. They parted at the foot of the steps as the older woman went off in search of her son.

Sharon found Kirk and the Shipleys waiting for her in the great entry hall. When her husband tried to embrace her, she gave him her hand. She avoided looking at him, but felt no shame, only a strange sense of loss. She was empty of any feeling for the man who guided her gently back in the direction of the ballroom.

Once inside the great room, they could see that the splendid, swirling *grand soiree* was still in full swing. And as if they had no choice in the matter, they too were caught up in the maelstrom; their troubles forgotten for the moment.

Shortly before midnight, the robust hostess announced she had a *marvelous idea!* Why not all join together and do the amusing old dance they did back when she was a debutante? La Conga!

She signaled to the orchestra. The conductor, a boney, sour faced old character who looked surprisingly like Joseph Haydyn, tapped an impatient tattoo on the podium with a long baton. The orchestra raggedly stopped playing their band arrangement of as the leader announced.

“La Conga!”

The members of the orchestra, stiff from long hours sitting, were delighted for a chance to get up and stretch their legs. They straightened their powdered wigs and picked up their instruments. The hostess motioned again for them to start playing and they stepped down from their gilt balcony to join the large crowd on the dance floor. The glittering throng made room for the musicians to form a line. The leader, smiling for the first time that evening, counted them down into the start of the infectious Conga rhythm.

They started to move in line around the room: “One-two-three, La Conga! One-two-three, La Conga!”

The hostess latched onto the snare drummer who brought up the rear. One-two-three, La Conga! Her ample, velvet-covered rump shook like tomato aspic as she demonstrated the simple steps.

“Come on!” she bellowed gleefully. “It’s fun!”

The younger guests finally got the idea and the whole room started to vibrate to the intoxicating music.

“One-two-three, La Conga.

The hundreds of guests formed an enormous snake that filled the room, growing in length as it moved. Coiling and slithering until the band, like the Pied Piper of old, led the long Conga line toward the French doors and out into the night.

The leader started off into the direction of the gardens. One-two-three, La Conga. They loved it! The musicians led the way through the hedge maze without a hitch and

around a miniature lake where sleeping swans pulled their heads drowsily from under wings to stare pop-eyed at the strange spectacle.

Down another path and through the rose gardens and on and on. The crowd was hypnotized by the exciting new game. One-two-three, La Conga! They began to feel they could go on forever, driven by the pulsating beat of La Conga.

At length they passed into a small wooded area where there was practically no light; each held a little tighter to the dancer in front. But the path was smooth and level so they passed through the woods and once again danced out into the open. The countryside was now enveloped in heavy gloom. The moon, which had served to light their way, was now hidden behind a passing cloud. Up ahead, barely visible in the dark, was an enormous jumbled mass.

"Careful now," someone called back. They were dancing along a very narrow precipitous pass. Below could be heard the sound of ocean surf crashing against the rocks. The white foam glowed with a weird iridescence as it reached upward.

At precisely that moment, the passing cloud unveiled the moon so its light spread out once again over the vast estate. Before them, the shape could now be identified as a tremendous church building on the cliff above the sea. It was built in the French gothic style of Notre Dame. The sides were pierced with tall, stained glass windows. Flying buttresses supported the walls, sprouting from it like the legs of some great misshapen, crouching spider. The revelers marveled at this new wonder.

An explanation for the structure came back quickly by word passed along the line. Their hostess late husband was a collector of architecture. The church had originally been shelled during World War II, and her husband had paid the diocese handsomely to take the ruin off their hands. The bishopric wanted to build a more modern structure on the same site and was glad to have the eccentric billionaire gather up the pieces and ship them off to America for restoration.

As they approached, the merry makers could hear a monster pipe organ breathing it's deep tones through the great stone portals. The more devout among them paused at the doorway, but the musicians and their hostess marched right in. The band stopped playing and the dancers ceased their undulating as they stepped somewhat hesitantly into the cavernous, high vaulted nave.

There was little illumination except at the far end, in the immense choir area. There, a pool of flickering candle light revealed a fabulous display. At the elaborate altar, a high mass seemed to be in progress. The participants were garbed in the opulent robes of cardinals, bishops and high clergy. But as the party moved closer, they could see in place of the rich red, white and gold raiment usually worn by such exalted gentlemen, these wore black, white and silver. The vessels, censers and candelabras were also cast in silver. In fact the lighting gave the impression they were watching an old black and white movie. The depth of three dimensions was still there, yet there was no color. During the ritual, the clergy turned toward them and their faces reflected a strange sickly whiteness.

The *congregation* of partygoers remained silent for several long minutes. then someone in the far back snickered, another took it up and in a few moments, they were all laughing uproariously. For in the reverent ceremony, the litany was being chanted in pig-latin. What a rare joke, they thought. The irony was too hilarious.

"Ixnay onyay ethay igpay atinlay!" Someone called out over the laughter.

The prelates continued their ritual, ignoring the unseemly laughter and remarks.

On an unseen signal the band struck up again and away they went.

“It’s not much farther now, my dears,” panted the hostess as they congaed- along the north transept of the cathedral. Just before they reached the north portal of the granite edifice, the orchestra made a sharp left turn and began to descend a flight of stone steps. Some of the crowd giggled because the stairs made it difficult to move in tempo.

In the tower far above them a great bell began to toll midnight. They continued their way down, laughing and stumbling against one another.

As the twelfth beat of the tolling bell faded away, they came upon a vast stone chamber. The room was well lit by flaming braziers on the walls-- walls which looked damp to the touch. There was a deep coolness about the room and the moldy odor of great age.

At the far end rested a low wooden dais on which had been placed a richly decorated leather chair. Radiating in rows from the dais were several dozen wooden chairs. A table of wood with a small bench was positioned in an open space below the dais. On it were ancient writing materials: quill pens, ink and parchment.

The revelers fell silent, awed by the room and the strange, slightly ominous atmosphere that filled it. Perhaps it was because they realized this great stone room was below ground...like the dungeons of the middle ages.

When the last of the assemblage had descended into the chamber, a tall slim figure clad in a dark cassock entered through one of the gothic arches to the left. His head was hooded and there was only the suggestion of a gaunt face deep in the heavy cowl. The robe was of simple design, similar to those worn by friars and monks during the middle ages. the material had the look of soft wool in a rich, dark brown fabric,

The garment brushed the stone floor as the man moved toward them. There was only a whisper of sound. He went directly to their hostess and extended a slim pale hand. the grand dame executed an elaborate curtsey and devoutly kissed a large amethyst ring adorning the hand.

“Good morrow, my Lord Inquisitor.” said the dowager obsequiously. She was still garbed as Queen Catherine de Medicis.

“And my blessing on you, you Majesty,” came the deep voiced reply. It seemed to reverberate and fill every corner of the great chamber.

Their hostess turned to face the silent party and announced,

“Ladies and gentlemen, let me present our guest of honor, His reverence, The Grand Inquisitor. We are indeed fortunate to have him with us this morning. He’s here on a very special mission which I’m sure he can describe better than I.”

“Ah, I am the one honored to be in such illustrious company,” he responded. “I believe I see Alexander the Great, and there is the Emperor of France,” he added, gesturing toward a rather short round gentlemen with one hand stuck in the jacket of his elegant empire uniform.’

Some of the party smiled, for he had indicated a man who certainly resembled Darryl Parsons, the Chief of the FBI. The detective chief frowned at being singled out and withdrew his hand from the jacket.

“And Herr Adolf...what a pleasant surprise,” continued the Inquisitor. “You may not

believe this my friends, but this mustachioed gentlemen and I have much in common, despite our differences of motive”.

“So many familiar faces.” The crowd opened before him as he pointed out Sir Winston Churchill, Erasmus, Queen Victoria, Gengis Kahn, Disraeli, Ramses II. Finally he stopped when his eyes fell on Kirk Miller.

“And of course St. Thomas Aquinas!” laughed the figure in brown. The Inquisitor directed their attention to the young physicist. Most of them had met Dr Miller at one reception or another. Few could claim they knew him personally, but all were struck by the unique presence he carried with him.

The Inquisitor had compared the scientist to the studious St. Thomas, and though Kirk Miller wasn't in costume, they were held by the saintly glow of the young physicist's face in repose. Lit from behind by the flickering braziers, his head was surrounded by a halo-like glow. For a moment their attention was captured by this ethereal image. The the object of their concentration coughed nervously and cleared his throat. The spell was broken.

SIX

“Yes--yes indeed, a truly illustrious congregation, “ continued the hooded figure. Or at least so it would *appear*. Facades often deceive. Although each of you is unique,” chided The Inquisitor, “There is one thing you all have in common. I refer to role playing; the play-acting you employ every day to protect yourselves and justify your niche in society. This evening's little entertainment for example.” He studied each face as he continued to move through the large crowd. They kept their eyes on him, mesmerized by his commanding presence and the voice that rang out with such authority in the great room. They were silent, listening intently to every word.

“For the past few hours you have been privileged to impersonate certain historic figures. There's a reason for this. You see, each of the *grand personages* you represent was motivated by certain forces and desires affected by id, libido, ego, psyche and what have you. Since your hostess is a master of character analysis, with a fine sense of humor, you can be sure *the shoe fits*.”

While he spoke a nervous rustling touched the guests as some glimpsed the purpose of the elaborate masquerade.

“Let me put it another way. Let's just say that your *soul*, if there is such a thing, is in tune with the soul of the personage you represent. *Soul mates* so to speak.” He laughed at the dumfounded expression on some of their faces. Those who who were dressed as some of history's more reprehensible characters discovered themselves in the uncomfortable position of being blatantly exposed to their peers and they didn't like it. They hid their discomfort in various way. Some stood defiantly: Attila the Hun folded his heavy arms across his bare chest, while Adolph Hitler looked sheepishly around for a place to hide.

“How does it feel to stand so close to history?” The Inquisitor went on. “There's a danger in that too. You see, there is one thing all these august personages from the

past have in common. They are all *Dead*. *Dead and Dust!* and most of their ideals and philosophies are gone with them. Forget them. *NOW ... this moment* is the only the *Present* which should concern you if you wish to survive in this life threatening world.” The voice rose in power and intensity. A faint tremor of fear fluttered through the assembly and the crowd found itself wanting to back away from the imposing force.

“Many suggest even God is dead; or has deserted this pale planet “ he continued, “About all that remains of Christianity are those doctrines that fall under the catchall name of *Charity!*”

Some shrugged as if they didn't quite understand the meaning of the word.

“*Charity?*” Here, let me define it for you.” The tall, slim figure moved to a stand on which rested a huge tome. the giant book resembled,--Webster's Unabridged.

“Hmmm...Let's see. According to M'lord Webster, “said the figure as he opened the heavy book. “*Charity...ah*, here it is. *Charity*” love, benevolence, affection, good will. That disposition of heart which inspires men to think favorably of their fellow man, and to do them good. In the theological sense, it includes supreme love of God and universal good will to men.” He laid the ornamental bookmark across the open pages and stepped once again toward the crowd.

“I wonder how many of you can recall the last time you performed a charitable act?--the last time you gave someone a helping hand without expecting some token in return?”

“I tell you what,” he continued. To prove my point we'll take a poll. We'll find out right here and now who believes in *Charity*, and who does not. We'll divide you into two groups, and to avoid confusion I will give each group a name. Those who continue to have charitable thoughts for his or her fellow man we'll call the *Givers*, and those who really don't give a damn about anyone but themselves --well, let's dub them the *Takers*.”

There was complete silence in the chamber. Many were shocked by the presumptuous request. Someone in the back giggled nervously, a few blushed. the figure before them waited quietly for them to absorb his meaning.

“Yes, I know,” The Inquisitor called out amiably. “It's a difficult decision, so I can understand why you hesitate to disclose your true feeling. I am only calling to account those who are *practical...sensible*. Those who consider only themselves. Be honest now, If you believe charity is dead, step forward and gather there,” he pointed to the other side of the room.

After some minutes something began to happen to the crowd. The group started to disintegrate as the first brave souls, those who recognized the truth in what he said, moved hesitantly toward the far side of the room. One who led the way was dressed as Caesurae Borgia, AKA Roger Bracken, followed by Hitler, Then Cleopatra...and so it went.

Sharon stood close to Kirk, her hand held in his while the man in the dark robes continued to call them out.

“Yes, that's right. We want all of you who care for no one. Those who've cast out the old impractical stigma of *Charity* and think only of themselves.

Sharon turned to look at Kirk. A long searching look. His eyes were on the departing figures. She could see he was troubled. She continued to watch him battle

with his own conscience and her face showed a strange sadness as she removed her hand from his and started to back away.

“Sharon?” Kirk asked, puzzled by the movement.

“I’m sorry Kirk,” she replied. Turning her back on him she moved with dignity and purpose toward the group of the *Takers* on the far side.

“Sharon?” Kirk called out again, taking several steps after her.” What’s the matter?”

She didn't look at him until she reached the other group, and then no longer acknowledged his presence. A cold chill of fear ran through him as he gazed across the space separating them.

Finally movement between the two groups halted. Their tall host spoke again.

“Is that everyone? Come now, be honest. Are those who remain absolutely certain you still feel some compassion for your fellow man?”

A few who had been wavering, or perhaps wanted to be on the winning side, quickly joined the majority. The *Takers* group was certainly larger. The *Givers*, a group of about fifty, remained behind with Senator and Mrs. Shipley, Kirk, Jim Paulson, Sally Merrywhether, the Jacksons and more than fifty others.

The robed figure turned to face the larger group and indicating the *Givers*, said,

“Behold, the real remnants of the impractical past. These are the ones holding all of you back from a life of hope and prosperity. I give you, the *Givers*.”

Someone in the group designated as *Takers*, booed, which started off a chorus of weak giggles. Those who had been dubbed The *Givers* wore various expressions: Concern, defiance and even here and there, some felt the pit of his or her stomach contract in the old grip of fear.

“*Charity*,” continued the dark form, pointing a slim finger at the *Givers*. His voice took on an edge of impatient sarcasm. “In, this troubled day and age *Charity* is a dangerous heresy.

“And now I need your full attention. This is important!” The Inquisitor waited until he was sure he had everyone’s attention. before he continued,

“My primary reason for being here is to remind you, despite the beauty of the rich green oasis we’ve prepared for you this evening, outside the verdant woods the real world awaits. Tomorrow you go back to a life which threatens starvation and death. No escape--No return to the world as it was. A world with no room for impractical ideals Now, You must think only of yourselves. *Survival* is the key word. *Survival of the fittest*. To achieve that, you must consider becoming one of us.

Kirk, who had been listening intently, wondered--*One of YOU? Who are you anyway?*

Just then, a small bell rang and other robed figures began to enter the room. A man clad in a black habit took his place at the small table and began to sharpen the quill pens. About thirty figures entered and took the places before the rows of chairs. Some wore symbols of high office, others of lesser degrees.

The Inquisitor stepped to the dais and seated himself with great dignity in the ornate leather chair. Now, when he spoke, he was very businesslike.

“We’ve been aware of this Impending crisis for centuries and are the only ones preconditioned to exist in this desperate world. We have redesigned ourselves to survive. How you may become one of us will be shown to you later. I truly regret that,

In the meantime those who are unsuitable must be eliminated. There is no other way. The next test may be difficult, but is designed to convince those of you *Givers*, to join us or perish

“Last chance...do you all still stand for Charity? Do you still refuse to deny the heresy?”

Finally the elegant gentleman dressed as Cesare Borgia stepped forward.

They do not deny the heresy, my lord!” and there was a sneer on his thin mouth.

“Then they are condemned by their silence,” smirked the Inquisitor.

The *Givers* standing behind Kirk tried to press forward, but it was too late

“Then charity has lost.” announced the Inquisitor.

Turning to the clergy seated beneath him he demanded. “Brethren, What is your decision?”

Each member of the tribunal raised his right hand and in a unanimous gesture turned thumbs down.’

Shiplely swayed unsteadily on his feet. Kirk, who had been watching his friend with deep concern, hurried forward and caught the old man as he began to topple. the young physicist lowered him gently to a nearby stool and leaned the white had against his side. Then he turned in the direction of the Inquisitor. His deep blue eyes blazed with fury at the inequities of the strange trial.

SEVEN

Almost before the condemning words were out of the Inquisitor’s mouth, soldiers began to enter the room. Their heavy boots and clanking armor made a terrible din that rang through the hollow stone chamber. With swords draw, the blades held smartly upward, hilts clasped firmly in mailed fists to their steel-armored chest, they surrounded the *Givers*.

The *Takers* broke into uproarious laughter at this last bit of fin and games. They laughed to see some of the nation’s great leaders in such a sorry plight. Indeed, the prisoners all wore hangdog looks and this caused the Takers to double their gales of laughter.

“Silence!” roared the Inquisitor rising to his feet. “We will not allow you to make a mockery of this tribunal.”

The laughter trailed off. the room became quiet once again except for the faint rattling of armor and shuffling boots of the soldiers. They stood at attention in a tight circle around the fifty or so prisoners, awaiting further orders.

The Inquisitor faced the guarded group of *Givers* below him. The condemned could just see the blaze of his eyes within the shadowy cowl. He appeared to tower over him as he solemnly read their sentence from a small scroll just handed him from the clergy below.

“For the crime of heresy--there is only one sentence. The soul must be cleansed. Therefor, it is the decision of this tribunal that you all be put to death in the scourging power of the flame. TAKE THEM OUT AND BURN THEM!”

The last was said with such vehemence, the assembled guests, both the imprisoned *Givers* and the assembled *Takers* gasped. They suddenly realized the horrible truth of what was going on. What had seemed like a game at the start was a game no longer.

It was difficult to see the condemned as they were well protected by the circle of armored soldiers. From their midst, however, a wailing sound began to rise toward the high vaulted ceiling. The soldiers started to lead the prisoners from the chamber, and as they passed the *Takers*, could see through the wall of soldiers, faces drained of color--pale and sickly. Some walked with heads bowed, others sobbed. Some were proud and defiant.

The soldiers marched grimly on each side of the prisoners. Only their hard eyes glittered between the slits in their helmets.

The *Givers* were marched from the room, down a wide hall until they slowly began to ascend what appeared to be a great stone ramp. There was little light, but up ahead they could see a patch of stars glittering in the sky.

The procession moved slowly, almost painfully. Some stumbled and had to be lifted up.

As they reached the portal and moved out into the chill morning air, it was still dark in the west, but a faint glow began to lighten the eastern sky. The prisoners were led down a winding dirt road. The terrain here was strangely different from the greenery of the rest of the estate. It had a desolate, lonely aspect. There were few trees and these gnarled skeletons looked bare and stark in the dim light.

At length, they were led around a bend in the road and up a small rise to a large flat area. A breeze passed over the guests who were perspiring from their exertions. The wind chilled them and some shook as with the ague. There was a strong acrid odor in the air of something burned. As the assembly looked around, the pale light revealed tall posts stuck in the ground. Someone stifled a terrified sob. The posts were everywhere...at least fifty of them. Dark forms moved among the poles bringing carloads of brush and wood. A husky voice called an order.

"Hurry--get a move on. We must be ready by dawn!"

The sky grew slowly brighter and its glow made the faces of the condemned stand out in bold relief against the dark sky to the west. Each wore a desperate, haunted expression.

Senator Shipley, who was leaning on Kirk from time to time for support, looked up at the young scientist and his voice shook as he spoke.

"This is all so strange, Kirk. How can we be condemned for something we have always held as our sacred duty?"

Kirk put a hand on the old man's shoulder. Only now did he realize how much he loved the aging patriot. One of the world's great leaders, garbed in the rebel uniform, Shipley dressed as Robert E. Lee must have looked like the rebel general at the moment of his defeat, when his beloved South had gone down under the Union banner.

Mrs. Shipley stood nearby, head bowed. She seemed totally out of it.

The Senator was crushed by exhaustion and the pressures of the last hours had driven the last of his great courage from him. Kirk put his arm around the Senator and held him as he'd held his dying father during those tragic moments years ago.

Suddenly they were pulled roughly apart by one of the soldiers who growled.

“There’s no time for that”

The soldiers took the Senator to the far side of the clearing and began to tie him to a post. His dignity regained, Shipley stood proud, and resigned as he was bound to the stake

Kirk was bound to a stake directly opposite his old friend and to the left of Mrs. Shipley. He could just make out their faces in the pale light. He looked around and was shocked to see his fellow Givers bound and ready for execution. A woman screamed, only to receive a severe clout from one of the soldiers. Her cries changed to a sobbing hiccough, The men were fighting panic and the cords of neck and cheek stood out like ropes.

The dark forms continued to pile wood and brush around their feet piling it high around their lower legs. At length it was ready. A deep stillness fell over the scene and only the jingle of the mule harness broke the stillness of the dawn.

The sky was brighter now and those who were tied, turned their heads in the direction of a new sound: a chanting of voiced came from, the direction of the road. In a few moments they were able to see the source of the sound. Entering the area were member of the court. The Grand Inquisitor, priests and others. Bringing up the rear, wearing the white robes of the novitiate, were their former friends and associates, the *Takers*. Kirk could see Sharon was among them. She was not smiling, but looked frightened as she glanced at the bound figures. Her eyes found Kirk and she stepped toward him crying softly:

“Kirk?”

Firm hands pulled her back as the Inquisitor spoke. “Don’t trouble yourself about him, my dear, he no longer exists. Only a part of your memory that would best be forgotten.”

As Sharon turned to look at the Inquisitor, Kirk could see she apparently took comfort from what he said as she resumed her place in group.

Senator Roger Bracken was there too. He glanced toward Senator Shipley and the old man returned the look. Bracken appeared to shrink under the senior senator’s gaze, though there was no malice written on the old man’s face.

The high clergy moved with great pomp and dignity the length of the forest of humanity, Now a glittering pageant in their rich robes of white, red and gold. Choir boys in lace adornment held the long train of a bishop above the dirt and mud while he carried a staff on which rested a cross; mounted *upside down*.

