

Seasons in the Sun

by
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1

Abraham Tarns peered out of the window as the jetliner descended toward the runway. Overhead, rain continued to pour out of the dark, cloudy sky, obscuring the Texas landscape in an endless haze of falling droplets. Even the skyscrapers of Dallas and Fort Worth were hidden behind a veritable Niagara of water cascading out of the heavens. Just before the tires slammed into the pavement Tarns felt the plane swerve as a particularly strong gust struck it from the side. He shuddered—and not merely because the aircraft was dancing around instead of flying in a straight line like it was supposed to. Buildings came up, and a thump followed by the screech of rubber on asphalt told him that they were down.

There weren't more than a dozen passengers on board, and every one of them shared the same haunted look. This plane—nominally the property of QANTAS Airlines—had just come in from northern Africa on its last frantic hop in a three-day flight that had originated in the Land Down Under. While in flight, the plane had flown high above the thick clouds that now covered the entire Earth. But whenever it landed, it had to once again re-enter that shroud of horror.

The plane slowed and turned onto the taxiway, and the single flight attendant on board stood up and walked past everyone without as much as a glance and vanished into the cockpit. Tarns wasn't surprised; the events of the past week had not spared her any more than anyone else. She was an Aussie and probably had family back home. Maybe they were even still alive. It was anyone's guess when she would ever see any of them again.

Or if.

The aircraft crawled to a stop, and a jet-way rolled out and osculated the front cabin door. The engine whine abruptly dropped in pitch as the pilot began to shut things down. A moment later the stewardess reappeared and opened the hatch. She did not remain to thank the passengers for flying QANTAS or to wish them a g'day.

As Tarns exited the craft, he noted that the terminal was also practically abandoned. *Big surprise there*, he thought sarcastically. There were few flights scheduled. At this point most people were resigned to simply huddling in their homes like animals gone to ground. The few whose business forced them to travel usually had military or other taxpayer-funded services available.

And a lot of destinations had simply been wiped out of existence.

Tarns walked through the huge, curving terminal, his footsteps clacking hollowly along the deserted corridor, passing darkened storefronts. Up ahead, he caught a glimpse of movement; a squad of soldiers scurrying off to some unknown destination. He shook his head, unable to recall

when, if ever, martial law had previously been declared in the United States. He patted his pocket, reassuring himself that his wallet was there, along with his identification. Hopefully the army hadn't started shooting people on sight.

He passed a newspaper vending machine, noting the headlines: “**Radiation Continues to Increase.**” On impulse, he fumbled through the change in his pocket. It was a futile gesture; all he had were a few Australian coins. And he knew that he didn't have any greenbacks in his wallet. He shrugged and went on. Normally, he would have gone to the nearest money exchange without a second thought, as he always did after an international trip. But the exchange houses were boarded up just as tight as the KFC on the corner across from him. There were still ATM machines scattered around the terminal. He could only hope that they would be working.

At least he wasn't stranded. He already had a reservation from Dallas-Fort Worth up to Columbus, Ohio, where he lived. It hadn't been canceled. Not yet, anyway. He had managed to pry that much information out of the flight attendant just prior to landing. The flight was scheduled to leave in a couple of hours. And his car was waiting where he had left it in the long-term parking lot. Under ordinary circumstances, he would be eagerly looking forward to getting home, to his house, his job, and most especially to his wife and daughter.

But today a very real part of him was dreading it.

He glanced again at the newspaper in the machine, and noted that it was two days old. Then he glanced outside through the window at the falling rain and shuddered. There was nobody outside. By now, everyone knew better.

His son was probably still off at college. Purdue University was a drive of several hours from Columbus, and Andy wasn't the type to pack up and come home on a whim. And by the time he learned about the Extra Ingredients in those raindrops he'd probably be too scared to. At least Tarns wouldn't have to face him as well. It would be bad enough with Sharon and Michelle.

For an instant, he considered getting on any plane he could find going anywhere else but home. Just run away to Outer Mongolia. After all, he reasoned, in the end it wouldn't make one iota of difference. But he couldn't. His own father had instilled in him a strong sense of responsibility, and his first and greatest was to his wife and children.

He turned away from the newspaper, leaving it to shout its deadly headlines at whatever other poor, miserable travelers that happened by. Most would probably ignore it. And those who did pause to read would probably swear at God or the Great Pumpkin and shake their fists in despair. Some would go home to their own wives and children. Others would go home alone. Some would go off to a quiet corner and, without any fuss or ado, slit their wrists. And still others...

Because none of them had long to live.

And it was Abraham Tarns' fault.