A rough wooden altar was being prepared for the ceremony. A rich tapestry was used to cover the rough planks. Silver bowls, dishes, chalices as well as candelabra were set upon the alter where guarded candles were lit and a large brazier burned.

As the celebrants took their places, they faced the condemned and the light from the candles and brazier gave an almost barbaric aspect to the scene. To one side stood the Inquisitor, aloof from the ceremony

At length a mass began, but this time it was performed in English so everyone could understand. Still, to those who remained bound to the posts, it made little sense.

“These poor unfortunate souls who have been misguided by well meaning philosophies...”

The Bishop made motions similar the the sign of the cross, calling to the all

powerful to forgive the heretics whose souls were to be cleansed in flame. As the ceremony drew to a close, several priests passed among the condemned sprinkling them with *holy water*--dispensing it on the wood and brush heaped about the feet of the victims.

At the altar, the clergy passed a cup among themselves. Presumably the chalice held wine. The celebrants, however, appear to relish the taste of the liquid more than seemed normal. Indeed, some appeared hesitant to give up the silver bowl once they had taken a drink from it. After they had all partaken of the wine, they turned once more toward the group awaiting execution. The sun was now seated on the horizon and its warm light illuminated every face--the condemned as well as their judges whose intoxicated grins contradicted the pious habits they wore.

Behind the priests the *Takers* began to chant. The words were not clear, but from time to time, one word---Survival -- predominated.

The shadowy beings, who had so carefully prepared their human sacrifices now came forward each carrying an unlit torch. The dozen or so forms were led by a tall misshapen phantom, who appeared to have difficulty walking. He clutched at himself with his free hand as if afraid he might fall apart. As they reached the area in front of the altar, they raised their unlighted torches in salute. The Bishop blessed them and the torches were dipped into the flames of the brazier. The flames took hold and the forms started to move among the human *tr ees*. When the brush was touched by the flames, the victims flinched only slightly, looking pale and horrified as the flames licked upwards. Yet, they didn't utter a sound

Yet, there were screams. The agonized sounds didn't come from the victims themselves. In fact the condemned showed no outward signs of pain but merely began to melt away like so many carved wax candles.

The screams increased in volume and number, but they came from sources other than the unfortunates who were even now vanishing into the rising flames of the blazing auto-de-fe. The confusion of sound was coming from the audience in the great round auditorium. Once again their presence was evident. The spectators were horrified at the spectacle they witnessed; they were engulfed in it, living it, feeling it. Their faces clearly lit by the blazing inferno. And as each image was set to the torch, his or her counterpart in the crowded theater seemed to bear the pain.

The audience was also surrounded by fire. Overhead the *sky* echoed the condemnation of the heretics and hurled down one lightning bolt after another. These flashes of heavenly electricity arced close over the heads of the spectators and added to the pandemonium as it seemed to strike the victims being consumed by the conflagration.

The tall, misshapen executioner hobbled toward the form of *Kirk Miller*. He held his blazing torch in front of *Kirk's* eyes, so it appeared to the audience like a great ball of flame rolling over them.

Those who were standing frozen in panic fell back into their seats, terror stricken as they shielded their eyes from the flames. In vain they tried to escape the heat and horror.

Those with more courage peeked at the screen and saw within the center of the flames, the figure of the awesome executioner and his face in the blinding brightness leering down at them. His manner of dress and skull-like features made them fear

they now looked into the very face of death. His figure loomed large before them, almost overshadowing them as he leaned out from the scene.

Suddenly the flames disappeared and the hot room cooled quickly to normal. Some were left shivering in gowns and tuxedos damp from perspiration. The form hung above them for a few frightening moments. Then, unexpectedly, in one motion, he stripped away the dark hooded robe and gruesome mask and tossed them aside. Now a truly strange sight confronted the spectators and left them more confused. Revealed before them was a gnome like creature on a tall pair of stilts. The stilts had heavy boots attached to them. With a head too large for his body, the little man leaped down as he flung away the stilts. He laughed, did a cartwheel and landed on one knee with arms outstretched. The audience sat dumbfounded as they recognized him to be the court jester from the ballroom scene. With his arms outstretched he seemed to await for their applause. . Some had just undergone an overwhelming experience and were hardly prepared for this last absurdity--this little man who stood before them laughing hysterically. He had a high, squeaking, unpleasant laugh and held his sides as he roared. And just as abruptly, he ceased his laughing, pointed an overlarge finger at the audience and began to chide them”

“Look at you! Distinguished leaders, important personages of a great nation. One would think to look at you, you were Humpty-Dumpties about to take a great fall,” He laughed gleefully at his simile.

“How could such intelligent, sophisticated beings be so easily fooled by this fol-de-rol and dumb show? Scared literally half to death. But,” he continued with a knowing sneer,..”Then you haven’t seen the half of it. We’ll give you time to gather your wits, if *any*,and in a few moments the ushers will show you the way to intermission and free refreshments. Come back in a little while for some *real* horror.” and with a cackling, high pitched laugh, his form faded before them as the lights in the theater came up.

The audience, almost as one, heaved a great sigh of relief.

Sharon Miller was dabbing at her eyes when Kirk turned to look at her. She glanced at him with some difficulty and made an attempt to smile through her t ears.

“Silly movie,” she finally managed to get out, but was choked with emotion.

The audience started to come out of their awed stupor. Some shook their heads as if awakening from an hypnotic trance. Small bubbles of laughter could be heard as some decided to laugh, not only at the experience, but at themselves.

And, so not it was over. Or was it?

Sharon felt a plucking at her sleeve and turned o fine it was Mrs. Jackson who was seated next to her.

“Oh, my dear. I’ve seen many thing in my life, but I have never...never seen the likes of that!” the little black lady told her.

Having recovered somewhat, Sharon took the woman’s hand and inquired. ‘Are you all right, Mrs. Jackson?’

“Oh, oh my dear, yes,” laughed the woman. It takes more than a little insanity to scare me.”

At that moment off the the left of the auditorium, doors began to open and ushers entered, smiling as they called out to the audience.

“This way, Please ladies and gentlemen. This way to intermission and free

refreshments.”

The theater crowd began to get up from the seats and start toward the doors.

“This isn’t the way we came in, Sharon, “ Kirk observed.

Sharon, without answering him, and still holding the hand of Mrs. Jackson, joined the exodus. Henry Jackson moved out just ahead of them.

Mrs. Jackson's' voice was small with just a hint of fright.’ What do you think the strange little creature meant by there’s more horror to come? I really don’t see how they can possibly top what we’ve just seen, do you” She said as she glanced around the great circular room that was now innocently swathed in its plain white curtain.

EIGHT

The theater crowd moved as rapidly as possible toward the doors, now held open by the ushers. It was hard to tell if their eagerness was a desire to escape the auditorium or the real need to refresh themselves, soothe parched throats or relieve the traumas they’d just experienced.

At length the Miller party passed through the doors only to face a new spectacle. They found themselves in a huge room which brought back vivid memories of another party--a very recent one. For they were surrounded by the same splendor they’d seen in the great ballroom of THE Movie. The rich, light colored wainscoted paneling was adorned with gilt baroque carvings. Opulent chandeliers glittered and danced in their own light.

Some felt a moment of uneasiness as they stepped into the opulent room. This quickly passed when they caught sight of the refreshment tables, heavily laden with all sorts of gourmet delights. Carved ice-statues stood guard over dishes of lobster, crab, caviar, exotic cheeses and meats of all kinds caught both the eye and appetite of the crowd. It was apparent to this sophisticated assembly they were being treated to the best of food and attention. Most were impressed. In fact one congressman commented to Roger Bracken:

“Where on earth did they get all this? I haven’t seen such a lavish array of food since the inaugural over three years ago. Must be black market.”

The legislator didn’t see the sharp look Senator Bracken gave him at his last remark.

As the Millers approached the table, a voice called out:

“Oh, Doctor---Mrs. Miller?”

Hurrying toward them as well as he could manage through the large crowd was the movie buff. Mr. Amos Parker. Sharon who had been wearing a rather anxious expression, brightened when she saw him.

“Mr. Parker, I see you survived the ordeal,” she laughed.

“Yes, my dear Mrs. Miller...although I must admit it was a bit touch and go there for a while” He appeared a bit breathless from his struggle to reach them and made an effort to catch his breath as he bubbled over with excitement. His eyes were shining

with delight. "But, have you ever seen such a movie?! I do think it was incredible--the most impressive filmever"

His eyes! Once again Kirk was stricken by the something unknown that lurked behind Parker's eyes. The feeling was even stronger now than the first time. Perhaps it was the brightness of the ballroom lights or the weird experience they'd just been through. Still, Kirk felt there was more to this Mr. Parker than he wanted them to know. This troubled Kirk for a moment. He never suspected another human being without reason.

There was something out of date about Parker's impeccable appearance. Not just his tuxedo. There was also an old-fashioned sort of continental air about him. And the way he spoke. One couldn't say it was actually Shakespearian, but there was a lilt and cadence to his phrasing that made one think of another age or culture.

Sharon and Mr. Parker were still enthusing about THE Movie. Suddenly their conversation stopped and they were looking at him. Kirk realized he was expected to make some comment. He felt awkward at moments like this. Small talk was nearly impossible and he remained uncomfortable in the presence of the urbane gentleman.

"I...uh...the the film's concept is really amazing. Part of my work deals with optics. The sophistication of the production indicates an outstanding grasp of the medium. I would certainly like to see their equipment."

"Perhaps it can be arranged," replied Parker. "I'm also rather curious about it." he turned his attention to Sharon once more. They excluded Kirk and again began to toss about movie trivia as they had earlier. Kirk smiled to himself. For such an intelligent woman, Sharon did enjoy the simple thing of life. He looked at his watch. It was ten thirty--twenty-five minutes since the start of the intermission. When would the movie resume?

Mrs. Jackson stood nearby, holding a conservative plate of goodies and delicately trying everything. She'd just dipped a cracker into a small sample of what looked like black beads. She took a taste and made a wry face. Kirk had been watching her with delight, and commented.

"Caviar. It has an odd taste, doesn't it?"

"It most certainly does," agreed the black woman with a smile. "Personally, ah prefer black-ahd peas. but the way things are nowadays, ah 'spect they're as 'sensive as this cayveear and 'bout as rare.

Kirk laughed and nodded in agreement.

Henry Jackson spied Roger Bracken in the crowd and pushed his way though the throng to reach him. Bracken was about to speak to John Shipley when the black Under Secretary joined them.

"Senator Bracken, excuse me. I'm Henry Jackson, Undersecretary to the Secretary of Agriculture."

"Well--ere, how do you do---ah, Henry?" Roger Bracken turned on his famous smile and extended his hand in a firm greeting. Henry Jackson was so overwhelmed to be in the company of the famous Senator from New York and the legendary Senate Majority Leader, he failed to notice Bracken's eyes were not smiling. In fact Bracken resented the intrusion. Half knowing the reason for it, the younger senator was trying

to think of a smooth way to delay their meeting.

“Henry, this is Senator John Shipley of Virginia. John, Henry Jackson.”

The southern Senator returned Jackson’s handshake with genuine warmth. Though many southerners were still notoriously bigoted, he was not one of them. His whole philosophy of statesmanship was based on the equality of men, regardless of color.

Jackson was flattered by the attention of two such powerful political leaders, but then he remembered the reason for his being there and plunged right in. “Senator Bracken, the Secretary sends his greetings and regrets not being able to attend tonight.

“Yes, he missed quite a show. Ah, I wonder--Henry, I would like to talk to you more about the department. Perhaps we could get together after the movie tonight.”

Henry Jackson was somewhat taken aback by this. He really wanted to deliver his message and then query the senator about an open position to further his career. But not wishing to make any waves, he acquiesced and backed off.

“Of course Senator Bracken, until later then, -- Senator Shipley.” the distinguished looking black man nodded to the senators and returned to the group near the refreshment table.

Senator Shipley registered some puzzlement about the exchange between Jackson and Bracken. What did Bracken have to do with the Department of Agriculture? He shrugged it off. He’d been in the political game long enough to know the Senate’s long arm reached into every department of government.

“John, I do want to talk to you for a few moments,” said Bracken. They were standing in a relatively quiet corner to one side of the crowd.

“Of course Roger,” Shipley smiled at his former protégé’.

“I’ve been having some pangs of conscience,” Bracken began, smiling. “If such a thing is possible in politics. You were the real force that pulled me into government, the one person who inspired me to become a public servant. I just don’t feel I’ve repaid you very generously with this battle for desalinization.”

“I’m sure you’re doing what you think best,” answered the older senator. “But if you looked a little deeper into the Project, you might recognize it’s value.”

“Sorry, John, I still firmly believe *rainmaking* went out with the Indians,” chuckled Bracken.

At that moment, Mrs. Shipley came up to her husband, she laid a hand on his arm saying:

“Have you had your refreshments John?”

“Sorry my dear, Roger and I got to talking.”

“Shame on the both of you. This is an evening for relaxation. You won’t mind if I run off with my husband, Roger?”

“Certainly not, dear lady. And I humbly apologize for bringing up business at a time like this.”

“You are forgiven,” the lady smiled benignly at him.

They excused themselves and started toward the lavish buffet. Their trip was interrupted many times by friends and acquaintances. The Shipleys, always a popular pair with young and old alike, had been in Washington for over a half century and nearly everyone knew them.

As they came up the the Millers, Kirk introduced them to Amos Parker. The old movie fan beamed at the famous political leader as if he was one of the many movie stars as he babbled on about THE Movie. Once the amenities were out of the way, the Shipley's confined their conversation to Kirk, allowing Sharon to devote herself to Parker and their favorite subject of horror movies.

Sharon said. "I've always been partial to THE THING. Now there was a real classic in horror."

"I believe that film would come under the category of scienc-fiction, my dear,' corrected the movie buff. "But you are correct, it certainly was horrifying. Personally, my favorites are the series produced by Roger Corman with Vincent Price, especially those loosely based on the Edgar Allen Poe stories. Did you ever see THE RAVEN-- Hilariously gruesome"

Kirk looked impatiently at his watch once again. Actually he was more concerned about the two AM test at the Project. He certainly intended to be there.

The laughter and noise in the room had risen to a crescendo when one of the doors opened to the left and the head usher called out to the crowd.

"You're attention PLEASE! ATTENTION!" He was practically screaming to make himself heard. It took a while for the crowd to quiet down so he could be heard over the din. Even then he had to shout.

"Ladies and gentlemen. I regret to inform you a temporary equipment failure has caused a delay in the start of the second half of THE Movie. However, there are plenty of refreshments, so enjoy yourselves. We hope ot have the trouble repaired shortly."

There was a barely perceptible pause in the gaiety as the guests went back to their partying. After all, who cared about a movie when they were all having such a great time. And behind their alcohol dulled senses, perhaps they felt it really made more sense to gorge themselves on the fantastic food and drink than be subjected to more of the agonies of THE Movie.

Suddenly a shot rang out in the room. Startled by this new, unexplained explosion, everyone jumped and looked around. It had certainly been a gunshot, there was no mistaking the sound. With eyes bulging in fright and panic, someone screamed.

"She's dead! She's dead! There!" and a woman pointed to an inert body in the center of the floor. An elegant, satin gowned matron lay crumpled on the floor. Her eyes wide open, a look of surprise was written on her face. There was a bullet hole in the center of her forehead.

Another shot rang through the room. This sent the great crowd into action. Washington's elite smelled the acrid odor of death and rushed about like so many stampeding cattle. The next instant the mob broke in the middle and became two tidal waves rolling in opposite directions toward the ends of the great room. Pushing and shoving away from the body in the middle of the floor. They screamed and bellowed at each other to get out of the way, like a school of smaller fish being threatened by some giant unseen shark.

The room was charged with terror. A woman was dead and no one wanted to be next. Some of the more intoxicated were pushed to the floor and trampled. their screams of pain and fear only added to the panic. As the waves of humanity crashed against the entrance doors, there were more screams. Shrieks of fear as they

discovered the doors were locked. Cabinet members, senators and congressmen alike pounded on the portals, demanding to be let out; yet the doors were closed--bolted from the outside.

Word went through the crowd that they were imprisoned within the room. Those few who'd remained relatively calm began to react and the pandemonium increased. Suddenly a powerful amplified voice beat above the noise.

"Silence!"

It took a few moments for the command to register.

"Quiet! Settle down Please!" the commanding voice called out once more.

It took some time, but at last the crowd became comparatively silent. There was only the sound of heavy breathing and the whimpering of those who had been hurt in the crush. They all turned to face the source of the command. The great room looked like a battle field. Those who'd been knocked off their feet scrambled for footing and some of their neighbors regained enough of their senses to help them

Sally Merriweather was one of the unfortunates who had been crushed by the mob. She had been knocked unconscious to the floor. UPN coworkers Sally and Jim Paulson were a close couple. They hadn't seen each other for weeks and had been celebrating heavily. Paulson, a two-fisted drinker, was feeling no pain during the panic rush to the doors. Now Sally was seriously injured and the shock of seeing her in such distress sobered the reporter. He knelt, took her head tenderly in his arms and looked around desperately for help. The situation was filled with such ominous implications that Paulson, usually so suave and sophisticated, found himself utterly at sea.

In the midst of the confusion, several individuals in white uniforms entered from the far end of the hall and started toward the victims on the floor. Each carried a small box that looked like an attaché' case. In their free hand they held metallic batons attached to the boxes by cables. The men approached the casualties and the victims eyed them suspiciously, afraid their equipment might bring them more harm.

Paulson made an attempt to shield Sally from this new threat, but a couple of *white* coats drew him to one side, holding him gently but firmly. One of the men moved to stand over Sally. His knuckles whitened slightly as he squeezed the handle of the wand and a quiet buzzing sound could be heard. He waved the wand over her still form, and seconds later, Sally opened her eyes. She yawned as if awakening from a long sleep. Paulson was released so he could join her. As he knelt beside her, Sally finally focused on him. She smiled sleepily and made an effort to rise, but he restrained her.

"No, please don't try to move, Hon." Paulson told her tenderly. "You were pretty badly mauled when these fools stampeded." and he gestured to the frightened group around them.

Sally looked up and focused her eyes on the man standing over her. As she turned her face to him, he aimed the point of the wand at the cut on her head which had stopped bleeding, but still looked dangerous. She was about to speak when the man again squeezed the wand and it appeared to weave an invisible bandage over the wound so it completely vanished. Paulson's jaw dropped in amazement.

"It's perfectly all right, Mr. Paulson. Miss Merriwether is fine now," one of the white coated technicians told him in a kindly tone.

One by one, the wounded were tended to in the same fashion. Much to everyone's surprise, the body of the murder victim, rose to her feet, dusted herself off, and removed the patch of make-up made to resemble a bullet hole. With a haughty toss of her head, she joined a smaller group gathered at the far end of the room.

The panic-stricken crowd at the doors hadn't noticed them before. They'd been too involved with their own hysteria. By contrast the far group stared calmly back at them, obviously amused by the terror reflected in the faces of the mob at the doors.

There were a few famous figures among the smaller group. a senator or two, some congressmen, secretaries and undersecretaries of this department or that. These great and near great wore strange sardonic smiles.

Kirk, who'd rejoined Sharon and the Shipleys after the panic, stood closest to the group and could clearly see the strange look in their eyes. A look he'd seen somewhere before. The Millers and Shipleys were among the few who'd been troubled, but not panicked by the recent violence.

NINE

There was movement at the far end of the hall and a tall, familiar figure stepped forward, Sharon gasped and covered her mouth with one hand.

"It's Mr. Parker," she whispered to Kirk.

Now dressed in a dark, fitted jumpsuit with silver epaulets, Amos Parker, stood for a moment looking around at the large party. They still looked frightened, yet were calmer now as they waited to see what would happen next.

At last he spoke, and this time it was not with the effeminate lisp of the old movie buff. His voice took on a calm assurance and commanding tone. Kirk recognized the voice as one he'd heard earlier that evening.

The Grand Inquisitor! He said to himself.

Parker smiled at the group.

"I'm sorry we had to resort to such melodramatic means to get your attention. A bit theatrical I admit, but I wanted to make sure you understood the party was over and it's time now to get down to business.

A rustling whisper came through the crowd.

"Business? What's going on?"

Just then, the little dwarf they'd seen in THE Movie as the court jester and executioner trotted out from the far crowd. He pushed his ugly face toward the larger group and gave the razz berry; then stuck up his middle finger and *flipped them the bird*. The dowager who had played the murder victim and looked very much like the *Queen* in THE Movie, rushed out and drew him back by the ear as she would a naughty child.

The little man placed a king sized cigarette in a holder and lit it with a golden lighter. He smiled at Kirk as he clasped the cigarette holder at a jaunty angle between his teeth, reminiscent of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Senator Bracken staggered out from the larger crowd. He was very drunk. Slobbering slightly, he bellowed.

“Is this some sort of gruesome joke?”

As Bracken stood there swaying unsteadily, Parker answered him with an indulgent smile. “No joke, Senator. Don’t be impatient. Everything will be explained in good time. I’m well aware you’ve all had a very trying evening. In our movie you’ve been battered, burned and shocked. Hopefully we’ve managed to amuse you from time to time.”

“We’ve tried to make you think; to make you feel and perhaps to make you concerned. We’ve been damned cruel to your delicate sensibilities and for that I must apologize. I’m doubly upset some were hurt just now. We didn’t realize you would react with such violence to our little charade.”

“At least you deserve an explanation. This entire evening was planned as test. An examination of your innermost feeling, thoughts, and desires. We’ve shown you the past, the present and are about to show you your future. As we said earlier in our little movie presentation, the past is dead. We can learn little from it. Tomorrow--today will also be in the past. Too many of you live only for *today*, that is your folly. the possible downfall of all humanity. You are fast running out of *today*s. too many going merrily on your way with little concern for the future. Most of you’d rather let someone else worry about it. You’re wrong! You must think of yourselves, only *yourselves* before it’s too late. “

“And that’s why we’re here. We call ourselves Primagnons, what you might consider an alien force, yet we’ve always been here; a part of your society, yet apart from it. Waiting until this moment we’ve always known would come. When the world would need us. That time is Now!”

The audience listened gravely. The shock of his introduction had silenced some of them. Others were concentrating, trying to fully comprehend what he was saying. Nearly all were impressed by his sincerity. His calmness was as dynamic as it was commanding. They were compelled to listen.

“As I said before, this entire evening has been a test. We’ve observed you involved in a series of experiences to see just how you’d react under various stresses. I believe you’ll agree we’ve shown you your most intimate, secret, even subconscious thoughts and emotions. A bit presumptuous of us, I agree, but necessary nonetheless.”

Some of the audience were looking at one another, more or less embarrassed to recall the image of his or her own reaction to THE Movie and the other events that had battered them earlier.

“You may wonder who “We are. I’ll try to enlighten you more about that as the evening moves along. We are part of a large organization sent to save you from your own destruction. Unfortunately, you don’t seem capable of formulating a solution to your own problems, therefore, we now offer you guidance as well as our advanced technical assistance.

Parker continued to dazzle them with his logic. After all, within any group, no matter how well educated or sophisticated, there are those who believe anything as long as it’s wrapped in a pretty package. These individuals now found themselves under the spell of this amazing person. Some, even to the point of looking up to him as a savior or new messiah.

Parker went on. “Some of you have grasped part of the method we plan to

implement. I must point out *your* plans are impractical and why we, members of the Primagnon Force are giving *you*, the nations leaders, the first opportunity to join us. Primagnons are, I might add, are a very select group. It's partially the reason for this elaborate evening; to determine which of you are suitable for membership.'

As the Primagnon spoke, he walked back and forth before the group of the nations leaders and their ladies.

"You have seen the first phase of our evenings entertainment." continued the Primagnon. " We must now interview each of you individually and privately to make our final choices. I hope this won't disturb you, but if you qualify, then you can become one of us. You will be required to participate in an initiation ceremony in which certain psychological and physiological changes will take place."

He turned away as if he was about to leave them, But turned back as if struck by an after-thought he wanted to relate to them. He spoke very positively, laying each word for effect.

"I'm afraid one step in your metamorphosis will be -- *Death!*"

There was a choked silence. *Death!* the awesome word hung in the silent air. The already fearful guests fixed their eyes in horror on the figure before them. Several of the ladies fainted into the arms of their partners. Some of the men found themselves suddenly sitting down hard, on the floor.

"*Death!*" the thought was still there. *Death!* --how it turned them, froze them, weakened them. With this one simple word Parker had laid the bombshell carefully and quietly, and as as always it worked. Fear was the strongest persuader know to human kind. He'd used it for hundred so years and found it indispensable in his work. He'd converted many humans to their secret society and always felt a pang of sorrow at having to resort to such drastic means. His studies had shown him that humans experience great psychological pain when faced with the threat of death. He regretted their suffering, yet the mission was foremost and any means must be used to accomplish it.

As Parker, the Primagnon, stood there, waiting for the panic-stricken mob to settle down, he flexed his powerful intellect and let his mind reach out and envelope the personalities of the hundreds of the human being cowering before him. As his power probed and plucked at the senses of each, he was struck by their topsy-turvy derangement and confusion, the terror and consternation that seethed within each psyche. He compared the disorder of the human mind with the well-ordered emotionless channels of his own.

Humans--so weak and fragmented when set beside the more-than-human mechanism of the Primagnon. It wasn't pride that made him think this, as Primagnons are almost devoid of personal ego or vanity. Other drives and obsessions were their rewards.

Parker did feel a moment of doubt as he scanned the confused mental working of the crowd. This was to be the first mass trial of *The Change*. Would it be able to convert the vanity, fear, weakness, ambition, petty prejudices and other useless imperfections of the human spirit into motivated, dedicated Primagnon's? And would the conversion of this group lead to the modification of the majority of the rest of the world? And would there be time to complete their work before it was too late?

He was forced to stand for a few more moments to allow the full force of his

declaration and presence work its will on them. While he stood watching them go through the various phases of their terror: from realization, to foreboding, to horrified anticipation, he considered once again what it as to be born a Primagnon. It was impossible to convert humans to this purest form of demigod during *The Change*, but an excellent facsimile was possible with most of them. He looked back into his own history to the point when the first Primagnons walked the earth.

His ancestors were spawned in a remote and isolated part of northern Europe. Only two, a male and female escaped when the ice age trapped and destroyed the rest of their kind.

The pair made their way into the outside world and even during that primeval age, they sensed their uniqueness. Possessed of unusual intelligence, longevity and a sixth sense that gave them extraordinary puissance over others, the two began the tradition of incestuous intermarriage that caused them to multiply only among themselves. Yet instead of weakening the strain, their powers increased with each succeeding generation.

The Primagnon leader noticed the crowd before him was now in a proper state of fearful attention and spoke to them:

“The interviews will begin shortly,” he said aloud. “Try to make yourselves as comfortable as possible. This will be a long night.” The Primagnon paused for a few moments to let this sink in, before he turned to where Senator Shipley was standing.

“I would like to see the Senate leader, John Shipley, for a few moments before we begin in earnest. If you please, Senator?”:

Parker made a welcoming gesture toward the far end of the room. Two uniformed Primagnons moved forward to escort the Senator, who hesitated a moment before falling in step with them as Parker lead the way.

Parker took them to a short hallway containing several doors. He halted the group before one of them. Pausing, he turned to look at the Senator before he opened the door, and with a slight bow, bade the old man enter.

TEN

John Shipley stepped into the room. Parker and his escort entered behind him and Shipley heard the door close softly. The guards took positions to one side while Parker motioned the senior Senator to a chair. Before he honored the request, Shipley paused for a moment to study the unusual room. He'd never seen anything like it. The overall effect produced an atmosphere of comfort and warmth. There were several couches and arm chairs resembling those they'd used in the theater. the room was possibly thirty feet square. The dimensions were hard to determine due to it's design, because the floors curved smoothly up to meet the walls. The carpets were woven of a soft plush material with no visible seam as they joined the walls and covered them, as well as the vaulted ceiling. Underfoot the floor gave the impression of walking on a firm mattress. the Senator smiled to himself at the thought, one could compare the room to a padded cell, or perhaps even a womb.

Parker's desk completely dominated the area. It was of unique design with added

features that made it look more like a control console than a desk. Behind the freeform executive chair was a giant screen which appeared to be an integral part of the desk complex. It measured at least eight feet wide by six feet in height. The picture had the same three dimensional quality as the film they'd viewed earlier. Showing on the screen, clearly as if he was looking through a window, were the guests gathered in the ballroom. He saw several Primagnon guards a few feet from their *prisoners*. The guards showed the crowd every consideration by not threatening them in any way and giving them plenty of breathing room. He also saw the man who had earlier acted as head usher. He held some papers as he conferred with the guards. Occasionally he nodded as he pointed out individuals in the crowd.

The guests looked a little pale, but were calmer now, and talking quietly to one another. The sound of quiet conversation came from speakers hidden somewhere in the console.

"Senator...do sit down and make yourself comfortable," Parker invited. Yet, this time his tone was more insistent.

The old man moved to a chair opposite the desk and sat down. He finally looked over at his host, now seated behind the desk. The Primagnon was pouring a drink from a dispenser that reminded the Senator of the soda fountains of his youth. Parker got up from his high back chair and came round the desk to where Shipley was sitting.

Extending a tall glass to the old man, Parker said. "Here Senator, Please drink this."

"Thank you no, I believe I've consumed quite enough of you liquor for one evening."

"Not nearly enough," laughed the Primagnon. "You were one of the more sensible ones. This isn't alcohol. It's much better for you and more beneficial. I want to have a talk with you and perhaps this will help you to relax. I know this evening has been traumatic for everyone. It was meant to be. Now it's time to get to know one another." Once again Parker extended the glass to the Senator.

The contrast between kindly smile and firmness of tone gave Shipley the strange impression Parker was a sorcerer handing him some sort of hypnotic potion. He hesitated and then caught a slight menacing glimmer as Parker looked him squarely in the eye. Still he hesitated until Parker motioned to the guards to assist him. The Senator could sense the guards taking the position directly behind his chair and the hair on his neck began to rise. Finally he relented, and took the glass. He'd played the give-and-take game of diplomacy long enough to know instinctively it was time to give in.

He looked at the glass before drinking and the liquid appeared a cool and inviting green. The edges of the container were frosted much like a mint julep. He moved the glass to his lips, took a sip and found it delicious. In fact, he'd never tasted anything quite so delectable. As it flowed inside him there was pleasant sensation of good Kentucky bourbon, but even more soothing. At first the effect was that of a mild alcoholic drink and a warm glow came over him. He started to relax and took another sip, much larger this time. He felt years younger, and the constant nagging chest pain was gone.

"There," cooed the Primagnon. "Isn't that better?"

“Much, thank you,” responded the Senator, but he was still wary of his mysterious adversary.

“Now that you are what I hope is in a more receptive frame of mind, I’d like to get down to negotiations.

Ah, here it comes! thought Shipley.

“Exactly.” replied Parker.

This startled the Senator, for he hadn’t spoken aloud. He began to wonder what was in the drink. He’d already drunk about a third of the liquid before deciding he’d best keep a clear head. He set the glass on a small table nearby and rested his hands on the arm of the chair.

“Yes, Senator. *Thought reading* is one of the many advantages of being Primagnon. As I told the assembly outside,” he said indicating the crowd on the screen behind him. “This evening has been a test and we’ve been *reading* you all. We know everything about you. Every thought you’ve had from the time you were a child, until this very hour. You recall, I’m sure the metal arms on the seats in the theater? They are equipped with sensor devices that told us many things. The information was fed into our computers and we were able to analyze all your reactions to the evening’s various crises. Each of you were subjected to nearly every trauma known to the human condition.”

The Senator looked down at his chair and noticed the same metallic arms, with that same sensually warm feeling. He tried to raise his arms, but the green liquid had relaxed him and the effort seemed to much of a bother. He looked up again at the man at the desk, and Parker’s smile told him again he was aware of this thoughts. At the moment it didn’t seem to matter.

“This little interrogation is also in the manner of a test, I’m afraid. I selected you to be interviewed first because you are the virtual leader of these people--as you have been for many years. Presidents come and go, but Senator Shipley goes on and on.” He chuckled. “What’s more important, the people love you, and except for a few like your Roger Bracken and our Primagnons, the government does pretty much what you want it to.”

Parker smiled at the expression on the elder statesman’s face. “

“Yes, senator, I think I said before, we are everywhere. All over the world. The troubles you’ve been having in the Senate lately has been *our* doing. We’re growing in power. we don’t have a Senate or House majority yet, but our members are most persuasive. Still, we do need you to fully implement our plans. We can, of course go ahead without you, but your endorsement would make the transition go more smoothly.”

“Endorsement of What?” The Senator was drowsy, dulled by the green nectar, but nonetheless getting impatient with Parker’s long-winded prolog.

“Very well, Senator. I refer to our *takeover*. We’ve waited centuries for this period in time; growing in strength and waiting. Preparing for this moment when the world would find itself in such a crippled condition the people would almost demand our takeover in order to save them.”

Shipley was visibly disturbed by this information.

“A World dictatorship? Impossible! The people...”

“Not so impossible. The Russians dangled a carrot in front of the noses of

deprived nations for years and their method worked quite well for a while. But now the Russians are out of the picture. The World needs help and we are the only ones equipped to provide it.”

A frown furrowed the Primagnon leader’s brow. “Unfortunately, you and your young protégé, Dr. Miller, have muddied the water of our master plan. Your *rain machine* is similar to our method. A bit crude, I’ll admit, but similar. We aren’t quite ready to unveil our system on a world wide scale, and your interference is most ill-timed.”

“Of course, you should know your project will never succeed. Though the Bay Project is already operable, there is no way the populations of the world can be supported by your *grand design*. It’s a utopian dream, Senator.”

“Here, let me show you,” continued Parker as he pushed a button on the console on the right side of his desk.

The ballroom disappeared from the giant screen and was replaced by one of the most appalling scenes the Senator had ever witnessed. A great throng of people stood before him. They were incredibly dirty, their hair matted with God knows what. The filth was the least pitiful part of their appearance. Their eyes, sunken into almost skull-like heads, held a haunted, empty look. Most were unable to hide their nakedness. Ribs stuck out above distended abdomens and made both males and females appear pregnant. So little flesh remained under the skin, the joints seem enormously enlarged and stuck out at odd angles. Most pitiful were the children. Even the youngest looked like withered old men and women. There was a pleading expression in the sunken eyes, so filled with misery, the Senator turned away.

“This, Senator, is what the world faces in the near future.” He then switched to several other scenes of desperate humanity.

The senator saw one of the shriveled children reach down and take something from the ground and stuff it hungrily into its mouth. The old man couldn’t swear what the youngster had eaten, but if it was what it resembled...the Senator felt the bile rise in his throat. Certainly no human being could ever be brought to such animalism. He turned to glare at Parker.

“I’ll show you what will happen if nothing is done. The world’s condition will worsen. I can assure you of that.”

He pushed another button on the console and the picture changed to a shot of grain elevators in the foreground: fields and a warehouse and city in the distance. It was the activity in the foreground that held Shipley’s attention. A mob of men in tatters were advancing on a company of soldiers holding bayoneted rifles. The attackers carried weapons of all sorts: Guns, axes, shovels, baseball bats, kitchen knives. Anything that might serve as a weapon. Women and children cowered in the background; waiting, hoping and obviously starving. The leader of the attackers stopped his group about forty feet from the soldiers and spoke.

“Please give us food. Our women and children are starving. Give us food and we’ll go away. We don’t want to hurt anyone. We only want food.”

An army colonel stepped in front of the soldiers and faced the rabble leader.

“Go back where you came from, we only have enough to barely feed this community. It’s rationed and only sufficient for our needs. We sympathize with you, but we have our orders.”

The ragged leader cast the officer a pleading discouraged look and turned to his followers.

“This Miller town is our last chance. We can’t continue without food. we must take a stand here while we have the strength.” He spoke quietly, urgently with a great sadness in his eyes. The men listened and some looked back to where their desperate families waited.

“We’re with ya, George,” called someone from the mob.

“Yeah, let’s get ‘em!” yelled another as the mob started to advance.

“Hold your fire,” shouted the Colonel as his men leveled their rifles at the approaching horde. It was easy to read the fear in the soldiers’ eyes and the desperate determination of the ragged company they faced.

The soldiers held their fire too long as they awaited the order that never came. The attackers were on them in moments and the Colonel was the first to be killed. A lucky slash of a butcher knife severed his jugular vein. What followed was the most obscene carnage imaginable. Limbs were hacked off, shots fired at close quarters did fatal damage to many. In moments it was a seething, bloody mass of uncontrolled violence. A child was hit by a stray bullet and lay bleeding, whimpering, dying in its hysterical mother’s arms.

The woman bundled the dismembered soldiers’ body parts in rags and carried them away as they left the scene of carnage.

“Canibalism, Senator, is part of the world’s future picture--what will result if the Chesapeake Bay Project continues as planned. *Plenty for some, starvation for most!*”

The Senator turned pale. He was shaken by the vivid tragedy displayed on the three dimensional screen. He reached for the drink beside him, and once more the liquid comforted him as he said.’

“What you’ve shown me has been hiding in the back of my mind for some time. Many of our critics have brought it up. Yet, there is no other possibility as we see it.”

“Ah, but there is, Senator” the Primagnon spoke with mounting enthusiasm. “ We are your salvation. We have planned this relief for centuries. And we’re almost ready. You and your associates can help us make the transition with a minimum of difficulty.”

“What do you propose?” the Senator sighed resignedly.

“The world of the next decade and the decades to follow cannot support all the peoples of the world. Even with our advanced technology, the population must be reduced by millions. Only then can the *life force* survive.”

“I hope I don’t understand you correctly, Parker?” Shipley saw the terrible truth of the Primagnon plan. Was the liquid he’d been given to relax him so he’d be prepared for what followed?

“Yes, unfortunately many must be eliminated.” the Primagnon Leader said, shaking his head dolefully. “The weak of heart, spirit and mind will have to be *Passed On*. The aged: mentally and physically deformed adults and children will have to be put aside”

“But...What you are suggesting is not human!” gasped Shipley.

“On the contrary. Our method of genocide is very humane. There is no pain and most of the unfortunates will be better off for it.”

Shipley could barely believe his ears. Parker’s manner was so matter of fact, as if taking the lives of millions, possibly billions of people meant nothing to him. Just so

many cattle to be slaughtered.

“Senator,” continued the Primagnon after reading the old man’s thoughts. “Human life is of little importance. We must preserve the *Life Force*. That alone must go on. Only the fittest must survive if the world is to survive. This is the prime reason we played out little games this evening. To help us decide which of you cared only for yourselves. Which are the achievers, the ones who always come out on top, No matter who they have to step on to achieve their goals. These are the ones we are interested in having join us.”

Shipleigh shifted uneasily in his seat. “Then you must know from your research, I am not your man.”

“Yes, your life has been exemplary, yet we both know it is almost over. Soon this country will need someone to take your place. If you join with us now, perhaps we can let you make that choice. We do have the way to sustain life for long periods. Possibly you could go on being the--Grand Old Man!”

“Grand old butcher, you mean!”

Parker pushed the button on the console and the screen sprang to life once more. This time it showed a field of beautifully cultivated vegetables. Beyond were pastures where beef and dairy cattle grazed--a lovely pastoral scene. In the background the Senator could see a tall tower similar to the one at the Project.

At the left side of the screen he could see many people advancing to the right. Another terrible sight; for they were like locusts, devouring everything in their path. The hungry horde completely denuded the field, leaving nothing behind.

Suddenly a small plane flew over them and what looked like a cloud of smoke poured from it to settle slowly over the mob on the field. They cowered, screaming under it. The camera moved in for a close-up as the cloud reached the throng in time to see the horror on their faces--the last expressions as men, women and children fell, choking and retching their lives away in the dirt.

“This is the way your plan will succeed Senator. We believe it’s far better to be selective and allow the chosen to die a peaceful sleep-like death.”

The old man reached for the pills in his pocket. His hand was shaking so much he spilled several until he finally got one into his mouth and swallowed it down with the last of the liquid from the glass. Some of it ran over his chin as he desperately swallowed the potion.

Parker started up out of his chair and held out a hand of caution.

“I’m not certain those medications will mix, Senator!”

The senior Senator’s eyes were bulging as he glared at Parker.

“What do you want from me:” he gasped, struggling unsteadily out of the chair.

“We want you to help us save your country.” replied Parker.

“But at such a cost? It can’t be worth it.”

“It’s the only way,” Parker replied firmly. “You must see that. There was a pleading tone to the Primagnon’s request. “We want you to help us.”

“You -- you’re insane,” the senator’s voice wavered as he shouted the words. “You’ll never get away with it. I’ll find a way to stop you if it takes my last breath. Believe me...I’ll stop you!”

The primagnon leader looked sadly at the old man.

“I...I’ll stop you!” and Shipleigh raised his fist defiantly at Parker. With anyone else

the gesture would have appeared melodramatic, yet it fitted the great man perfectly.

With his fist wavering in midair, a look of excruciating pain came into the eyes of the old statesman. His fist turned into a grasping hand that clutched at his chest. He tottered for a moment and then fell back, sliding halfway out of his chair. The two Primagnon guards rushed to help him. Parker stepped forward and stared down at the old man.

"I'm sorry you couldn't see it our way, Senator." the Primagnon appeared truly saddened by the impotency of the former powerful leader who was not completely helpless.

"Kirk. Take Me to Kirk." Shipley's voice was barely a whisper.

"Do as he asks," ordered Parker. "Make him as comfortable as you can."

ELEVEN

One of the Primagnons left the room and returned shortly with a gurney, Then both lifted the Senator gently onto it and slowly wheeled him back into the ballroom. As they entered with the gurney bearing the prostrate form, the Senator's wife broke from the crowd and hurried to her husband's side.

"John?! What is it? What have they done to you?"

The bearers rolled the gurney to small alcove at the side of the great room. Some of the crowd started to gather around. Sharon Joined Mrs. Shipley alongside the dying Senator. Jim Paulson and Kirk stood with them and were shocked by their own helplessness. Tears welled up in Kirk's eyes and he left the group and stepped into the ballroom. Almost choking with the conflicting emotions of sorrow and fury, he shouted,

"Parker, Come out! Damn you Parker, Come out!" He was nearly crying and the last of his words caught in his throat.

The door at the far end opened and Parker entered the room. He had several of his associates with him and strode purposefully toward the desperate scientist. As the party approached the young man, they could feel as well as see what was going on in his tortured mind. as he reached toward thoughts of violence.

Two of the Primagnon lieutenants stepped forward to protect their leader as Parker faced the distraught young man.

"Parker, You d-did this!"

"No my friend. Nature has had it's way."

"B-But, you can save him. You have the means. I've seen it"

"I'm sorry. I came to know the Senator well in the talk we had. I think it's best to allow him to *pass on*."

"You son of a bitch!" The young man blurted out the words. Choking on his hatred, he made a lunge for Parker but was restrained by the guards.

"Strong language for you, Kirk. I think you're learning. We'll see how much you've

learned a little later,” and Parker turned on his heel and proceeded back in the direction of his office. His men held Kirk for a few moments before joining their leader.

Kirk wanted to scream his raging helplessness after the departing figures, but it seemed futile. He found his mind was working at incredible speed, trying to search for way out of the maze of this nightmare, but finding only dead ends.

Someone was standing at his elbow, and he saw it was Mrs. Jackson. The black lady was one of the few who'd held up a brave front to the incredible events that had battered them.

“Dr. Millah...the Senatah, He really needs the help of a competent physician.”

It took a moment for Kirk to focus on her words. He looked back over his shoulder to where Parker and the others had disappeared to see the doors close behind them. He turned in the direction of the nearby prisoners. Perhaps in the group of hundreds there was someone who could help, yet the expression in their eyes reflected total defeat.

“A doctor, A doctor is needed... anyone here a doctor?”