2

Tarns could still recall the day, nearly six years ago, when the first tentative step had been taken down the Highway to the End of the World. He was a Professor of Astrophysics at Ohio State University, and one day one of his students had asked a question which seemed to have no relevance, except for the simple fact of human curiosity. He had thought for a moment, then given an answer. That should have been the end of it. Except that it wasn't.

For the answer to that question had lit a fuse in his mind that would have been far better left alone.

Black holes had been objects of astrophysical interest ever since the beginning of the twentieth century. First their very existence, then later on their nature, had propelled many young men and women into the ranks of science, then held them there with a grip almost as strong as their immense gravity.

Their violent formation intrigued many. It had been long recognized that tremendous forces were required to create black holes. Forces such as those found only in the cores of massive stars or the Big Bang. There is a limit to the ordinary compressibility of matter. No matter how many army tanks you pile on top of a steel sphere, for example, it remains a steel sphere. At most it might flatten out. But it will not compress.

However, there are forces at man's disposal far greater than the weight of army tanks. The greatest and most powerful, of course, is the nuclear explosion. Therein lay the heart of the student's question to Tarns.

Would it be possible to create a miniature black hole by directing the force of a nuclear explosion inward toward, say, a metal sphere?

His first response had been, "Of course not!" The whole idea was ridiculous. However, after class he had been unable to forget the question—and thus the fuse was lit. It had not been difficult to do the necessary calculations of the actual amount of force necessary to crush such a sphere past its event horizon. On the other hand, he was not a nuclear engineer and had only a vague idea as to the actual available yield from an atomic bomb. As a result, he ended up going to his friend and co-professor, Wayne Quiller. Quiller was not only a nuclear engineer; he was considered among the five best in the world.

Quiller's initial response had been just about what Tarns had expected. He had stopped short of declaring that Tarns was crazy, but the implication was there. Nuclear engineers had much more important things to do than waste their time squashing steel spheres. Tarns shrugged and turned away, dropping the whole matter and going back to more worthwhile astrophysical endeavors, such as trying to determine the amount of 200-proof alcohol present in the atmospheres of extra-solar gas giants.

He had almost forgotten the question entirely when Quiller approached him a few weeks later and asked if he was still interested. Recalling Quiller's initial reaction, Tarns was more than a little surprised. It didn't take long, however, for him to realize that his colleague's interest had nothing to do with any serious interest in astrophysical research, and he certainly had not been converted into the realm of the believing. But "Studies in Reproducing Astronomical Phenomena in a Terrestrial Environment" had a tremendous appeal.

For, contrary to popular belief, scientists do not spend most of their time in laboratories, hunched over experiments, or in observatories peering through telescopes. Rather, they spend a great deal of time at the computer terminal writing about what they found while sitting hunched over an experiment or peering through a telescope. "Publish or Perish!" has long been a favorite battle cry in academia. And directly related to "Publish or Perish" is the Great Bugbear of Funding.

Money for scientific research does not grow on trees. Scientists working in universities and national laboratories do not sell products to the public to make money. Instead, their cash cow is that Big Daddy of all sugar daddies, the Federal Government. Scientists can only spend as much as they can wheedle out of their representatives, such as Republican Franklin Jackson, a notoriously tight-fisted congress-critter from Quiller's own congressional district. (He would not even refer to the man without first changing his name to a two-word obscenity. He had divorced his first wife after she had contributed \$100,000 to Jackson's re-election campaign. It didn't matter that it was her own money; it was the principle.)

Tarns had no objections to his fellow scientists using odd projects in an attempt to milk the Federal Cow; he suffered from the same lack of cash as they did. So he shrugged again and sat down with Quiller to work out a few of the details.

It was while working out these details that Tarns began to notice a few things that he couldn't merely shrug away. The first was that any black hole actually produced would be extremely tiny—on the order of a few kilograms at most, depending on the size of the steel (or lead) sphere used in the experiment.

The second was that very tiny black holes, such as the one envisioned, are not stable. They evaporate.

This evaporation is a phenomenon that has been recognized since the early days of quantum mechanics. It is rooted in the concept of the probabilistic nature of matter interacting with the boundary of a black hole, the so-called “event horizon”. Because the event horizon is literally a separator between the normal universe and a completely different, miniature universe, certain conservation laws, which normally keep the whole universe from going “poof!” and disappearing, do not hold.

In effect, a miniature black hole was a means of converting matter completely into energy.

It was when Tarns began to realize just how much energy would be released from the total conversion of a kilogram of matter that he began to seriously rethink the whole matter. It was too dangerous, he said. It would be worse than a thousand atomic bombs going off all at once.