Sharon hurried from the alcove and touched Kirk's shoulder.

“He's asking for you,” she whispered urgently.

Kirk looked desperately at the crowd and then followed Sharon back into the alcove. It was quiet inside the small chamber except for Mrs. Shipley's muffled sobs and the Senator's labored breathing. The half dozen grouped around the senior Senator made room for Kirk to stand beside the old man.

At first there seemed to be little sign of life about the old man, and then he took a deep breath. It rattled in his throat as he labored to grasp the oxygen his lungs craved. Kirk took the man's wrinkled hand in his own and looked down at him. With all his knowledge, life and death were mysteries he couldn't unravel.

There was a hand on his shoulder and Kirk turned and looked into the dazed eyes of a middle-aged man who had joined them. He was of medium height with thin curly hair and carried a small black case.

“I'm Doctor Craig. what seems to be the trouble?”

With a look of desperation Kirk spoke to the doctor. “It's Senator Shipley...he's...”

Sharon broke in, “We think it's a heart attack, doctor.”

“Well, let me see,” and he moved next to the gurney. “I have my bag with me--an old habit.” He took out a stethoscope and listened to the Senator's heart for a few moments.

No one saw the hopeless expression on his face. Digging down into the bag. he handed Kirk a small bottle, syringe and sanitary disposable needle. Kirk held them while the doctor pushed the Senator's sleeve up out of the way. He prepared the syringe and carefully inserted the fine point into one of the large veins on the upper arm, then slowly compressed the plunger, withdrew the device and put his instruments away. The MD turned the the group and motioned for Kirk to follow him.

“I've done all I can. He's sinking, but he should come out of it for a few minutes at least. I'm sorry, but without the proper equipment...”

“I understand Doctor. W--we certainly appreciate the help you've given us.

The M,D, looked around the big room and studied a group nearby. His wife was among them and his face screwed up as tears began to run down his cheeks.

Ashamed, he turned away from the young man. When he spoke again, his voice was choked with emotion.

"Perhaps it's better, in view of this. Perhaps the Senator will be better off."

Kirk placed a hand on the doctor's drooping shoulder. It trembled for a moment before the man moved slowly away to join the main group and his wife. There was a stirring in the alcove and Kirk heard his name called in a harsh, gasping whisper. He hurried back to the Senator's side.

For a moment the great man stared unseeing up at Kirk, then spoke as he recalled what had happened.

"Kirk, It's up to you now," The Senator was having difficulty speaking and it was difficult to understand what he was saying.

"Kirkland my boy, this is a poor way to say goodbye. You, you're the only one--- where's momma?" he looked around until he spied his wife standing nearby, looking at him with a vacant stare. The nightmare of the evening had driven the life from her.

"Kirk, I've tried all my life to do what was best for my country. Now I'm afraid my time is over. But these people here tonight. These Primagnons or whatever they are...I've heard rumblings; from the CIA...and I couldn't believe it...The reports too vague...But now I believe they'll do what they say they can do--I want you to, aaaahh,!" The pain tossed the Senator and he writhed for a moment before he could speak again.

"I want *you* to help them, son, to help our country. That Parker. I could see he had his eyes on you. He wants to use you son, to use us all. You must get away from here...There are a lot more folks important to our nation. Help 'em son. Some the finest leaders...national security..."

The ailing man grabbed for his chest again and incredible pain was written on his face. He made an attempt rise, only to slump back on the gurney. Kirk grabbed for him and held the old man's head against his chest. His young head bent over the old one while tears rolled unneeded down his cheeks, wetting the old man's brow. The great leader opened his eyes and looked up at the younger man who had been like a son to him.

"Help them Kirk," he breathed. "Help..." and with a deep sigh, his long life left him.

At first Kirk couldn't believe his well-loved friend was gone. He held the old man for a while, rocking him gently in his arms. Distracted by the pressure of a hand on his shoulder, he turned. Through the mist of tears he could see the Usher, and two Primagnon guards standing behind him. The others in the alcove were leaving except for Sharon and Mrs. Shipley. He glared at the aliens.

"Leave us alone!. Haven't you done enough? *You* killed him!"

"Please, Dr. Miller, try to understand. We bear condolences from Mr. Parker. He also admired the Senator. He sent us to prepare him." The Usher appeared to be truly compassionate.

"Prepare him, for what?" demanded Kirk.

"Why, prepare him for his return to the outside. Your people will undoubtedly wish to give the Senator the state funeral he so richly deserves," replied the Usher.

Kirk stubbornly held the inert form close for a few moments, before laying the Senator back on the gurney. He couldn't think of any way to fight them. He had to find plan to carry out the dead man's wishes. That would take time. Carefully he folded

the Senator's hands on his chest and took one long, last look before pulling the sheet over Shipley's face.

It was Jim Paulson who came forward to help Kirk and led him past the Primagnon group. Kirk held in his fury, he mustn't lose control now. He had to think.

When they joined the group outside the dim alcove, Sharon gave Kirk a quick look of sympathy, but didn't touch or try to console him. She and Mrs. Jackson were apparently more concerned with Mrs. Shipley's welfare. The Senator's wife was a strong woman, yet, from the blank stare in her eyes, it was apparent she was now in shock.

Paulson left Kirk's side to join Sally. Kirk stood alone in his grief just outside the alcove. So confounded by his mourning, he was barely aware of what was going on inside. For a few moments, light appeared to come from the far side of the small room, as if a door beyond had been opened. The impression only grazed his mind, but was left lodged in his subconscious. A few moments later, the Usher came out of the alcove and motioned to four Primagnons who were standing nearby. They moved after the Usher in the direction of the small group composed of Sharon, Mrs. Shipley, Mrs. Jackson, and a few steps away, Kirk Miller. The Usher stopped beside Sharon.

"Mrs. Miller, if you will be kind enough to follow these brethren, Mr. Parker would like a few words with you in private."

Kirk stepped forward to defend his wife, but two of the Primagnons each placed a hand on his shoulders. He struggled and flung away their hands, and they took firm hold of his arms. The Usher turned to face him.

"Please Doctor, your wife will suffer no harm. The leader merely wants to talk to her."

Sharon was terrified, but too proud to show these creatures she was afraid. One took her arm to lead her away from her distraught husband. She pulled herself free and glared at the guard. Turning to look over her shoulder and could see Kirk was frightened for her. In a burst of fury, he tore himself loose from his captors and struck out at one of the Primagnons who held him.

"Here, none of that!" Ordered the Usher. He motioned to one of the men carrying one of the special kits. The Primagnon moved quickly toward the flailing Kirk and aimed the wand at him. Immediately Kirk crumpled. The man he'd been fighting grabbed for him and lowered him gently to the floor.

"I wish you people would understand we're only trying to help you!" the Usher said impatiently. Turning to Sharon, he almost pleaded. "Mrs. Miller, will you please go quietly? We don't want to hurt any of you, but you must see resistance is useless."

Kirk was still unconscious and Sharon could see she might expect no help from the others in the room. She glared at her escorts, then turned and started toward the far door.

Meanwhile, the Usher continued to speak to those who waited behind. Many of the crowd turned with terrified looks toward the locked doors.

"We are going to begin the interviews now," continued the Usher. "We can handle ten of you at a time. Each will be consulted individually. The interviews, I might add are mandatory and I hope you will go quietly. If not we will be forced to give you assistance."

As he spoke more of the uniformed Primagnons came into the room. Their

jumpsuit style apparel was black with silver trim, and on the cuffs of each were various markings indicating rank or position. Each was armed with a unique looking weapon.

The Usher began to read names from his list. Names of senators and congressmen were included as well as the Chief of the FBI and Sally Merriwether. Although Sally appeared frightened, she didn't cry out. Jim Paulson made an attempt to shield her, but was held back by several guards.

Some of the wives and girlfriends of the men chosen didn't exhibit Sharon or Sallys' courage. Some fainted or screamed out as they attempted to cling to the arms of their men. The guards showed great patience at first, but finally even their calm forbearance gave way to irritation and they pointed their weapons at the more stubborn politicians. There were more screams now when those who where threatened tried to shield themselves with their hands. the Primagnons fired the weapons and sparks shot from the pointed metallic sticks and brought forth a series of *ouches* and *yipes*. It was as if the Primagnons were pushing a small herd of unruly steers with some sort of sophisticated cattle prods.

The politicians jumped and flinched before they started moving quickly toward the doors pointed out to them. Those who remained behind could only watch helplessly and wonder what fate awaited them when their time came.

TWELVE

As the door opened before Sharon, she hesitated. She felt strangely awed to see this room was dimly lit. The unique design gave her the distinct impression she was entering some sort of cave--a place which held a peril that might affect her life and future. As Sharon stepped through the door she became only vaguely aware of her surroundings. Her attention was riveted on the man who stood next to a chair in the center of the room. The foppish movie buff had taken on new stature and Mr. Parker's presence frightened her.

He greeted her in a kindly voice. "Come in Mrs. Miller."

Despite his friendly tone, Sharon remained wary and frozen. Unable to move, she felt hands from behind, take her gently by the elbows and propel her forward.

"Please sit down. I believe you'll find this chair comfortable," Parker invited.

Sharon stood peering into Parker's eyes, half afraid to look, yet drawn to their penetrating gaze.

Parker addressed her softly. "Mrs. Miller -- dear Shana," he smiled.

Sharon was startled. Only her father had ever called her, Shana. How could this creature know that? Was he laughing at her? Taking liberties with her memories? She stuck out her pretty chin at him.

"I'm sorry about the little deception I had to play on you earlier this evening. But later, I think you will see it was necessary ."

"Who or *what* are you Mr. Parker? What role are you playing now?" she snapped angrily.

"You see me as I am, my dear. A Primagnon through and through. I might add, a

Primagnon with a great deal of influence and a good deal to offer you.”

“You sound like a used car salesman,” she tossed back at him.

Genuinely amused, Parker laughed. “A used car salesman?! Just wait until you hear the beauty of a bargain I have for you Shana.”

Sharon was irritated by his continued use of her pet name, yet the man’s outgoing manner had softened some of her fury. She looked up at the Primagnon. She was still standing and they were only separated by the width of the chair. She could see his eyes more clearly. The dim light caused his pupils to dilate and through the widened opening, she could see far back into them. There were strange glittering lights of many colors dancing within. She also saw shadows and movement. No definite forms, but the mystery of them intrigued her.

Sharon knew now she was no match for this Primagnon, or whatever he was. But she was less and less afraid of him. When he offered her the chair again, She could read the insistence in his face. She withdrew her gaze and sat down.

When she was comfortable, Mr. Parker indicated the drink on the table next to her. She took a sip and found the pleasant taste refreshing.

“I can see you are confused, my dear,” Parker began. “A very natural reaction to this evening offerings.”

“I’m sure my confusion would be cleared up if I knew what it you’re planning,” Sharon responded.

“Why, we’re planning your salvation. That’s the simple truth. The world is in trouble and we wish to save it.”

“My husband’s already working on that.”

“Yes, and his plan is a worthy beginning. Unfortunately, it’s not the whole answer. There’s a greater price to be considered.’

“Price?” Sharon queried as she took another sip of the liquid. Her eyes followed the Primagnon as he moved to sit behind his desk.

“Yes -- a price. I think with your scientific background, you’ll understand my meaning.”

“ My husband’s the scientist.” she managed to smile.

“But you’re close enough to know for ever action there must be a reaction. When something is added, very often something must be subtracted. No matter how many are allowed to live on this poor planet, there’s no possible way to save the entire population. Many will have to perish in order for the *Life Force* to continue. You certainly must see that”

Sharon considered this for a moment, and almost immediately saw the truth in what he said. It disturbed her, yet she elected not to reply.

“Sharon,” Parker continued, deciding she was not happy being called by her father’s pet name. “Sharon, we need your help. We want your husband to be a part of our plans. Dr. Miller is without doubt a brilliant man. However, there’s something beyond his brilliance, we need to make our mission a total success.”

Sharon gave the Primagnon a questioning look.

“I want you to help bring Kirk under our influence. His innocence and utopian optimism may make our plans for him impossible. Yet we must try. I should warn you what I ask may destroy his love for you. We’ve been studying you all evening; somehow I don’t believe the loss will be all that unsettling.”

“But...he loves me and I love...”

“No Sharon, for the last year or so, you’ve only been deluding yourself with the idea you still care for him. In effect you’ve already been unfaithful to him.”

“That’s a lie!” she cried, and yet there was little conviction in her anger.

“Unfaithful in thought if not in deed.” he continued, to qualify his remarks. “You’re much like us in that respect. The fulfillment of basic needs are primary. Once those are met, we go on to more important work>”

“But, I’ve always...” murmured Sharon uncomfortably.

“Not always,” interrupted Parker. Reaching into her thoughts. “We know everything about you--and the lengths to which you’ve gone to satisfy your needs.”.

Suddenly furious, she shouted. “How Dare you...!”

The Primagnon tried to mollify her. “It’s no crime to relieve those frustrations left you by a neglectful husband.

Sharon blushed and turned away, horrified that anyone should know her secret.

“Sharon,” said the Primagnon quietly. “That’s all in the past. Just your human nature, and as our friend the Inquisitor stated. *The past is DEAD!*”

Parker, who had been sitting at his desk, now rose.

“We want to offer you a new life, one full of promise. A life which will be fulfilling--perfect for the likes of you.”

He moved to stand before her. she leaned back in the chair so she could look up at him. He was almost in silhouette, towering in front of her. She could see the expression in his eyes was kindly, yet insistent.

“Kirk isn’t worthy of you. He thinks only of his work and has little time to give what you need. In his present state, unfortunately, he might accept the comfort you offer, yet can give little in return. You, however, will continue to give and give until you are sapped of your youth and beauty.--a bitter old woman before your time. Here, let me show you” He turned back to press a button on the desk console.

The great screen sprang to life and he stepped away so she had a clear view of it. It showed her face, and the beauty of it shown through the room. It was the same face that once looked back at her from her mirror.

“Sharon Miller at age twenty-five,” remarked the Primagnon.

There was a slight pinging sound from the area of the screen and a change appeared. It was as if someone had thrown a pebble into a pond, and as the ripples moved across the screen, subtle changes took place in Sharon’s image. At first they were barely discernible. Small shadows around the eyes; a slight drooping at the corners of the mouth. Slowly the youthful glow and happiness faded to be replaced by disillusion and bitterness.

Sharon watched, aghast as her beauty crumbled before her eyes. Her vanity urged her to look away from the picture as it became increasingly repellent to her, but she was held, fascinated by the panorama of her life passing before her. Age began to creep into the image. Lines around the eyes and mouth. Pallor replaced the bloom of youth. Then a face caked with make-up so it looked like the work of a drunken plasterer;. Had the bitter face smiled, it probably would have fallen away and left nothing but a ravaged ruin. The scene ended with a face like that of a grotesque skull with only wisps of white hair to top the shiny scalp. The eyes were closed and pennies were placed upon them as the picture faded to darkness. The room was

silent.

Tears streamed down Sharon's face as she sat slumped in the chair. She couldn't bear the thought of what the future held for her. Parker stood to one side. There were times he regretted the methods he had to use to convince the human heart. He felt an almost fatherly feeling, if such a thing was possible for Primagnon, a deep affection for Sharon and wished he could have spared her this.

He moved toward her, took up the glass and offered it to her. She dried her eyes and took a sip of the cool, green liquid. With some of her courage returning, she lifted her reddened eyes to the Primagnon leader.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to become one of us. I'll outline your mission later," he replied.

"But what about Kirk?"

"You've been a good wife to him, but now it's time for you to think of yourself. If you would only face the fact, you'd know your love for Kirk is dead. Love is not the Primagnon way. The word isn't even in our vocabulary. We offer something better. In a Primagnon relationship both parties take pleasure from one another without having to give any part of themselves. There is incredible passion and great satisfaction, but never frustration or heartbreak. And when one *Passes On*, there is no grief. We only know the *Life Force* must continue. We believe it 's the purpose of all existence. As for you Sharon, we have the power to grant long life and beauty which will never fade."

"But..." she started to protest, yet her resistance was gone.

"We want you Sharon. We need Kirk, too. There's someone here who I think might be able to convince you better than I." Parker pushed a button and a door slid open to her right. A tall, dark, handsome male entered.

"Carl?" gasped Sharon.

The man smiled. "Hello Sharon."

"But, I don't understand."

"There are many things about us which are different. Most, however are an improvement on the human condition," Parker told her. "Carl will explain it to you. Please call when your decision is made. I do hope you'll elect to join us, my dear."

Parker stepped from the room and as the door closed behind him, the handsome Primagnon moved toward Sharon, then stood looking down at her. His face was in shadow. As with Parker she could see the lights dancing within his eyes. His look sent a warm flow of eager excitement through her body.

"Sharon," he breathed her name passionately as he knelt slightly to draw her up from the chair into his arms.

He barely spoke, only whispering her name over and over while his eyes revealed more than words. They held her own with a tantalizing promise. He arms encircled her loosely while his fingers gently caressed her back, bared by the deep cut of the gown.

His hands were warm, almost hot where they touched her--a sensual feeling that caused her heart to pound with anticipation. Her conscience demanded she resist him, but he easily conquered the voice within and insidiously drove away her doubts and fears.

She remembered the scene in the film when he'd played the part of the black Satan. Now he'd teased and caressed her so she blushed at the memory, yet it

heightened her fierce need for this strange wonderful being who held her.'

The nearness of him; the light but pleasant, intoxicating animal smell about him caused her to press herself into the hardness of the muscular body under his jumpsuit. He breathed her name again and she felt his warm, delicious breath against her face. Her arms went up around his shoulders to hold him so their bodies molded together. She could feel the hardness of his erection pushing against her belly and was dizzily excited as he smothered with his warm, soft mouth.

He loosened his embrace and she could feel his hand move down inside the cleavage of her dress. She wore no bra, so his insistent fingers were free to send tingles of pleasure through her trembling frame. Suddenly she felt the dress give way and fall to the floor, while he unfastened his jumpsuit and let it join the rest on the carpet. She took a deep intake of breath at seeing he wore nothing under the garment.

He supported her spine gently as he laid her on the soft, padded flooring. Sharon was not the least embarrassed as she helped him remove the rest of her garments. He caressed her, kissing her from head to toe. His insistent tongue now searched out even her most private places and his erotic love making was an experience she'd often dreamed about, but had never enjoyed.

He move over her, his body hot to the touch. As he pressed into her, Sharon wanted to scream out in pain and pleasure. He began to move in a tantalizing, teasing way -- thrilling her as he rolled, tossed, pushed and turned.

All the world was lost to her as the flashing lights within his eyes and his smile, encouraged her; urging her ahead. His mouth kissed her, his hands fondled and caressed as he drew himself in and out--all the time breathing her name.

"Sharon, Sharon."

His fragrant breath warmed her and she wanted the time to go on forever. His strokes were were at first slow, and then became more insistent, driving her toward fulfillment. Sharon lost all concept of time as he continued his caresses. Then his pace increased to an erotic crescendo and the climax was beyond imagining. His thundering, surging, trembling body sent her on wave after wave of orgasm.

He continued on, slowly slackening his pace to let her float down slowly to the beginning. He shuddered slightly with one last thrust, and as the tide of passion abated, Sharon felt a magnificent satisfaction pour over her. All the frustrations she'd experienced for so long where gone.

Carl lay over her for a while and she held him--enjoying the weight and heat of his body and the strength of his lean muscular frame pressed close to her. At length he pulled himself free and sat beside her. He pushed away the lock of silken hair from her face and gave her one more hard, searching kiss. She put her arms around him to hold him captive, but he rose to his feet and looking down for a moment, quickly slipped back into his jumpsuit.

"Carl? Please." she pleaded.

"There'll be plenty of time for pleasure once our mission is completed, my darling." and he smiled as he reached down for her hand to pull her to her feet.

Sharon's legs would barely support her. She felt drunk with the last moments of passion. Carl helped her dress as she leaned weakly against him. He treated her like a small child who couldn't dress herself and Sharon found she wanted more of

him and was disappointed he was now being so efficient and businesslike.

When he finished dressing her, he placed her gently in the chair, Carl combed her hair and helped her repair her make-up. He stepped back to survey his handiwork. Satisfied, he gave her a warm smile, moved to the desk and pressed a button.

Parker entered so promptly, Sharon had the embarrassing impression he'd been waiting just outside the door; listening to what was going on inside.

She remained seated and her composure finally returned, With one hand resting lightly on her shoulder, the handsome Primagnon stood behind her, as Parker moved to stand in front of them. Looking first at one and then the other, he could read Sharon's thoughts, and though his question was redundant, he asked.

"Well, Sharon, have you made your decision?"

Sharon looked up and Carl and he smiled down at her--a smile which gave the promise she was waiting for.

"Yes, Mr. Parker. I'd be proud to join your organization."

The Primagnon leader clapped his hands together with pleasure.

"I am delighted, my dear."

Carl assisted Sharon to rise and the Primagnon leader placed his hands on her shoulders, looking fondly into her eyes.

"You will make a valuable addition to our ranks. I welcome you, Shana!" He bent forward and placed a fatherly kiss on her forehead.

It now seemed right for him to use her intimate name.

"Carl, would you be so kind as to take Mrs. Miller to the *Changing Room*?"

Parker was holding her at arms length and seeing a troubled, frightened look cross her face, he reassured her,

"Please don't worry, my dear. the metamorphosis is practically painless. No more than the prick of a hypodermic needle. You'll then pass quickly from this life, through death into rebirth as a Primagnon. You'll never regret it, I promise you."

Sharon felt a moment of apprehension until Carl placed his arm around her and turned her face up to him. Again she saw promises which vowed a lifetime of moments like those they'd just shared. She would have gone through anything just knowing he would transport her on that delicious journey again and again.

"A perfect mating," smiled Parker almost as if he had just pronounced them man and wife. He stepped to his desk and pressed the button which opened the door on the right Carl took Sharon's hand and led her toward it. At the door, Sharon turned to glance over her shoulder to the man he's first known as Amos Parker. She gave him a look of deep gratitude as she passed through the door and it closed silently behind her.

THIRTEEN

Sharon let Carl lead her down a long hallway, where they met Primagnons of both sexes who smiled at them as they moved along. There were many doors on either side of the hall. Above each a red or green light glowed. They paused before one

showing a green light and entered.

It wasn't a large room, perhaps fifteen feet square. It was dimly lit and at one end an observation window revealed Primagnons working in the room beyond. Their faces were lit by the glow from control consoles. Beyond was a room like this one.

In the center of the room, supported by a low pedestal, was a long rectangular glass box which reminded Sharon of Snow White's coffin. Inside it, however, at either end of the glass enclosure were metallic projections resembling electrodes.

Carl nodded to one of the figures beyond the window and the female technician gave Sharon a friendly smile. Looking down at her console, she pushed a button and there was the low hum of an electric motor. In front of them, the glass cover on the pedestal started to rise. It stopped about four feet above the table and Carl led her toward it.

Sharon felt a shiver of fear go through her and she looked at him for reassurance. He squeezed her hand.

"Everything will be all right. We haven't lost a Primagnon yet." he laughed.

She allowed him to help her up onto the table-like pedestal. It was covered with a soft pad, apparently filled with warm liquid. Carl helped her lie down and then touched her face tenderly with his hand to calm her. Sharon took his hand to her mouth and kissed it. Then he folded her hands across her bosom.

"All right?" he asked.

"Very comfortable, thank you," she smiled.

Carl nodded toward the window and the humming began again. This time the glass covering above Sharon descended quickly to enclose her.

Fatigue from the long evening made her welcome the warmth of the water pad beneath her. She found it very relaxing. Looking up through the glass she could see Carl smiling down at her. She nodded slightly to indicate she was ready.

He signaled the control room again. A rushing sound came into the glass box and along with it a pleasant unfamiliar fragrance filled her nostrils. Waves of colored lights that followed the spectrum a rainbow began to dance before her. There was a high singing sound as the lights wavered, and after a few seconds, the singing changed key to an exotic minor harmony as the lights danced closer to her. They began to touch her and there was a mild tingling sensation as they entered her body. Next she sensed a strange buzzing sound in her head. She glanced at Carl and their eyes locked. He smiled down at her and the worry dissipated. She became aware of a new sound. A regular beat, a thudding sound she recognized as her own heart. It grew louder and louder and then a strange numbness began to fill her. It started from her toes and moved upward. As she continued to look at Carl, the numbness moved upward until it reached her chest. Soon after another strange thing began to happen. The light started to fade and Carl's image faded with it.

"Come back!" her mind called to him, but he continued to fade into the blackness bearing down on her. The beating sound thundered in her ears.

Suddenly--the beating stopped!

There was silence--a deep restful silence that went on and on. Sharon floated into the darkness. After what seemed an eternity of time and space, she could feel a glowing warmth flow into the coolness--a warmth radiating from her head and spreading in waves throughout her body .

Slowly, the light started to return and she discovered the source of the warmth was Carl's lips on hers. Warming her, bringing her back into the light.

At length he drew back and looked deep into her eyes, his face so close it shaded her from the ceiling spotlight. He waited for a moment, before asking'

"Well?"

He was backlit so his face was in shadow. She could see his teeth, white as he smiled, and the lights glittering as they danced within his eyes.

Sharon sighed and stretched, "I don't know yet, Carl. May I get down, please?"

"Of course," and he took her hands and swung her to a sitting position. Sharon stepped down carefully. She felt light headed for a moment and unsteady on her feet. Then her eyes opened wide in disbelief. She stood for several moment, testing herself; resisting the impulse to pinch herself out of what seemed to be a dream.

"It's strange," she said looking up at Carl. "I feel wonderful! But there's something else I feel. I can't describe it -- unless it might be I feel *larger than life*. Like I can do anything without effort or pain."

"I know exactly what you mean. It's unreal at first, but you get used to it." He chuckled at her amazed expression and kissed her lightly on the cheek. She looked at him; studying him. It seemed strange but her first impetuous desire for him was gone. It was replaced by a feeling she didn't recognize, but she liked it. Perhaps it was a feeling of belonging. Belonging to herself and yet a part of something else. She knew her need for him would return soon, and when it did she would take and take from him as he would take from her. Never again would she have to give herself to anyone.

"Welcome, Primagnon Shana," Carl whispered.

Primagnon, what an awesome sounding title. It appeared to describe the eons of time between the first man and this new, more-than-human state of being. Now she was one of them and she was glad.

Carl took her hand and led her out of the room. When Sharon reached the door, she turned to wave her thanks at the Primagnon technician who returned the wave with a smile.

Carl led her down another hall and into a room filled with racks hung with clothing. A uniformed attendant stepped forward and studied Sharon.

"Size please," she inquired.

"Oh...Yes, I wear a size seven."

The attendant went to one of the racks and brought back a uniform made of a light, black material with a slight sheen to it. There were silver stripes on the collar and along the sides. Narrow silver and green stripes adorned the cuffs.

"This is a fourth class uniform. The green stripe means you are a new *Pri*, explained the attendant. "The material is lighter than you're accustomed to, but with your new higher body temperature, you'll find it most comfortable. At first you'd have the sensation you're naked because of the special fabric. But it's long wearing. You won't need a coat, even into the coldest weather, nor notice the heat no matter how hot it gets. Shoe size?"

"Six and a half, double A," Sharon replied.

The attendant returned with a pair of mid-calf, silver boots with thin pliable soles.

"Here, I think you'll find these comfortable. You may change in there." she added,

indicating the curtained booths along one side of the room. Sharon entered one and dressed quickly in her new attire. She emerged in a few minutes. The attendant showed her to a full-length mirror and Sharon stood in front of it, admiring her new look. Carl had been right, She looked stunning in the uniform and it was the most comfortable thing she'd ever worn.

She looked over to see Carl smiling at her reflection and she smiled in return.

She moved closer to the glass to study her face. Mr. Parker's promise had been fulfilled. The metamorphosis she'd just undergone had erased every trace of bitterness from her face and eyes. She looked as fresh and lovely as on her wedding day. But suddenly, that life all seemed long ago; no longer of any importance. All the frustrations of her former life were gone. Now a sense of happiness filled her. It danced in her eyes along with the glittering lights, and the mysterious forms could now be seen deep within the dilated openings. Carl came up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders.

"Shall we join the others now?"

She touched his hands and nodded to his reflection. They turned and left the room.

FOURTEEN

Roger Bracken stood to one side of the room and some distance from the rest of the prisoners. He was partially screened from them by a large potted palm, but he could see them clearly. It was the way he wanted it, for he was in no mood to speak to anyone at the moment. He had a terrible headache and his stomach was queasy.

What a fool he'd been to drink so much, he thought ruefully. What's more he needed to piss badly, but unfortunately the restrooms were at the far end of a hall, and to get there, he'd have to run the gauntlet of the Primagnons. The events of the evening had sobered him and now he was left with one hell of a hangover. There was another feeling gnawing at the the pit of his stomach that had nothing to do with his queasiness. It was the distinct canker of fear. Alone with his thoughts, he went over again all the mind-boggling events of the evening. In the past he'd always been resourceful. At the moment his often devious mind was working overtime to come up with a plan to turn the whole affair to his advantage, but so far he'd come up with nothing. He really couldn't make too many plans, not when he didn't know what he was up against

He looked over at the prisoners. His friends. Friends?--well acquaintances. There had never been that many friends in his political life. John Shipley had once been his friend" That was long ago. Now the old man was dead. Bracken wasn't even certain what had killed the senate leader. He knew the old man had a history of heart trouble, so it would be correct to assume the evening had been too much for him.

He also watched the wives and lady friends in the group. Earlier they'd all looked so elegant, sleek and sophisticated. Some had even looked beautiful, But look at them now. Bedraggled masses of humanity. their elegant coiffures were unkempt; with the stray ends falling over their faces, which were pale and drawn. It had been a

long hard night and perhaps he should feel sorry they had been forced to live through such a time of terror. Perhaps soon they were to be subjected something even more horrible.

The make-up of the patrician ladies was smeared and faded. Many had gone into hysterics when the first shock wave hit. Consequently, their eye-shadow and mascara had run down to blend with the puffy skin under their eyes, giving them a haunted, cadaverous look. Even the glamorous ex-movie star resembled a slattern.

Bracken suddenly felt very alone. His wife had left him a couple of years ago for another man. He pulled himself up with the idea he didn't really care, since he didn't need her any longer. In reality, she'd been another necessity in his climb to success. He actually despised women. He felt they were only on earth to be used. Most of the time they only got in his way, gave bad advice and talked too much. He was lonely some of the time, but he was his own man and preferred it that way.

Bracken caught sight of Kirk Miller. The younger man looked distraught. The physicist constantly glanced around the room as he paced back and forth. He resembled a caged tiger who only wanted to escape and take his mate with him.

Jim Paulson, the newsman, stood very still with his arms folded across his chest. He was glaring at the Primagnons at the door through which that redhead he'd come with had disappeared.

A whole cacophony of emotions marched through Bracken's mind and body as he watched the group standing only a few feet away. All the time however, there was the awful gnawing at the pit of his stomach.

He glanced through the palm fronds to see two Primagnons approaching his hiding place. He shrank farther back into the shelter of the plant. The two were dressed in the now familiar uniform. One carried a weapon: the other had several stripes on his sleeve, Bracken assumed he was of higher rank. Yet they didn't appear to be conscious of any rank distinction as they talked together like good friends.

The one with the weapon appeared to be concerned. They were close enough to Bracken so he could hear clearly what they were saying.

"What's going to happen to all these people?" the concerned one whispered to his friend.

"By our orders, those who don't compute will have to be eliminated," replied his superior.

"Oh? That's too bad," replied the other with genuine regret.

"You're right, but they all know too much. The mission is our primary objective and if word gets out before we're ready..."

"Shhh!" cautioned the other as he looked in the direction of the larger body of prisoners. Most of them were staring at the two as if they could read their intentions. The men stopped talking and moved on.

"Eliminated?!"

Bracken had overheard only part of the conversation. His mind translated to word to *Killed* and his conscience was jarred by guilt which flooded his brain with memories of his past deeds. If someone were to be put to death, surely he was a prime prospect for execution. His *public* record was relatively pure, but these Primagnons apparently had ways to search behind his glib facade. They must know

about the past deeds of Senator Roger Bracken. His mind recoiled from imagined agonies.

Unexpectedly, the Usher entered the room, and the sound of his entry jerked Bracken's head around with such a jolt he felt a sharp pain. His eyes watched the approaching Usher and his associates. Sally Merriwhether was with them, along with a few others who had been taken earlier. Why were they being brought back? were they the ones who had computed or those being returned for elimination? The Usher spoke and Bracken's taut nerves jumped at the sound. Vaguely Bracken watched Sally return to the arms of a grateful Jim Paulson. Under other circumstances the reunion would have been touching, but now, all the prisoners were concerned for themselves.

The Usher called out. "Our next ten interviews will be with..." as each name was called, Bracken's eyes grew wider with fear.

"...and the tenth name is Roger Bracken, the Senator from New York."

At the mention of his name, Bracken flinched and moved farther back into the cover of the potted palm. He was still in plain sight, but it was the best he could do. The effort caused him to break wind loudly and many eyes turned in his direction.

"Ah, Senator," smiled the Primagnon Usher. "Mr. Parker is most anxious to talk to you. Please come with us." the Usher and a couple of guards approached the cringing man behind the palm.

"Please....Please don't kill me!" he squeaked.

The Usher looked offended at the suggestion and tried to reassure the senator.

"We only want to talk to you, Senator," he said gently.

The group was within arms length of the distraught Senator and the Usher extended a hand to help Bracken out of the tangle of fronds. Bracken stood his ground. The guards even resorted to the *cattle Prods*, but the Senator only danced a bit and wouldn't move from the shelter of the palm.

Finally they took hold of him firmly by the arms and pulled him free of the greenery. His eyes rolled wildly as he continued to plead for his life. The guards were finally forced to drag him bodily toward the far end of the room,

Jim Paulson, who was watching the Senator's performance with great interest, remarked to no one in particular.

"Remember when he ran on a platform of *Brave New Leadership*? There goes our *brave* leader."

Those who were aware of the struggle watched the Primagnons push and pull. even at times half carry the distraught Senator bodily to the far end of the ballroom and through the familiar door.

Inside the office, Senator Bracken cowered back from the Primagnon leader and the guards had to haul him forward to face their leader.

Bracken knelt and groveled at the Primagnons feet; sobbing for breath, crying like a small child who had been severely punished for being caught in the cookie jar. A small puddle began to form on the floor, as in his terror, the powerful Senator released the last of his dignity, and knelt in his own urine.

A human being would have been disgusted by the humiliating sight, but Primagnon Parker only smiled down at the distraught politician. The fragile complexities of the human nervous system never ceased to amaze him. He was one

of the few of his kind who had been born a Primagnon. He never lived through the pain or frustration that could torment the human soul. All he knew about suffering was what he'd learned by observation. And although he could understand and even sympathize, it was only through research, not from personal experience.

While studying the trembling man before him, Parker considered what the computers had told him about this Senator Roger Bracken. The man had real possibilities in spite of his present condition. He had several serious flaws to his character, but these would be washed away during *The Change*.

At last the Senator found his voice, and in a pitiful, whining sound, began to plead for his life.

"I don't want to die, Please don't kill me. I didn't mean to. I don't want to die".

He sounded rather like a disagreeable recording with a crack in it. He blubbered and slobbered down his already disreputable stiff, white shirt front and the Primagnon leader felt a pang of impatience with the man's cringing performance. He sighed and touched Bracken's shoulder. Bracken shank back as he'd just felt the cold steel of the headsman's ax as the executioner checked his mark.

"My dear Senator Bracken, will you please try to pull yourself together? We don't wish to harm you. You're much too valuable and potent a leader for us to even think of eliminating you," Parker told him in a soothing tone of voice.

One of the others in the room brought the leader a tall glass of the green liquid. Parker took it and offered it to the still kneeling Senator.

"Here, drink this. It will make you feel better."

Parker's kindly manner somewhat softened Bracken's terror and he looked at the glass in Parker's hand.

"What is it?" the Senator asked with a slight hiccough.

"Just call it a mild tranquilizer," replied the Primagnon leader.

Bracken wiped his runny nose on the back of his tux sleeve and took the glass.

"Than...thank you," he stammered.

He studied the green liquid for a moment before taking a tentative sip. He found it good and took another. Like those before him, Bracken found the soothing potion did a great deal to put his exposed nerve ending back in their proper place.

Parker spoke to the two attendants. "Please help the Senator. See his clothes are cleaned and you can tidy up."

Bracken heard the order given firmly but not harshly, and the two went to work. They helped Bracken rise, placed him in a chair and removed his trousers. While they were occupied, Parker pressed a button and another attendant dressed in coveralls entered with a device which looked something like a shop-vac. While the others removed the Senator's trousers and shirt and wiped him down, the Janitor cleaned up the Senator's mess. When he finished, there wasn't a trace of filth left and the area was perfectly dry. Another of the Primagnons marvelous gadgets. The cleaning crew finished up by temporarily dressing the Senator in a garment similar the janitor's coveralls. One of the attendants then took away the Senator's soiled clothes for cleaning.

FIFTEEN

Senator Bracken relaxed and sipped the life giving fluid supplied by the formidable Mr. Parker. He drank eagerly. It gave him strength and seemed to return some of the courage he'd lost. While the Primagnon attendants completed their work, Bracken looked directly at the Primagnon leader. Parker stood patiently in front of the desk, waiting until all was put right again.

When they had finished, Bracken found he was feeling much like his old self, and could almost speak to this Parker person as an equal.

Parker spoke first.

"I see you have recovered Senator. And yet I sense a slight embarrassment lingers. Don't disturb yourself. It 's of no importance. This evening's little gala was designed to put you all through the wringer and most reactions were anticipated." The Primagnon paused for a moment, studying the Senator. "Before we get down to business, I'd like to offer my condolences on the death of y our leader."

"Thank you. John Shipley's death will certainly leave a great void," replied Bracken with some lack of conviction.

"I realize you aren't quite certain how he died. Let me assure it was from natural causes and through no fault of ours."

"Oh...of course...it goes without saying," Bracken agreed fawningly.

The Primagnon stepped forward and stood over Bracken. "I would like ot hear from your own lips why you disliked that great human being so much?"

Bracken was taken aback by the unexpected question.

"What?! What do you mean? We all loved him."

Bracken grew uncomfortable and took another swig of the pacifying drink.

"So you've said on many occasions, Senator. But deep down, you... I hesitate to say it...*Hated* him. You can tell me. It makes no difference now."

"But...I...we all revered..."stammered Bracken.

"Come now Senator, you know you can bare your soul to me?"

The Primagnon almost whispered the words. So soothingly , the sound caressed Bracken's ears. Something gave his mind a nudge. His conscience wanted to speak out and tell what he'd kept hidden for years. The ambitious frustrations had been pushing and shoving, trying to reach the goal he wanted so desperately.

The Primagnon already knew what was stored in his brain, but for reasons of his own, he wanted the Senator to say it, to purge his mind. Parker could see into Bracken's thoughts and observed the struggle the human was having with his conscience, and the unwillingness to expose himself. Parker waited patiently. The potion was having its effect and soon all would come pouring out.

Bracken took another sip of the green liquid as he tried to avoid the prying look of the Primagnon before him. At last something told he could confide in this being who waited so patiently .

"Shipley? Hate Him?! You're damned right I hated him! I'm glad the

sanctimonious old bastard's dead! I'll admit he was great help early in my career, but for years he stood in the way of progress. My Progress!" His voice rose as he warmed to the canker which had plagued him.

"He refused to retire. Refused to die, while the rest of us stood in his shadow and waited. *Shipley! Shipley! Shipley!* That's all we heard...*An untiring workhorse for the good of his country!* I've been hearing all my life. I'm glad he's dead, but they're all ready for him. He'll probably live on in legend forever. They've already prepared his official portrait for the Senate Hall Of fame, where it'll hang with Henry clay, Robert Taft and all the others. He'll *leave a permanent mark on our nation's history and bring distinction to the Senate!* -- Bullshit!" Bracken snorted, His envy of the late Senate leader was obvious to the Primagnon.

During the tirade Bracken hadn't looked at the Primagnon. Now he did so, He, like so many victims of paranoia, quickly analyzed his own verbal catharsis and sheepishly clamped his mouth shut.

The Primagnon apparently took no notice of the Senator's discomfiture, but went on with his interview.

"My dear Senator. we already know the many facets of your unique personality. Some of them are, to say the least, unworthy of a man of your stature.

Bracken squirmed slightly under the Primagnon Leader's critical gaze.

"For instance. We know about the secret bank account you have in Switzerland. Full and fat with misappropriated funds and kickbacks. On a scale of misdeeds, that's probably the most innocent. The world thinks of you as a leader and humanitarian. I wonder what your constituents would say about your black market dealings and the clandestine arrangement you've made with the Desalinization Commission. Humans cannot live without water, yet you and your associates have been charging a high tariff for the water. A fee that fills you pockets."

Bracken was red-faced with embarrassment and cringed back into the comfortable chair. What sort of trick was this? How could this being know so much about what he'd kept secret? Now he began to have fears for his safety. What were they planning for him?

Reading this thought, Parker told him. "Fear not, Bracken, we have great plans for you. Now your leader is dead, you are next in succession. I don't agree with your methods, but we can use men like you. You, Senator, are an achiever. A ruthless one. You don't care who you step on in order to win. It's your whole *raison d'être*. You do want to be on the winning side, don't you?"

The pressure of the Primagnon's will on his muddled brain was overpowering. Bracken was willing to agree to anything in order to relieve the push and pull of a force pressing like fingers to dislodge a blackhead or the pus from a boil.

Finally he broke and opened his mind to the Primagnon,

"Yes! Yes!" he agreed, trying to sink farther down into the soft chair.

Parker released his hold on Bracken's mind the he was able to relax again. The rise and fall of tension under the Primagnon's interrogation was more subtle, yet as effective as being stretched on the rack. And now Bracken poured out his all to the man.

"I came into office with all the best intentions," He began haltingly. "But all around me I saw my peers lining their pockets with the money of their constituents; ignoring

the very principles for which we were elected. My illusions were shattered early in the game. I even tried to start an investigation into the corruption, but got my hands slapped for it.

“Since I couldn’t fight ‘em, I decided to join in. Oh--I did a lot of good. Worked hard for the common man, but for every card I dealt him, I dealt myself two. I became a genius at the slight of hand, Covered my bets with tons of paperwork until I emerged a Winner--looking clean-laundered, starched and pure. The great unwashed are such fools!”

When he’d finished, Parker said. “Good, now it’s all out in the open we can forget about it. Let’s get down to the real reason for this meeting.

Bracken was reassured by the Primagnons manner. Perhaps all this would all work out to his favor, he rationalized.

“Yes, I think you’ll appreciate what we have in store for you, Senator,” Replied Parker to Bracken’s thoughts.

This little demonstration of ESP jarred the Senator and his jaw fell open for a moment. He clamped it shut as if afraid he might say something to incriminate himself further. Now he was almost afraid to think. Parker ignored his uneasiness, gave a token nod of agreement, and went on.

“All of that will be changed in the New Order of things. Unfortunately, Primagnons are still a minority. It’ll take years to convert every suitable human to the Primagnon force. That’s why we needed Shipley’s help. Regrettably, his stubborn spirit refused our invitation and the effort killed him. Now we turn to you”

Bracken’s ego received an encouraging boost by the Primagnon’s words. He smiled at Parker, who reached over his desk and pressed a button on the console. Again the giant screen glowed. This time with the face of the Senator from New York.

“We need the help of the world leaders in order to expedite the *Change Over*,” said Parker. Many countries blindly follow the policies of the United States. That’s why we started our campaign here. We need to move more of our kind into areas of dominance.”