Quiller had dropped all pretense at this point. Of course it wouldn’t work, he said. The whole idea was ridiculous. But he had nearly a half-dozen “real” projects on the burner, all needing funding. Let him go ahead with this ridiculous notion. He knew how to write research proposals, he insisted, and could use this astrophysical joke to get money for things more worthwhile. And, he had added with spiteful glee, it would be worth it just to spit in his favorite congress-jerk’s face.

In spite of his reservations, Tarns had quietly acquiesced.

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Ninety-five percent of the project design was completed within the first six months. The basic idea—create a nuclear device to implode a metal sphere—was not complicated. Quiller was practically able to sketch it out in his sleep. It was the remaining five percent that took an additional five years to finish up.

Publicly, Quiller gushed over the great advances in astrophysics that would be made when his invention became a reality. Privately, however, he referred to it as “Tarns’ Cash Cow” and laughed. His other projects were proceeding nicely, thank you, ever since Quiller had personally gone to DC and bent the ear of his favorite liberal Democratic representatives and senators. He had also danced in both public and private glee when his arch-nemesis, Congressman Franklin Jackson, was soundly trounced in a mid-term election.

“You can have the cores,” he told Tarns once after a faculty meeting. He had taken to calling the crushed remnants of the lead spheres “cores” after a test involving conventional explosives, since what came out resembled a rather large, heavy apple core. He didn’t bother to mention that the “cores” resulting from the Real Thing would be viciously radioactive.

He still didn’t believe that they would be crushed into black holes.

Initially, Tarns had believed him. After all, Quiller was a preeminent nuclear engineer, and if he said that the resultant force from a nuclear blast would only amount to such-and-such, why then, it must be true. So at first Tarns had not paid much attention to the project. In addition, he had his own research to keep up with.

It was only after nearly four years had passed that he began to seriously reconsider the matter. A project aimed at accurately modeling the processes taking place within supernovae produced theoretical results disturbingly similar to the ones that he had originally taken to Quiller. He had tried to shrug it off, but his imagination was too functional to allow him to. He finally went back to Quiller.

Talking to Quiller was like trying to catch a greased pig with a pin stuck in its butt. He listened and sympathized. He agreed that Tarns’ calculations were significant. Then he turned and carried on excitedly about all of the wonderful research taking place because of Tarns’ wonderful idea. It would work, he said. Although it certainly would not create any kind of astrophysical phenomenon on Earth, it would work.

Tarns tried a different tack. Very well, he conceded. Finish the device. But don't set it off anywhere on Earth. Take it to NASA and have them send it up in a Shuttle and have a booster rocket blast it out into space somewhere, preferably as far away as possible. Then go ahead and light it off. There weren't any Martians to care one way or another.

Quiller demurred. Since it wouldn't produce anything like the horrors Tarns was describing, why waste all that money? General Mines was still waiting for the Nuclear Excavator to replace the outmoded steam shovel; wouldn't it be better spent there?

As the fifth year passed Tarns' health declined. Stress is never beneficial to the human body, and Tarns had plenty. He had tried repeatedly to "talk sense" into Quiller, only to be treated like a retarded baboon. By now, even some of his other colleagues were beginning to consider him slightly cracked.

The frustration level continued to generate large amounts of stomach acid, to the point where it began to burn holes in his gut. He was hospitalized for three weeks with a severe duodenal ulcer. During that time Quiller and everyone else from the Ohio State physics department came to visit. And they left.

It was simply amazing, he thought with a shake of his head. Say the word "black hole" and suddenly it's an out-of-the-world phenomenon that could not possibly take place on Mother Earth. That was the problem. Nobody would consider the possibility that he was right simply because nobody's gut feel would allow for something like a black hole to exist within a million miles of the Earth. See-no-evil, hear-no-evil, speak-no-evil. The three monkeys with their hands over their eyes, their ears and their mouth. Close your eyes and it will nicely go away.

By the time he got out of the hospital, Quiller had already picked a site to test the device. At least he wasn't totally callous, Tarns realized. He had picked a small island in the South Pacific, isolated from its nearest inhabited neighbor by about a hundred miles. And he had convinced the local authorities to cordon off the area while he conducted "research of a nuclear nature." The South Pacific islanders were used to such things, having already seen the island of Bikini turned into a pile of radioactive slag.

Tarns did not consider a hundred miles to be any better than a hundred feet. If the device worked as he feared, even a thousand miles might not be enough. Quiller, on the other hand, never wavered in his confidence that nothing was going to happen. He picked another island, around twenty miles away, to use as an observation post.