Senator Bracken was barely listening, fascinated by his own image seated in the Senate Chamber. It was obvious he was now Majority Leader. The next picture showed him shaking hands above his head in victory. There was giant political rally and behind him, a huge picture of himself with the words, *Bracken for President!* printed in bold letters.

The picture changed, and there he was, standing with the Chief Justice on the Capital steps. A large crowd of people surrounded him as he was sworn in as President of the United States.

“You...M-mean? Bracken stammered.

“Yes. Before the year is out, you’ll be President.”

Bracken smiled his toothiest smile, He positively beamed. This man, or Primagnon was offering him the one thing he wanted most in the world. The Presidency of the United States.

“And when you are President, You will also be a Primagnon. the *first* Primagnon President of the United States!” Parker laughed to himself at the idea.

Bracken sobered somewhat, saying, “Primagnon? But how?”

Parker smiled at Bracken a little apprehensively. He wasn’t sure he could endure

another spell of the Senator's hysterics. Even a Primagnon's patience has its limits.

"It's quite simple Senator. Just a few moments in the *Changing Room* and you'll be one of us."

Bracken's face screwed up as if he might cry. The Primagnon could see the man's human brain was again looking for escape.

"But you said -- *Death*," Bracken almost choked on the last word.

"Don't worry about it, *Mr. President*," soothed Parker the Primagnon. It's only a fleeting, temporary demise. Not more than the heart stoppage you humans experience when you sneeze. And when it's over you'll be a new Primagnon. You'll be pleased with what that means. No more pain, no more anxiety and a very long and healthy life."

Once again the Primagnon had stilled the Senator's fears. And suddenly Bracken knew he'd risk even death to achieve the pinnacle promised him.

"You'll find the Change more than worth it to become a Primagnon. I understand it's really a beautiful experience. Since I was born a Primagnon, I've never been through it. But those who have, assure me it is most uplifting.

The Senator sat quietly for a few moments. His thoughts torn between the opposing poles of fear and ambition. Again the Primagnon broke the silence.

"I think this should be enough for our first meeting, Senator. If you will go with these brethren, they will conduct you to the *changing room*."

The two Primagnons, who had waited quietly behind the Senator during the conference, now stepped forward. Bracken looked at them a little apprehensively, then took a last slug from the glass and stood up.

"I might mention Senator, you will also find your character changed when you return. Your painful conscience will be gone. You need never concern yourself with it again."

"Thank You," Bracken replied a little tremulously.

"You are welcome," responded the Primagnon leader.

Parker pressed a button and the door opened. The Two Primagnons took the Senator firmly by the elbows and escorted him through it.

Parker sighed as he leaned back against the desk. It had all seemed so easy, but he certainly didn't envy his men and machines the ordeal of *changing* the illustrious Senator into a Primagnon.

SIXTEEN

Kirk Miller sat along at one of the small tables in the brightly lit ballroom. His face cradled in his hands, he looked up with a sudden start when a noise from the far end of the room grabbed his attention. A door opened and one of the guests came slowly toward him. It was a woman escorted by one of the lithe uniformed figures.

it wasn't Sharon and Kirk fell again into the enervating hollowness that gripped him each time the returning prisoners didn't include Sharon. Each time the door opened, . The sound would jar at his nervous system and each small trauma added to his anxiety. What awful torments could they be subjecting Sharon to?

For the first time his reddened eyes and haggard face exposed his true age. The month of frustration with the Project, and then this evening had taken a heavy toll. His normally fit body drooped in the chair.

What was happening? Where was Sharon? Most important, what had they done to her? His anxiety on top of the grief over the death of his great friend, John Shipley, pulled him deeper into a state of despair, a condition alien to his nature. He felt like he'd been kicked in the chest. It weakened his whole being. His extraordinary mind was unable to grasp the meaning of the night's events. Even a computer needed input to understand and make determinations. Kirk was so weighted down by his own anguish, he was hardly aware of the suffering around him.

Again the door opened and Kirk's attention was jerked toward it. Still it was not Sharon. this time it was the Usher approaching with his lackeys.

Kirk looked around at his companions and for the first time noticed they'd grown fewer in number. Probably only a hundred left out of the more than three hundred who'd entered this room at intermission. Few had returned and the thought did little to comfort him. Those who were left rustled and stirred as the Usher approached. some were whimpering; too exhausted to cry out. Kirk could stand the suspense no longer. He pulled himself to his feet and hurried to meet the Usher.

The Primagnons who accompanied the Usher watched the young scientist's approach, concerned he might cause trouble again. Kirk stopped a few steps away and glared at them.

"What have you done with my wife?" he demanded.

The Usher turned to look at him and smiled.

"Oh...Yes...Dr. Miller. Yes, the leader will see you now," He turned to the small squad of Primagnon guards behind him. "Will two of you brethren conduct the good doctor to our leader?"

Two of the guards took up positions on either side of Kirk and waited. The young scientist ignored them and with long strides started toward the door at the far end of the room. They fell into step at his sides as his anger built to fury. The escort must have sense this because one moved ahead of him, opened the door to the hallway and led the way to proper door. The young Primagnon paused at the entrance and attempted a smile to pacify the face so full of wrath.

The door slid open and the guards slipped forward in front of Kirk. Before he could announce the young physicist, Kirk was striding directly to the figure seated behind the desk. His eyes full of hate, he blurted out.

"Where is my wife?" What have you done to Sharon?!"

The Primagnon studied the young man and gave Kirk a smile while indicating the chair behind the scientist.

"Please sit down Dr. Miller--ah--Kirk." he could still see questions blazing in the young man's eyes. "Your wife is quite safe for the moment. I you will please have a seat, we can discuss the situation more calmly."

Kirk remained leaning over the desk and the Primagnon nodded to the young

man's escort. The two Primagnon guards came forward and took hold of Kirk's shoulders. He shook them off and grudgingly took the chair.

"I must say this evening's little merriment has wrought a change in *you*, Doctor. Such violent thoughts! I can feel them reverberating throughout the room." The Primagnon got up and approached Kirk's chair.

Kirk made a slight movement to rise and the Primagnon guards behind him held him down in his chair as if they were afraid the young man might harm their Leader. Parker could see the animosity in Kirk's eyes. He stepped to his console, flicked a lever, and turned to observe the young physicist's reactions to the metallic arms of the chair. Kirk felt a strange tingling sensation move through him. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling, but he suddenly realized he was paralyzed and couldn't move.

The leader walked back to Kirk's chair and bent down to lean upon the arms of it. The chair's force apparently had no effect on Parker. His hands rested on the clenched fists of the younger man and the Primagnon's touch made Kirk flinch inwardly. Parker put his face close so Kirk could feel the Primagnon's warm breath against his face and it fanned his anger. He tried to lift his hands to strike out at the creature so close to him, but was frozen and couldn't move.

Parker leaned closer and looked directly into Kirk's eyes. The already dilated openings of Parker's pupils opened even wider, allowing Kirk to see deep into them. There were lights within and they grew brighter and brighter. He could feel Parker boring into his mind and into his very soul.

Parker held Kirk's gaze for a long time as he probed the young man's psyche. There were many interesting things to be seen. Colored fires burned in the fertile brain. The young physicist's intellect blazed bright -- a steady white heat. To one side a greenish flame glowed alternately pale, then with the intensity of a blast furnace. This was the young man's hate. It changed and wavered as if the spirit wasn't used to this new emotion.

The Primagnon's searching probe went on farther. At last he apparently found what he had been searching for..

"Yesss," he whispered. "There it is, just as I thought it might be."

In the dark corner of Kirk's brain smoldered a low flame of iridescent blue. The Primagnon's mind pushed against the azure light. Kirk flinched slightly as if he'd experienced some sort of physical or mental pain.

The young physicist was perplexed by the Primagnon's strange examination. This Amos Parker's intense scrutiny disturbed his inner being. What was the sharp pain he'd felt within his head? He wasn't sure what had happened during the examination, but felt somehow the sanctity, the private inner recesses of his soul had been violated.

The blue flame grew brighter, and for an instant the two minds locked in a battle of give and take. Kirk could look back into the mind of the Primagnon, and could read the thoughts of this strange, more-than-human-being.

For several seconds he glimpsed something deep within the Primagnon's mind. He wasn't sure what he'd seen, but sensed it was something ominous.

SEVENTEEN

Parker withdrew and closed his mind to the young scientist. He'd seen something beyond the glow, a steady red-orange light. It burned as warmly as a star. The light disturbed him as much as if he'd seen a cancerous growth inside the young brain. The light was *Love*.

The Primagnon couldn't understand the emotion. It was not a part of his being. Primagnons could offer understanding and even sympathy, but they could not love. They had a substitute, but it didn't weaken them like it could weaken and even destroy the human spirit. Yet in this young man, Love glowed with a steady flame. Love for those close to him and love for his fellow human beings.

Parker sighed as he reached back over his desk and released the power that held Kirk immobile. If a Primagnon could be discouraged, the leader was discouraged. He admired this young physicist and despite what he'd just seen, he felt Kirk could still be a valuable addition to their organization. The Blue Light! -- it was also there in Kirk's mind. It made the Leader wonder if somewhere in Kirk Miller's dim past there might have been a Primagnon ancestor.

Impossible! Nowhere in Primagnon history had they fraternized with human beings. Yet, there within Kirk's mind burned the blue flame only born Primagnon's possess. He wondered at this similarity, but was more disturbed by the distressing, bright-burning red-orange beacon he'd seen. He had great plans for the young man and Love might stand in the way. Hate he could deal with --but Love?!

The Primagnon's thoughts were interrupted by movement as Kirk made a halfhearted attempt to rise. Finally he stopped struggling against the two guards and surrendered to their superior strength.

Parker returned to his desk and sat down. From this vantage point he could control the young man if necessary. He looked steadily at the physicist and then asked the guards to leave. They hesitated for a moment until Parker assured them he would be safe.

After the guards had left the room, the Primagnon began to speak to Kirk. As with the others, he outlined his plans for the world.

"The suggestion that global warming was the cause of the world's troubles was only the narrow view of your scientists, and reduction of burning fossil fuels not only came too late, but could never have solved the problem. We've been aware of this impending situation for centuries. We anticipated the change in the earth's axis and alignment of the planets, as well as the current escalation of sun spot activity, the real cause of this irreversible drought. We researched every possibility for survival, including the one you're working on. Our alternative is more sophisticated, but similar, yet even *our* plan cannot save every human and animal on earth. Nothing or no one can accomplish that miracle. Some must be sacrificed. It's a regrettable fact, but unavoidable."

Kirk sat straight in the chair and glared at Parker. For as the Primagnon outlined his strategy, the young physicist was struck dumb by the future under Primagnon rule. The Leader spoke calmly of *The Great Change*, with detached logic, yet Kirk couldn't

relate to his plot to murder nearly a billion human beings over the face of the globe. He had no frame of reference for such an abominable act, except the atrocities committed by Hitler's Nazis during the Second World War.

The Primagnon pressed his point: The population had to be reduced in order to sustain life on earth. But, genocide on such a scale! No -- genocide on *any* scale was too horrendous for Kirk to comprehend.

The Primagnon continued to speak, yet, at the same time he was able to listen in on Kirk's thoughts.

"Don't you see Kirk? *Our way* is the only *Humane way*. If the world follows your proposition, many will die anyway -- die wretchedly and painfully from starvation and thirst. Our method is simple and painless. The *Passing Over* of unnecessary beings is a beautiful dreamlike state which ends in a void. It's somewhat like *The Change*, except there is no return."

With venom, Kirk demanded. "Are you a God then?!"

"Not exactly, but perhaps as close to a God as this earth will ever see. A demigod, if you wish" he added with enthusiasm. "Kirk, You can be one of us."

"In one short year, with your help and the help of others," Parker went on. "We can save the world from extinction>"

He stood tall, his nostrils flared slightly. He gazed past the seated physicist, as if his eyes were fixed on some distant star. The lights within his eyes glittered with feeling.

"A cruel god, then!" snorted Kirk.

"Oh no, Kirk -- benevolent. However, even gods are imperfect. We cannot save everyone, Only those who deserve to live. Only the fittest and those willing to work for the *Cause*. We can make the *Passing* of the rest painless,--perhaps even sublime."

Kirk interrupted Parker's zealous argument. "At first, I didn't recognize the pictures in your mind. Now I do, and your plan for the world is monstrous!"

"But Kirk, it's the only way. Can't you see that?!" The Primagnon was almost pleading for understanding.

"You want me to be one of you, to be a part of your inner circle," The physicist glared at the Primagnon and then added with loathing. "If you saw anything inside my brain, you know I can never condone what you propose."

"I'd hoped you'd see how imperative it is for us to succeed. Now, however, I'm beginning to wonder if you are too much like the old gentleman who sat there a short time ago."

Once more Parker had to try and convince him. He began his final argument. He was inspired by his own *Gospel of Truth*.

"The world has come full circle from the days of savages to a new age when once again the weak will not survive."

Primagnon Parker could see Kirk's anger cool to intense curiosity. The Leader stood between Kirk and the desk complex as he continued.

"This new era brings with it an old law: the first law of nature. Only those who are strong willed can continue to exist. Only the achievers who love no one but themselves and their own ambitions will carry on the work of living."

"You see Kirk, the only difference between the days when men huddled around the first fire and the present, is technology. Technology is the one achievement that can

save civilization. Yes, Technology. And I must compliment you on your outstanding contribution. With the Senator's help you've created one solution to this irreversible crisis."

The younger man squirmed in his chair.

"You are very generous," Kirk demurred sarcastically.

The Primagnon pretended not to notice the young man's sneer, though he kept a mental check on the physicist's emotional thermometer.

"Your method is very close to our own. A bit crude and unwieldy, yet it remains a brilliant achievement. Your only mistake is believing it can save the entire population.

Parker read the discouraging thoughts in the young man's mind.

"Take heart, Kirk," he said in an attempt to console the physicist. "Your *Rain Machine* works. It always has. Unfortunately for us, your discovery offered the world hope before we were ready to give it. You dangled the carrot we needed to win our own ascendancy to power. We had to slow down your progress until we could put ours into effect."

The Primagnon leader paused to survey the young man in the chair. *What would this next bit of news bring?* Trust and friendship meant so much to these humans. The young man's animosity had cooled somewhat. The Primagnon decided to release the next bombshell.

"There is someone on your own staff who is of our---uh--persuasion. He obligingly arranged a bit of sabotage."

Kirk was now staring at the Primagnon in disbelief, his attention riveted to the Leader's arresting eyes.

Parker was curious how the scientist's computer brain would react to the next news as he said aloud.

"I'm afraid my next confession may be more traumatic than anything else you've heard this evening. You see, our agent at the Bay Project is -- Doctor Donovan!"

Kirk's expression didn't change nor his eyes flicker as the color drained from his face.

The Primagnon could see the pain written behind the young man's eyes.

"You mustn't feel the less for Donovan," he continued. "He loves you. Yes you are like son to him. No, he's not a Primagnon yet. When he told me he sensed you possessed valuable hidden powers, we both felt you might see through his disguise as you saw through my poor performance earlier this evening. Therefore, at least for now, Donovan remains a human being."

At last the young man found his voice,

"Donovan...? Oh, my god. Donovan, how could he?!"

"Because he sees the rightness of our course. He's a scientist, but he has a practical side, too. A Primagnon's gift for practicality. You must see Donovan is right. You've got to understand, Kirk."

The Primagnon could see the physicist was confused and deeply hurt by Donovan's treachery.

"Your civilization has become placid and weak," the Primagnon went on.

"Primagnons can sympathize with the weak of heart and body, but we cannot permit them to stand in the way of the continuance of the *Life Force*. We will either convert you or use you to gain our goals. The *Great Change* must be made within a year. Our

biggest stumbling block is a shortage of leaders. And that's why we need you. The *Great Change* will be made regardless, but the transition will come easier for everyone if those who can be an asset to us will join our crusade.

The Primagnon studied the man who sat slumped in the chair before him. No...he had no alternative. The final test for Kirk Miller, though completely repugnant to him, was necessary. It had been planned carefully as the last means to gain this brilliant human being's trust. Yet he felt the emotional cruelty to put the final examination into effect would be a difficult trial for both of them.

Finally Parker spoke. "Kirk, I believe I said earlier--this evening has been a test of all of you human beings. To say we Primagnons are selective may sound snobbish, but it's unavoidable. Some humans simply cannot be *Changed*. Our equipment is sophisticated, but not perfect. It can plumb the human soul only to a certain depth. Those areas of human behavior completely alien to our society can only be seen by our machines. Unfortunately, it is often difficult to determine whether these traits can be erased during the metamorphosis."

Kirk was still steeped in the misery of his own depression and fatigue, Nevertheless, he listened to each word the Primagnon uttered. The unreality and horror the Primagnon had outlined by statement and innuendo, pushed him further into his malady. Dejection topped by the new knowledge of Donovan's infidelity. Now Kirk was only half listening, lulled by the Primagnon's voice. Exhaustion had caught up with him and conscious and subconscious were fighting a battle with reality. Whole chunks of his life flashed through his mind in a vague delirium. The values he'd placed on his life's work were being tossed aside. Sharon? Where was Sharon? She'd always been around to bolster him, to encourage him when he needed her. A sudden thought sobered him, *had he really depended on her that much?*

Kirk stirred in his chair as the Primagnon continued.

"Your brotherly love and high moral standards could stand in the way of your initiation as a Primagnon, and that would be tragic." Parker continued.

He nodded sadly. "Yes I know at the moment our philosophy is distasteful to you. But you have no choice. The selection is made by us. We must now examine the depth of your regard for humanity against your love for Shana."

At Parker's use of Sharon's byname, Kirk came part way out of his stupor.

"You asked if your wife was safe. I'm afraid she has also been a stubborn subject." Once more Parker moved to the console and pressed the button to activate the giant view screen. Sharon's face flashed before them. An extreme close-up dominated the room. Her face was etched in pain and tears stained her cheeks. Her head was bent forward slightly so her dark hair tumbled to cover part of her face. There was a dark smudge under each eye and her lipstick was smeared. The picture widened to show the left side of her dress was torn away to expose one breast. As the picture included more of his wife, the distraught husband saw she was strapped into a contraption reminiscent of the electric chair. Figures moved around her. From a brazier of coals one of the shadows picked up a branding iron and checked it. It was red hot. Kirk could feel fury begin to rise at the sight of other instruments of torture. The Primagnon could sense the rage building in the young scientist and decided to immobilize him with the chair's paralyzing power. No need for violence yet.

Kirk grew terrified for Sharon's safety and was doubly frustrated to discover the Leader had reactivated the chair's power over him.

Parker ran a slim hand over his eyes. He had to admit the sight of the young woman on the screen was enough to dishearten even the strongest spirit. She was moaning softly and calling out.

"Help! Someone, Please help me. Please!!"

Kirk pulled and struggled against the power of the chair.

"Sharon, Sharon!" he cried out as if in pain. He could speak, but was otherwise helpless,

"Parker, I--I'll kill you for this!

"Your wife has not been seriously harmed -- yet. It's up to you to save her."

Kirk was glaring at the Primagnon. Parker had his total attention.

"This is the final test to see how tenaciously you cling to your worthless emotions."

"Parker, what do you want?!" screamed the scientist.

Parker could see Kirk's anguish was unbearable. It was apparent he'd do anything to save the one person most dear to him.

"I only want you to commit murder," replied the Primagnon in a steady, low voice. "I want you to take the life of one of your fellow human beings in exchange for the life of your beloved Shana."

Kirk was struck by the insupportable demand as if he'd been slapped.

"Yes," continued Parker.

You have a choice. Will your love for your wife outweigh your love for humanity? That is the issue here."

"B-But, I c-can't."

"I think you can. I think you will," the Primagnon assured him as he pressed a button on his desk.

Moments later two guards entered the room carrying a strange bundle which they proceeded to place on a nearby chair. Kirk could see it was Mrs. Jackson. The black lady was trussed up alike a chicken. Her mouth was gagged and Kirk could read the terror in her eyes.

"You don't mean?--You c-can't expect...?"

"But I *do* expect *you*, to do your duty if you expect me to free your wife unharmed. The choice is yours.'

Parker turned away from the distraught young scientist and motioned to one of the Primagnons who stood behind Mrs. Jackson's chair. The guard came forward and handed him a gun--a conventional forty-five caliber police revolver. Parker removed the force that held Kirk captive and stepped toward him. Behind the Leader, the face of Sharon loomed huge. Her hoarse whisper filled the room.

"Please help me, Please help me!"

Kirk buried his head in his hands. The pressure of his emotions were unbearable and he felt as if his mind was cracking under unexpected forces.

This time as he spoke. The Primagnon's voice held an edge of cruelty.

"Here, no time for that, Kirk. Time now for action!"

Kirk looked up to see Parker holding the forty-five before his face. He shank back.

"Get up!" demanded the Leader.

Kirk hesitated.

"Get Up!" and this time the demand was an order.

Kirk could see the pitiful face of Sharon in back of Parker on the screen and struggled to rise. One of the guards moved forward to assist him.

"Take this," the leader commanded as he pushed to gun at Kirk.

Still Kirk faltered. The horrible thing he was being asked to do, couldn't penetrate the dread that gripped him. His rage was nor replaced by stifling panic. He had been given a choice, but both were insupportable. Either way, he must kill a human being, an act contrary to his who moral code. He love his wife, but also loved mankind.

Now on the screen he saw something which made his eyes widen in terror. One of the figures near Sharon withdrew the branding iron from the coals and it was white hot. He held it close to the woman's face and the terrified image screamed, a pitiful heart-shattering sound. the Primagnon bent and took Kirk's limp hand and pressed the pistol into it.

The screaming stopped and was replaced by gasping sobs. Kirk looked down the object in his hand. The weapon seemed to weigh him down.

"Hold on to it. guard it, Kirk. it's the means to your wife's salvation.

The Primagnon took the dazed scientist by the arm and led him to the motionless form of Mrs. Jackson. Kirk's attention was still held by the threatened figure on the screen,

"Kirk, this is Mrs. Althea Jackson." The young man stood as if transfixed. "Kirk?" Parker's insistent voice broke through and kirk looked down at the miserable creature in the chair. He was drawn by the terror in her eyes. Eyes that rolled in the dark face, looking first at one and then the other. Finally they riveted on the weapon in Kirk's hand.

"Come Kirk, you are wasting valuable time. If you want your wife back alive and well, you must eliminate this useless old woman."

Tears welled up in the young scientists eyes as he looked into the pitiable face of the old black woman. Her eyes were pleading with him. She appeared to represent all the millions fated to be slaughtered at the hands of the monster standing beside him. It occurred to him he could turn the gun on the Primagnon and strike a blow for salvation.

Parker read his thoughts saying.

"No, Kirk, that would avail you nothing."

The figure on the screen screamed again and Kirk's attention was jerked toward it. He tried to step toward the image and choked out the onename,

"Sharon!"

One of the figures was fastening a garrote around her neck.

"NowKirk...Now!"Parker demanded and Sharon's eyes beyond him were echoing his pleas.

EIGHTEEN

Kirk turned back to Mrs. Jackson and fell to his knees before her. He lay his head

on her lap and moaned.

“Please, Mrs. Jackson. Please,” as if she could release him from his dilemma.

After some moments he felt her move slightly. When he looked up into her face, it was no longer fused with terror. Her eyes were calm and although tightly bound, she nodded to him as best she could. Parker helped Kirk to rise and the scientist barely noticed his touch.

“Look Kirk, she’s an old woman and can’t live much longer. You must see her death has little meaning, whereas Sharon’s life has great value. Kill her!” He commanded.

Although Kirk was shaken by the ominous order, he slowly began to raise the revolver. Slowly--slowly...until it was pointed at the old woman’s head. He no longer seemed to have control over his actions. Mrs. Jackson looked serene, as if waiting for some profound event.

Kirk’s hand was trembling violently until he heard a noise from the screen and saw the garrote slowly tightening around Sharon’s throat. A strangled voice came from the screen.

“Kirk, help me! Please help me!”

“Kill her!” demanded the Primagnon in a vicious whisper.”

Had Kirk looked at the Primagnon, he would have seen the Leader’s forehead was covered with perspiration.

Kirk turned away from Mrs. Jackson’s calm old eyes and closed his own. He had to clench his teeth to keep them from chattering.

“That’s it.” Parker told him. “Now, just a little to the right. “Good, that’s perfect. Now *Squeeze the trigger!*”

There was a deafening report as the high caliber pistol fired. Kirk wasn’t even aware he’d pulled the trigger. The sound of the shot froze him and he kept his eyes tightly closed. From far away he heard the voice of the Primagnon.

“Oh, Kirk, now see what you’ve done.”

Unnoticed, the gun had fallen to the floor, Drawn by the Primagnon’s voice and the horror of the crime, Kirk turned slowly and looked down at the inert form in the chair.

“See what you’ve done?” the Primagnon repeated.

Then Parker did something which at first seemed abhorrent to the younger man. The Primagnon Parker started to pull at the face of the old lady. First he plucked at the nose. Then at the ear. He pulled and tore at the face. It appeared a stupid, senseless thing to do. Then Kirk began to see the reason behind the Leader’s strange actions and they were more terrible than the murder itself.

First the white woolly hair was torn away. Dark, silky tresses spilled forth. White skin began to appear under the black, as the Primagnon slowly, tantalizingly stripped away the face of the old black lady and revealed the death-white face of--Sharon!

Kirk froze where he stood. The blood drained from his face as the hideous reality sank into his heart--the gruesome truth. He’d just murdered the one person he cared for most in the world. He’d killed his own wife.

When he realized how Parker had tricked him, the coldness left Kirk to be replaced by the white heat of terrible rage. Before the others in the room could stop him, Kirk fell screaming onto the kneeling Primagnon. He grabbed and shook the Leader by

the throat. As the fury which had been building throughout the long evening overtook him, all the power concentrated in his hands as they tightened around the Leader's windpipe.

"You monster! You miserable monster!" Kirk screamed as he tightened his grip. Through tears of fury and pain, Kirk could see the Primagnon's eyes bulge as if they might pop from his head.

Parker struggled to free himself. What had only been seconds seemed to drag on for long minutes. Suddenly Kirk went limp and fell forward on top of the Leader as one of the guards fired a tranquilizing jolt into him. He was knocked completely unconscious.

The guards helped their gasping Leader extricate himself from the tangle of Kirk's arms and legs. He hand went to his throat and for a moment he struggled to regain his breath.

"Are you all right, sir?" one of them asked.

"Yes, I think so." gasped the Leader. "I knew our young friend was a strong, healthy specimen, but never dreamed he possessed such power." Parker looked down at the unconscious physicist. *Good, Kirk, Good!* he thought to himself. *With anger, comes courage.* To the guards he said.

"You may take him back to the others now.

The guards lifted the physicist gently onto a gurney and wheeled him from the room. The primagnon stood alone massaging his bruised throat as he tried to regain his composure. From behind him on the screen, Sharon's image was still speaking but with the repetition of a cracked record.

"Kirk, please help me!" (click) "Kirk, Please help me! (click)

The Leader pressed a button and the screen went black. He turned toward the inert, bound figure in the chair.

"An excellent performance my dear. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, thank you, sir. But he seems to have caused you some damage." Sharon said with concern.

"It will pass in a moment. We Primagnons have extraordinary recuperative powers. Here, let me help you Shana," The Primagnon moved forward to help her untie her bonds.

She rubbed her wrists for a moment before speaking.

"Sir, when will you know the outcome?"

"Of Kirk's test results? They should be completed in a few moments." He wore a strained expression. "I'm afraid however -- Well, let's wait and see."

He went behind the desk and sat down, hesitating a moment before pressing a button marked *Computer Room*. A voice sprang from the speaker next to him.

"Yes, sir," it asked.

"The final read-out on Dr. Kirkland Miller, please."

"Same as the first analysis, sir."

"The *L* factor still negative?" the Primagnon asked with a sigh.

"I'm afraid so, sir?"

"No chance for error?"

"Sorry, sir,"

"Then we've wasted our time."

"It's too bad, sir, he was an ideal candidate."

The Primagnon paused for a moment. He was visibly shaken by the news. Then he took a deep breath and spoke.

"Yes, too bad. You'll arrange it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Please call Donovan at the Bay Project," Parker added "Ask him for a *token gesture*. He'll understand."

"Yes sir,"

"Thank you, that will be all for now."

Parker pushed the button again, got up and moved to stand beside Sharon.

"I'm sorry, My dear. It's as I predicted." He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "I'm afraid Kirk is lost to us."

They stood together for a few moments without speaking. Almost as if observing a moment of silent prayer for a departed friend.

Far away, behind the deep blackness Kirk began to hear faint noises. Familiar sounds were dragging him back -- tugging at his consciousness. As the sounds grew more distinct he began to recognize them as voices calling his name. It was like moving down a dark hall with a light showing faintly at the end. The hall was shrouded in fog so the light was diffused. Sounds reverberated inside his brain. He moved in slow motion toward the light and at last the fog began to lift. The light became hundreds of points of brilliance that were pierced by dark moving shadows. At last the shadows took shape and he heard one calling his name.

"Dr. Miller, can you hear me?"

"I think he's coming out of it," another voice said.

Although the figures were lit from behind by the giant chandelier, Kirk recognized one as Jim Paulson, the other was the Dr. Craig who'd treated Senator Shipley. Behind them stood the tall dark form of a black man. Kirk's first impression was the haggard look about them. Their faces looked drawn and tired.

The fragments fell together and suddenly it all came back to him. The pain of memory filled him as he fought to control his emotions.

Someone else joined the group hovering around him. It was Mrs. Jackson. Seeing her there -- alive after the agonizing scene in Parker's office caused Kirk to groan in pain.

The little black lady held a glass in her hand. She leaned forward and lifted his head slightly to assist him.

"Here, drink this, young man. It'll make you feel better."

She held the glass to his mouth and he drank the cool liquid. He remained numbed by deep grief, first the tragic death of his mentor, the unnerving interrogation by Parker, and finally the murder of his wife.

Though he was badly shaken, he knew he had to do something. But what? Suddenly a spark of memory struck him--a vague recollection from an event earlier in the evening.

"Yes, that's it!" he whispered to himself.

Mrs. Jackson had laid him back on the gurney, but during the time she held him, He could see out of the corner of his eye their guards were talking among

themselves, apparently oblivious to the little drama nearby.

"Jim," Kirk whispered. "Ask the guards if you can wheel me into the alcove where they put the Senator earlier.

Paulson was puzzled by the request, but did as Kirk asked. The guards shrugged and nodded.

"The rest of you come with us," Kirk added softly.

As Paulson and Henry Jackson wheeled Kirk past the Primagnon guards, he faked unconsciousness and they apparently assumed he was being taken to the quieter vestibule to recover.

Once inside the alcove Kirk threw off the sheet that covered him and sat on the side of the gurney. He gestured for the others come closer. They sensed the secrecy of what he was about to say and gathered as close around him as possible. The group consisted of Mrs. Jackson, her son Henry, Sally merrywether, Paulson and Dr. Craig.

He looked around at his fellow conspirators and started to explain his plan.

"I assume you've all been interviewed by these so-called Primagnons?" They all nodded or murmured in agreement.

"Then I gather that, to put it mildly, you also disagreed with their plan in one way or another?" Again they all agreed.

"Then we're outcasts, apparently incompatible with their *grand design*. I've no idea what they plan to do with us now, But I do know we've got to do something to stop them from destroying us all. So far they've been using a powerful secret weapon on us -- Fear." They've kept us so stifled by our own terror we've forgotten our wits, our power to reason. But, the Senator said it -- We've got to do something to stop their destruction of mankind.

"While coming to my senses just now I remembered something I saw while we were all stunned by the Senator's death. Something in this room that didn't register until just now.

Kirk stopped to look at them and realized something *had* happened to him during this evening. He could feel a new power surging through him. And although he was still a prisoner of the Primagnons, he sensed a new determination within himself. He quickly accepted this new strength and went on.

"We've assumed the only entrance or exit to these rooms are the big doors at either end. If I'm not mistaken, there's also a way out of this very alcove."

His comrades looked around mystified. "I know, It looks solid enough, but if you'll remember after the Senator's death, we left the alcove to the Primagnons. I happened to look back for a moment and thought I saw a dark opening with a light beyond. Unfortunately, I wasn't functioning clearly at the time and let it pass."

He glanced toward the alcove entrance, but the archway was partially covered over with potted palms and the guards were out of sight. He rose and went to the back wall of the alcove and touched the wall tentatively while his comrades moved to stand near him. He gave the wall another push and it gave slightly. Kirk turned to smile at the group.

You won't believe this, but I have a feeling this entire ballroom is nothing but a shell--a flimsy veneer like some movie set. We've been imprisoned in the cardboard box of our own fear."

Several of the small group put their hands out to feel the walls, a look of disbelief on their faces. The young physicist was right, The walls looked sturdy and solid yet were flimsy to the touch.

“By God, Miller!” Jim Paulson offered. “I think you’re right! Looks like a good swift kick would send it toppling like a house of cards.”

“Mrs. Jackson,” Kirk asked the little black lady. “Would you please check on the Primagnons?”

“Of course,” she replied and moved quietly to a position behind the potted palms where she was hidden, but had a good view of the ballroom.

“Not a Primagnon in sight,” she whispered over her shoulder.

Kirk checked along the elegant molding that adorned the wall of the alcove.

“Ah, here we are,” he smiled at the others. “Jim, Please give me a hand.”

Kirk took hold of the wainscote molding and lifted it slightly. The flimsy section of panel began to move and was so light, help wasn’t necessary. The panel was easily lifted out and they leaned it against the wall beside the opening. Beyond the makeshift door was a dark opening lit by a single bulb hanging from the ceiling.

“Here’s the plan I have in mind,” whispered Kirk. “I think it would be best of the ladies waited for us here. We’ll scout the way and if we find a way out, We’ll send someone for help and come back for the others.

“Jim, I want to go with you.” Sally whispered, taking Paulson by the arm.

“I think Dr. Miller is right Sal,” replied the reporter reassuringly. “It could be more dangerous out there than it is in here.”

“We’d just be in the way, dear,” agreed Mrs. Jackson who had rejoined the group.

Kirk showed the women how to replace the panel. Paulson gave Sally a lingering kiss while Henry Jackson said farewell to his mother. Then they joined Dr. Craig and Miller and the four men stepped through the opening. They helped the ladies return the panel to it’s proper place and inspected their new surroundings.

The area beyond the panel was dimly lit, but they could see some distance in either direction. Kirk had told the story right. The outside of the ballroom resembled the back side of a stage or movie set. Just so many flats with braces to hold them in place. A giant *cardboard box*. Opposite the flimsy ballroom, however, was a wall of concrete forming a hallway about six feet wide that stretched away in both directions.

“Unless I’m mistaken,” Kirk told the men, “the street entrance should be off in that direction.”

“Looks about right to me,” agreed Paulson.

They set off, moving briskly, yet quietly. At the corner of the concrete structure was another light. When they reached it, Jackson let out a surprised gasp.

“Eggs! Ninety-nine cents a dozen? That must have been a while back.”

The other looked at the small faded sign Jackson had pointed out at the corner of the building. It was clear to them the ballroom was built inside a huge deserted supermarket. One closed down years before.

They paused for only a moment when Kirk reminded them of their mission.

“No time for nostalgia, gentlemen. We’d better get going. The theater entrance has to be over this way.”

As they moved off, they suddenly heard a sound from behind them and realized someone was approaching along the passage way from the direction they’d just

come.

NINETEEN

“Come on!” Paulson whispered urgently.

They hurried quickly and quietly down what must have been the front part of the old store, only to discover the plate glass doors and windows had been replaced by heavy steel plates.

They paused for a moment and could still hear the click-click of boots on the worn linoleum

“Shit and double shit!” said Dr. Craig under his breath.

“Only one thing to do,” whispered Kirk. “We’ve got to get back into the ballroom>”

“Go back? But why?” muttered Jackson in astonishment.

“Look, over there,” murmured Kirk. “That looks like another panel opening.”

Without waiting for them, Kirk moved quickly to a panel he was certain led to the ballroom and opened it a crack. The others watched him as if he’d gone crazy. Yet, the footsteps were getting louder and there seemed no other way. The sound goaded them into action. The men silently rushed to help the physicist remove the panel. They ducked inside and replaced it just before the footsteps reached the corner of the deserted store.

“Whew! Close one!” breathed Henry Jackson as he wiped his perspiring brow.

They heard the footsteps pass along the other side of the partition. In front of them was a group of prisoners. They registered no surprise at seeing the four men emerge through the wall. In fact the few who faced them were so stupefied by their own troubles, they took little notice of the small escape force.

Henry Jackson, who was tallest could just see over the heads of the listless prisoners. Only half of the crowd was still standing. Many had given up and were lying on the floor, either passed out or trying to escape in sleep.

The Primagnons must have been away on other duties. There were no guards and no apparent need for them. The crowd was completely immobilized by their fear and exhaustion.

“What now, Kirk?” questioned the newsman. The others still weren’t sure what he planned to do, yet looked to the young scientist for leadership. Kirk himself was playing the game as he went along. He thought for a moment, then turned to the others as they huddled around him for his next bit of strategy. He looked at them for a moment and gave them the most encouraging smile he could muster.

“I’m going to risk a peek,” he said.

Dr. Craig helped him with the panel while Paulson and Jackson sheltered them from view as best they could.

“All clear,” Kirk whispered.

Silently they opened the panel just enough to squeeze through, and reentered the passageway one at a time. They waited for a moment until their eyes readjusted to

the dim light. Kirk motioned for them to follow, and they moved on toward what they hoped would be the theater lobby. They reached a corner and Kirk whispered.

"With any luck, this is the common wall between the market and the theater."

There was nowhere to turn. Their way was barred by a steel door that looked like a new addition. They hesitated, wondering what they'd find beyond the door. It might be the way to freedom. or they could walk right into the arms of their enemy.

At length Kirk stepped to the door and seized the knob. He turned it slowly. It moved easily without making a sound. He put his face close to the crack, opened it slightly and peered through. The other three waited with bated breath.

"I can't see a thing," he said softly.

He opened the door wider to discover there was a heavy curtain stretched across the opposite side to the entrance. He reached through until he found an opening, carefully spread the velvet drape apart a crack.

Through the narrow opening he could see colored lights and recognized them as the neon illumination surrounding the candy counter in the lobby.

"Bullseye!", Kirk whispered, smiling back over his shoulder. "We made it!"

Kirk left his friends waiting nervously in the passageway as he stepped cautiously through the curtain. He stood listening in the dim light of the lobby, then pulled aside the curtain to beckon the others to join him. Paulson came first, the Doctor was followed by a hesitant Henry Jackson. When they had all gathered in the entry, they looked round. The tall Egyptian statues were lit by the single glowing source of the candy counter's neon bulbs and gave the awesome feeling they were standing in an ancient temple or tomb.

"Let's try the front doors," Kirk offered quietly.

He motioned to them and they started forward. As they made their way across the lobby, suddenly Jackson jumped back, as if startled by something.

"Look out!" he gasped. They all turned in the direction he was looking and saw four shadowy figures in the gloom. Suddenly they laughed.

"Look at me," chuckled Jackson. "Scared of my own reflection."

The four shadows were their own images caught in the mirrors that lined part of the lobby. They heaved a sigh of relief and continued on to the doors.

"Shit!" came Paulson's explosive whisper.

They were standing before the entrance door. Unfortunately, between them and the glass doors were heavy iron gates. The gold painted gates looked very imposing. When Paulson tried to pull them open, he discovered they were chained and padlocked.

They could only stare at the gates with looks of discouragement.

"Well, it may be an exercise in futility, but we'd better check the other doors, too." Kirk told them.

Moving quietly to the second entrance, they found it too, was secured and padlocked.

"Miller! Wait!" Look there!" Jackson whispered urgently.

There was someone or something casting a moving shadow on the door from the outside. they could barely make out the figure. The courtyard was dark, lit only by the starry sky and dim glow from the city. For a moment the four stood back so they couldn't be seen. It could be another of the Primagnon guards.

No, it was only a transient. Probably an old wino who had seen the spectacle earlier and had come across the street to pan-handle the guests out of a fresh bottle. His face was distorted as he pressed it against the glass door. A trickle of drool oozed from his mouth and rolled down the pane. He looked as if he was having trouble focusing on the dark inside until he saw the lights from the counter. The four men moved between the light and door in hopes of getting his attention. He flinched slightly at this new development, but held close against the door. Kirk leaned through the bars and tried to make the man hear him.

"Hey mister--mister!" he called in as loud a whisper as he dared. "You've got to help us. We're trapped in here, hundreds of us. You've got to call the police!"

"Please, you've got to help us," the Doctor pushed forward echoing Kirk's pleas.

The wino staggered back from the hands reaching out to him. He could see their faces, but couldn't hear them. The building was sound proof! He stumbled back into the courtyard, shrugged his shoulders and tottered away.

"NO, No. Don't go! Don't go!" they called after him in desperation. He disappeared from sight and once again the courtyard was empty,

The four men were utterly disheartened. Only Kirk kept an alert eye out as he looked around for another exit. He could see none in the lobby, but there in the dark curtained corners they might find a way. Kirk shook each out of his companions out of despair and led a reconnoiter of the lobby.

"Let's look behind the curtains," he told his companions. "They could be hiding an exit."

They searched along the walls and found nothing. As they approached the candy counter, the lights in the lobby started to come on."

"What the...! exclaimed the doctor.

They halted for a moment. Kirk grabbed Paulson's arm and shoved him quickly behind the counter.

"Get down!" he ordered softly.

The four men dropped to the floor and lay there. The lobby was brightly lit now, and they could hear voices coming their way.

"We've got to find them!" said a voice close by. They sensed the forms moving past the counter and tried to shrink into the floor.

After a few moments they heard the Primagnons moving up the stairs to the mezzanine. Kirk lifted himself up on his arms and cautiously peered around the stacks of candy bars in the glass case. The lobby was empty again. He didn't hesitate, but began to look around for another escape route.

Then he saw it! Near them behind the counter. It was almost invisible, yet he was sure there was a doorway where the exotic poster advertising THE Movie was displayed behind its glass cover. He crawled over to the brightly colored poster while the others lay still, watching his progress.

Kirk reached the poster and felt his way up along the frame where he discovered a small lever. He pressed it and pulled. The poster began to move and the men behind him gasped their approval. Kirk pulled the hidden door open and crawled through the opening. He signalled the others to follow.

The doctor being the last one through, closed the door behind them. It made a sharp snap as it closed and the others looked at him disapprovingly. He grinned

sheepishly. They could see they were in a small storage room with a door opening to the left. Paulson stepped warily to it and peeked through.

"Hey, would you look at this?!" he exclaimed.

The others joined him and stared in wonder at the scene beyond. Towering to the right side of the doorway and curving away into infinity was an amazing luminous wall. It glowed like blue-white alabaster.

"The movie screen," murmured Kirk.

"I've never seen one like that before," whispered Dr. Craig.

They moved toward it. On closer inspection they could see it was designed like a honeycomb -- each cell was approximately an inch in width. Kirk, who was always looking for the scientific answer, looked into one of the cells.

"Amazing!" he murmured.

The octagonal shafts were about three feet deep and within them he could see grids positioned every few inches. The grids were of gossamer fineness, yet he could still observe the silvery end of the shaft, a tiny glowing point. Beyond would be the auditorium.

"Kirk, look at this!" the doctor called softly.

Kirk turned to look behind him. Across from the immense curving screen was an even more impressive sight. Row upon row of tubes stretched fifty feet up into the rafters of the building. They resembled the muzzles of hundreds of rifles pointing at them.

"Incredible," gasped Kirk. "So that's how they did it -- Lasers!"

Kirk pointed out the glass coils around the laser barrels and the complex system of cables that fed them. The lasers, lit by the glow from the screen and work lights hung at intervals in the ceiling, shimmered a metallic silver.

"An impressive development," Kirk said finally, "But we've better keep moving."

As the four men walked briskly along the passage between the screen and the laser barrels, Henry Jackson suddenly took an envelope from his tuxedo pocket. He looked at it for a moment, then tore it open and removed its contents; a single handwritten sheet bearing the letterhead of the Secretary of Agriculture.

"Hell of a time to catch up on your correspondence, Henry," quipped Paulson.

"This piece of paper is the reason I'm here tonight. I was supposed to deliver it to Senator Roger Bracken. The way things are going it doesn't look like he'll be needing the information."

"What's it say," asked Paulson with a newsman's nose for news.

Jackson read the message then related its contents.

"The Secretary is asking the Senator, as Chairman of the Desalinization Commission to cast the deciding vote to raise the rates. He mentions it's the only way they can maintain their own remunerations. God, can you believe it? And right under my nose. The dear and august Secretary, Senator and their cronies were getting a kick-back from the Desalinization Fund.--a non-profit organization yet. Our honest leaders, feeding off the misery of others. We talk about a life of misery under the Primagnons. This makes one wonder if that might be better than this existence we face under our own corrupt politicians."

As Jackson finished this tirade, they came to an area which could only be the original stage of the massive auditorium. They looked up and could see a network of

catwaks, flies and lighting grids suspended there--remnants of the days when the theater presented a mixed bill of silent movies and vaudeville.

"Keep a sharp eye out and study the walls, there may be a way out."

The men looked around them, studying every inch of the floor, walls and ceiling.

"Kirk, look! up there! -- That point of light," Henry Jackson called out in a loud whisper.

He was pointing beyond the light grid just behind the top of the laser racks. Up beyond them was an isolated point of light.

"I don't see it," said Dr. Craig.

"I don't think it's a light," said Jackson. "Looks more like a star. See how it glitters?"

Once they found where Jackson was pointing, they studied the spot. "Henry, I think you're right," smiled Kirk. "You wait here. I'll take a closer look."

The young scientist crawled under the racks of laser tubes and a few feet beyond them found a wall. There was a metal ladder fastened to it. The ladder went up into the gloom in the direction of tiny dark blue patch.

"There's a ladder here and it looks like sky up there," Kirk called softly to the three on the other side of the lasers. "I'm going to check it out."

"Go ahead and good luck!" Dr. Craig called softly.

Kirk started up. he was thankful he'd kept himself in good shape, it would be a long climb. He moved slowly, taking deep breaths as he went along. Even though he was probably in better physical condition than the others, the long evening had consumed much of his energy and he wanted to conserve what he had left.

He looked back over his shoulder and could just make out the three men through the maze of lasers. Glancing up, he could see the opening more clearly. There was no doubt now. It was a patch of night sky! Stars twinkled invitingly to him and he quickened his pace.

Then he heard it--a loud *ka-bam, kabam!* The unmistakable sound of giant circuit breakers being activated. Kirk looked down and could see the others had heard it, too. He saw them clearly, as they looked around as if trying to find the source of the sound. There came a soft humming noise that froze Kirk's blood in his veins.

"Get Down! Get Down!" he yelled at them, not even trying to be quiet.

Too Late! The lasers began to glow and the three men looked toward them fascinated--unable to move. Kirk wanted to scream at them, but before he could get a sound out, The laser beams cut across the space between the racks and screen. Vivid lights danced in many colors. Kirk recognized the ballroom scene in reverse. As the beams cut across, they passed through the bodies of the three men. It was too late!

They screamed in unison as the searing beams passed through their bodies and they fell dead to the stage. Kirk was stunned, nauseated and clung tight to the ladder rung as his knees went weak under him. He looked back and down as the circuit breakers ka-bammed again and the laser beams faded. Jim Paulson was lying on his back, legs and arms thrown out. His eyes were wide open and his mouth still formed a scream. Kirk couldn't see the faces of the other two who had collapsed face down on the hardwood floor.

He hung there for a long time trying to regain his senses, Blaming himself for not

warning his comrades earlier about the possible danger of the banks of lasers.

“Damn them! Damn them to hell!” he screamed mentally at the Primagnons.

In moments two of the enemy came running, apparently drawn by the death cries of the unfortunate men. Kirk could clearly see and hear what was happening. He felt as if he was going to throw up and gripped the ladder rungs as a cold weakness shook him.

“Boy!” said one of the new arrivals, obviously the one in charge. “For a Primagnon, you really are dumb. I told you to check the laser area before testing.”

The other was visibly upset by the tragedy his negligence had caused and replied, “Aw gee, I’m really sorry,” and nodded his head woefully.

“Well, they’re only humans. Still, it’s a waste. They might have been useful to the Cause. Come on, let’s clean up this mess.”

The two of them started to drag the bodies of Kirk’s three companions out of his field of vision. He gathered his wits at last. Someone might discover his absence and spread the alarm. He continued up the ladder.

Although he was sickened by the loss of his comrades Kirk knew he was the only one left who could possibly save the hundreds left behind. This goaded him on and without a backward glance he climbed upward. When he reached the roof, he climbed through the small opening, stood up and looked round. There in the distance he could see the faint glow from the Capitol area. The clean air blown in earlier from the sea left the moonless night sky clear and brilliant. Each star stood out and appeared to dance in the blackness. Not a trace of the Appalachian smoke contaminated the atmosphere.

He studied the edge of the roofline of the great building. In the dim light he spied the top of a fire escape ladder. Removing his shoes he tip-toed toward it, afraid his footpads might give him away to those below.

Once Kirk reached the ladder, he tied the shoelaces together, draped the shoes around his neck and started down. He moved with less caution now. Any moment they might discover he was gone and sound the alarm. Throwing caution to the wind, he almost repelled himself down. On the last flight of the escape ladder, Kirk rode the cantilevered stairway the rest of the way and jumped lightly to the ground.

He was in a dark alley and hesitated for a moment to put on his shoes. He was grateful the dress shoes were kid-leather soft, perfect for running. He looked back toward the street in front of the theater. *No, too logical*, he thought and ran instead toward the street behind the movie house. The alley was strewn with debris. The stench did nothing to help his nausea. A cat squalled in the dark and a flurry of tiny feet passed in front of him to jump with a bang onto a garbage can. Kirk ran on.

As he came to the street he turned toward the Capitol. This wide avenue was much like the one in front of the theater. He ran past block after block of boarded up stores, shops, hotels and restaurants. From time to time he heard sounds of habitation from transient dwellers. No help from them. They were afraid of the law. Afraid of being thrown out of their cosy free housing. There was an occasional high pitched laugh and more than once he heard angry voices. From time to time a shadow would move along one side of the avenue or cross onto the street as if to way-lay the well dressed runner.

Don’t stop me! prayed the young scientist as he ran on. The fresh air had revived

him. As he got his second wind, his feet began to fly over the debris strewn pavement.

TWENTY

Suddenly Kirk had the uneasy feeling something or someone was following him. He wasn't just afraid for himself, but for the hundreds left in the theater and the millions across the world who might be destroyed if he was recaptured. He had to reach the military. The President. Someone!

As he ran on, he felt the hair rise on the back of his neck. He was certain that on this lonely street, something was stalking him. The night was moonless and the street unlit except for the dim glow from the occupied quarter of the city beyond.

Then he turned and saw it. In the darkness behind him was a moving shadow. A large shadow of some sort of vehicle. It was about two blocks back and moving toward him.

Kirk stopped to listen. There was an almost imperceptible hum from that direction. He moved quickly to the sidewalk to his left and into a store front entrance. In the dark he bumped into something soft and yielding. A voice growled sleepily at him.

"Hey, watch it buddy."

It was a transient asleep on the concrete, and the sound startled Kirk so he moved back into the street. He paused for a moment. Now he could hear new sounds--sounds from back in the direction of the theater. The noise of boots on pavement.

He looked around to see he was in the middle of a long block of deserted stores. There was no cross street to duck down and escape. Kirk moved back into the shadows of a clothing store next to him. He could see little in the gloom and when his eyes became accustomed to the dim light, he noticed though the show-case windows were broken, there were heavy bars on them and the door was bolted. He was trapped. He huddled behind some boxes, back in the darkness, hoping they wouldn't see him.

Kirk held his breath so he could hear better. The sound of the boots was getting louder and the humming sound slowly increased in volume. For what seemed forever, the marching feet echoed through the street and reverberated in and out of the empty buildings. Louder and louder the humming grew until it seemed to be nearly on top of him.

"Platoon, halt!" came a command from the street. Kirk jumped, startled by the nearby sound. A Spotlight beam scanned past his hiding place, and he tried to push himself farther back into the shadows.

"Left face!" there was a shuffling sound of boots as the men obeyed the order.

"Parade Rest," there was the sound of metal as rifle or weapon butts hit the pavement.

The humming sound increased. It was coming from a large black, electric powered van. He could just make out a silver streak down the side. It stopped just short of where the soldiers were standing. Its beacon scanned the buildings.

For a moment there was silence, then a new sound. A thin whining noise came from the van. Kirk looked toward it from behind the boxes. A moment later a strange periscope apparatus started to rise from the top of the vehicle. As it rose higher and higher, he could make out a large round object on the end of it.

Without warning, a blinding searing light cut the dark. It was as if someone had turned on the sun at midnight. The entire area was lit as bright as day. It took the physicist a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the glare.

Through a crack between the boxes, Kirk could now see them. Standing in front of the large van was a group of Primagnon guards. He estimated about thirty in number. They were standing very correctly at parade rest. The entire platoon was at dress-right-dress and their unique laser rifles were pressed forward at a sharp angle. There was a very cold, business-like quality about them.

Kirk was horrified by the implication of the soldiers and van. He had nowhere to go. There was no escape.

“Doctor Kirkland Miller!” an amplified voice filled the street and echoed down the alleys and side streets dissecting them.

Kirk froze behind the boxes. He held his breath in the hope somehow he might be overlooked.

“Dr. Miller, we know where you are! There is no way out, so you may as well show yourself!” the voice boomed forth.

Kirk still didn’t make a move.

“Sergeant, if you will!” said the voice.

The sergeant turned, lifted his weapon and aimed it directly toward the boxes behind which Kirk was hiding. There was a buzzing noise, similar to what a wasp would make and Kirk smelled smoke. Suddenly he realized the boxes were on fire. He held for a few moments longer until the heat and smoke became unbearable; then stood up and stepped out in full view.

“Very sensible, Doctor,” the loudspeaker blared. “You were only prolonging the inevitable.”

Another voice broke through the stillness -- the familiar voice of Parker. The power of his voice was awesome as it spilled from the speaker and echoed along the street.

“Kirk, I regret you’ve chosen not to join us. You could have been one of our great leaders. Your refusal to cooperate leaves us no choice but to *Pass-You-On*. I know you won’t believe this, but I mourn your *Passing*. Your stubborn grasp of a false ideal is your greatest folly. I’m afraid this is goodbye, Kirk.”

With the Primagnon Leader’s farewell the speaker grew silent. The soldiers moved restlessly and looked toward their Sergeant.

“Attention!” he ordered. The platoon snapped sharply to attention.

“First squad, One step forward--march!”

As a man, the file of men closest to Kirk stepped forward and resumed their stance of attention.;

“Ready -- Aim...”

Kirk couldn’t believe this. He was about to die. But for what reason? It all seemed unreal--all far away. Like a nightmare.

“FIRE!”

A chorus of buzzing wasps filled the air and Kirk felt a slight tingling sensation in

the area of his heart. Suddenly he grew very sleepy. He yawned and looked down at the brightly lit sidewalk. It looked soft and inviting, so he knelt down and then stretched out for a moment before curling up and going to sleep.

“Front line--Attention!” bellowed the sergeant. “About face -- to the third file--March!”

The first squad moved crisply around behind the other two lines.

“Second squad, one pace --forward --March!” commanded the platoon sergeant.

The second squad repeated the movements of the first, yet they were carrying heavier weapons.

“Ready. Aim -- Fire!”

There was a blinding searing flash as beams shot out to strike the inert body on the sidewalk. The body was enveloped in a glow of purple. With a small puff of smoke it vanished.

The whining sound of the heavy weapons was replaced by a high pitched scream that seemed to come from everywhere. The scream went on and on. The misty smoke rising from the spot where Kirk's body had lain, diffused the scene. At length the blinding light was extinguished and all was blackness again.. The scream continued until it turned to choking sobs.

In the dark, shadows began to take form. Seated figures were visible when soft lights began to illuminate the darkened room.

Not a room -- but a theater--the auditorium of the Orpheum. The figures barely moved, barely breathed. They appeared to be in a state of shock. Unable to react or revive themselves from the awesome experience they had just witnessed.

In the center of the theater sat a handsome couple. The lady was sobbing against the shoulder of the youthful man at her side. Beside the couple sat a little white-haired black lady. She still stared wide-eyed at the screen.

Finally the young man looked away from the darkened walls of the auditorium as the cut ains were drawn to cover them. He appeared dazed from his trial and looked down at his hands where they gripped the arms of the chair. The arm rests had once been warm and inviting. Now they were icy cold. He flinched, removed his clenched fist from the arms and laid them in his lap. Finally he became aware of the sobbing at this shoulder.

“Sharon, Sharon,” he said comfortingly. He put his arms around her and held her tight as she sobbed against him.

Finally he took handkerchief from his jacket pocket. He gently tilted her head back to dry her eyes. They were closed and the convulsive sobbing ceased. She opened her eyes, but there were no tears. In the dim light the dilated pupils had an odd glow.

“Kirk, Kirk,” she whispered. “You're here. You're still alive!”

She looked away and averted her eyes. She'd been through a lot and he was sure this strange evening had affected them all in some mysterious way. He shrugged if off and held her so she rested once again against his shoulder.

Seated next to Sharon, Kirk could see Mrs. Jackson drying her eyes. She kept looking around and was disturbed by something.

Kirk also looked around the theater. Strange. Where was everyone? The auditorium seemed about half full. Had the presentation been too much for some

and they'd left at intermission? There seemed to be some activity to his right where men in white uniforms were fussing over one of the guests.

Suddenly, Kirk looked across at the the little black lady -- the seat next to her was empty.

"Mrs. Jackson, where's Henry?" asked the physicist, with some concern.

The old lady turned vague eyes toward him.

"I -- I don't know. Oh, he's probably gone off to find Senator Bracken. That's why we're here...to see Senator Bracken." She spoke haltingly -- almost incoherently.

"Henry said...I should take a cab and he'd be home later."

Sharon stirred in the seat beside him.

"Come on Darling, I'd better take you home."

She appeared to be back to normal, but still didn't look at him.

"Mrs. Jackson, you'd better share a cab with us," then Kirk added to Sharon. "I'll tell the Shipleys we'll phone them tomorrow."

She nodded and the three of them struggled up from their seats and started up the aisle. Kirk's legs felt like rubber under him. Perhaps sitting too long, he reasoned. He thought back over the evening. THE Movie had certainly lived up to its promise. It still seemed so real. His own horrendous experiences. The realism of the special effects. The extraordinary three dimensional production and their involvement in it. Thought it seemed so long ago he remembered the old movie buff, Amos Parker, mentioning *the fourth dimension*. Had they all been somehow dragged through a sort of time warp as well? His analytical mind couldn't fathom how it had all been accomplished.

They reached the lobby and he looked at his watch.

"Oh Lord!" he said under his breath. It was already a past two. The test?! Anxious to know how the test would go, he took the two ladies by the arm to escort them toward the doors. They seemed to hold him back and he resigned himself to being late.

As they moved to the doors he glanced at the crowd around him. Could a mere motion picture have done this? Everyone seemed to be staring vacantly ahead and moving like cattle toward the exit--cattle being herded in slow motion.

Through the crowd Kirk saw something that made him stop. The white-coated men he'd seen in the auditorium were rolling a gurney toward the door. Walking with them were two women. The younger, auburn-haired one was supporting the older lady. Both looked distraught and haggard.

Kirk groaned as he left Sharon and Mrs. Jackson to shove his way toward the women.

"Mrs. Shipley, Mrs. Shipley," he called. On reaching them he looked down at the sheet covered form on the gurney, An attendant pulled the sheet back and Kirk looked into at the death mask face of his dear old friend. Tears welled up in his eyes. The aged, yet handsome face seemed to be sleeping. He looked over at the old lady. A wisp of hair had escaped her elegant coiffure as she gazed straight ahead, seeing nothing. He put an arm around her and gently kissed her cheek.

"Dr. Miller," said Sally Meriwether. She was wearing a worried expression. "Have you seen, Jim?"

Kirk had to think a moment before remembering the hideous scene behind the screen. Paulson's agonized scream and sightless stare. Kirk choked out the words.

“Not since intermission.”

“Intermission?” questioned Sally. “I don’t remember any intermission.”

Kirk stared at her. The bewildered young physicist began to wonder if perhaps each individual had been subjected to a unique experience -- each different from the others who’d taken part in the incredible soiree.

“I...I haven’t seen him.” stammered the scientist as he moved slowly away from the two ladies and the body on the gurney.

Leadently he moved back to Sharon and Mrs. Jackson. Sharon didn’t look at him or speak. and he had an uneasy feeling about the future, but tried to rationalioze it into a practical perspective. The evening’s presentation had distorted his values and perception. His imagination was playing tricks on him.

The trio stepped out into the dourtyard and Kirk looked at his watch. It was after two. He looked to the sky to the east where dark masses were forming to block out the sky. The clouds were moving rapidly toward them.

He forgot his worries for a moment. The idea the Poject might finally prove operable drove all other thoughts from his mind. He must get to the plant.

Forgetting Mrs. Jackson, he took Sharon’s hand and almost dragged her through the courtyard.

The small, electric taxis were pulling up to the curb to pick up the early morning theater crowd. Some had to park far out in the street because of the crush and Kirk led Sharon hurriedly toward one of them.

As they made for the cab, however, another, pulled in a bit too fast and swerved thrugh the crowd. People dodged, screaming and cursing.

“Look out! “ “Damned maniac!”

The cab bore down on the hurrying couple. Kirk didn’t see it coming. Someone pulled Sharon back in time, but Kirk was struck a glancing blow that sent him sprawling to the pavement.

He lay still for a moment, then tried to lift himself, but his lower body was numb. He hung for a moment teetering on one arm, then slowly toppled backward.

He lay there on his back, looking upward into the clouded sky. He felt no pain --no feeling at all, only disappointment he was leaving his work unfinished. But as he watched the sky boiling and seething above, a smile flickered across his lips.

Hope welled within him and his thoughts cried out to the sky.

“Come on! Come on! Maybe...just maybe....”

Then he heard a crying, whimpering sound next to him. He turned his head slightly to see Sharon kneeling beside him. Around her, shadows moved as the curious gathered to observe -- to feast their eyes on pain and death.

He could see Sharon’s face clearly. She was leaning over him. Lit by the headlights of cars stalled by the accident. Her face was contorted in grief. Her shoulders shook with sobs, yet he could clearly see her eyes were dry. Not one tear of parting welled up within them.

All at once her face was plunged into darkness as headlights were switched off to conserve battery power. Then he saw it. There it was again in her eyes. Lights, glimmering and flashing. Shdows moved among the many-colored beacons, caused them to dance and shimmer. The pupils dilated in the darkness and her eyes locked with his. She invited him in. Suddenly he remembered -- was it Parker who said he

had the power? Yes, he'd looked into the Primagnon world before. Was it only yesterday? His intellect moved in to join Sharon's. It swam there on the surface for a moment and then dove deep. Inside he was able to cast about within her inner spirit. She'd opened it to him. The strange ominous shadows moved and danced about him. The lights were blinding now. Some exploded like colored flash bulbs. Others were steady arc spotlights, and he felt teeming, seething movement.

Finally he realized why he'd been beckoned into this sanctuary. Sharon had brought him in to show him he no longer had a place there. Nowhere could he find the shining love he'd taken for granted. It was gone. Vanished and replaced by strong new feelings that were alien to him.

At length he felt her withdrawing and he was forced to leave her. She wore a sad smile as she looked down at him.

A hand reached out from the shadows and touched her shoulder. She looked up and smiled at the shadowy figure beside her. His hand took hers and he lifted her up. Kirk's vision began to blur. Lights from an arriving taxi caught the face of the shadowy back-lit figure. It was Parker. He could just make out another image move in to stand next to Sharon -- a vague phantom who resembled the dark Satan in the movie. Kirk wanted to call out to them, but the scene began to fade from sight, as if a fog had drifted across his eyes. They were vanishing -- his love and the power which had taken it from him. He tried to call them back. It was no use. His will was dissolving.

At that moment splendid fires tore across the black, stormy sky, ripping this way and that. They were followed by rumblings that mingled with the heavenly fireworks.

The spectators turned away. Forgetting the dying man in the street, they looked up toward the fire sky.

A soft breeze began to blow along the avenue. The man could no longer see, but he could feel the cool breeze: the bits of paper and refuse that blew past him. A souvenir program for THE Movie fluttered close and settled against his shoulder.

He sensed his life was rushing away from him and many thoughts flickered through his mind. He tried to grasp at them as they flashed by him. For some profound reason his imagination settled on the concept of the Primagnon. Was there such a being? Even such a race of beings? He had fought their ideology, but now wondered if perhaps there was some substance to it. He knew this world around him was no longer his world. It had changed and perhaps he no longer had a place in it. Perhaps there were others who were better equipped to show the world the road to survival.

His mind was now on a slow downward spiral as his reflections were projected on it. An overall impression began to form and move forward in his spirit. For a moment, it gave him peace.

Suddenly a drop of water struck his cheek. Was it a tear. In his blindness he called out,

"Sharon!"

There was no answer.

Another drop touched him, and then another, and another.

The drops fell faster and faster, and began to soak the man who lay alone on the pavement.

Above him and round him, forms were dancing, laughing and singing.

The man smiled -- and died.
It was raining.

THE END