He invited Tarns to accompany him.

Tarns refused.

Yet in the end, Tarns found that he could not simply sit at home twiddling his thumbs while the South Pacific burned. After all, it *was* his idea originally. So he told his wife Sharon that he was going to check out some possible sites for telescopes, then boarded another plane for New Guinea. The island where the test would take place was about seven hundred and fifty miles north-northeast of there.

3

New Guinea is a mountainous land. It has often amazed linguists and anthropologists just how many different tribes, many with totally unrelated languages, could exist nearly side-by-side geographically. The answer was the mountains. Even villages only a few miles apart are often as isolated from one another as if they were on separate planets.

New Guinea was also a missionary's paradise. In modern times, nearly every organization in the whole world dedicated to enlightening primitive peoples had sent its representatives to this South Pacific island. Therefore, it wasn't surprising that at least one of their number was someone known to Tarns.

Jared Irving had been one of Tarns' more promising students a number of years ago, before he heard the Call of God to go preach to the heathen instead of studying distant galaxies. Through

the years they had kept in touch occasionally, and Irving had more than once invited Tarns to come visit the village where he worked. Privately, Tarns suspected that his former student simply wanted yet another opportunity to try to convert him. Nevertheless, he had left the door of possibility open.

The village where Irving worked was about a mile from the top of one of the higher mountains on the island, and fortunately on the side away from the upcoming test. To Tarns, the opportunity was just too perfect. If he could have asked for a better place to observe from, he would have been hard put to find it. So two days ago he had flown into New Guinea and taken a local puddle-jumper the rest of the way.

Ten o'clock in the morning on the day of the test found him hiking up a steep trail, his breath trailing behind him in clouds of puffy steam. The event was scheduled for one in the afternoon. Even as he thought about it, he could feel his innards contract. Up until now, in spite of the implications of his calculations his mind had been able to dismiss their reality as merely a series of scratches on paper. Numbers. Figures that described something so frightening that the brain simply shunted it aside. But now... He thought back to Irving's God and decided that, if this test did fail and nothing happened, he just might allow himself to be converted after all, out of simple gratitude.

He reached the top after about an hour. Except for a few trees on the southern ridge it was flat; he recalled Irving saying something once about the villagers using it for tribal ceremonies. Here and there he could see the remnants of fire rings and primitive altars. Sacrificing virgins to the local Volcano God? Eat thy Neighbor? He shrugged. All of a sudden it didn't mean diddly squat. He felt his guts contract again.

The sky was clear and blue, with only a few cumulus puffs scattered here and there. In the distance he could see the ocean, trailing hazily off beyond the horizon. Somewhere out there, Quiller and his cronies were huddled over hastily-rigged laboratory equipment, preparing to set off a specially designed nuclear bomb. They were probably laughing, joking about all the money that they had suckled from the federal breast. A quick fireworks show, then go home and tell Senator Ding-Dong that alas, it was a failure. Black holes remain a purely astronomical phenomenon.

For the first time in years, Tarns actually found himself praying.

After a while, he slowly trudged back down the trail a few hundred feet to a natural clearing that gave him a good view of the top of the mountain. His recent spate of ill health had left him more drained than he had realized. When he reached the clearing he looked around for a suitable spot, then lay down. *Just a few minutes*, he sighed to himself. *Just a few minutes...*

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Tarns opened his eyes and sat up suddenly, then shook his head, feeling dizzy for a moment. The world swam, then steadied. In his belly he could feel a faint reminder of his recent ulcers. His mouth tasted like a sand pit.

He glanced at his watch and noted that it was a quarter to one. He shook his head again, still trying to clear it after the disorientation caused by his involuntary sleep. *It's almost time*, he told himself. *T-minus fifteen minutes and counting...*

The seconds display slowly incremented away the remaining time, and Tarns sat cross-legged in the clearing. His ulcers were back with a vengeance. Every few seconds he swallowed. Again, he found himself praying. *Please, God*, he begged. *Please... I'll start going to church. I'll regularize all the pirated software I've got on my computer. I'll even stop going out with the boys on Friday night for a drink. Please...*

The time dwindled and vanished. As the seconds ticked away the final minute Tarns found himself retching, his hands shaking. *Sharon*, he thought. *I love you...*

One o'clock.

Nothing happened.

Another minute dragged by and it was 1:01.

Still nothing.

Another minute.

The sky remained cerulean blue, dotted with puffy cumulus clouds. Birds continued to twitter and mosquitoes continued to fly into his ears. He felt himself starting to relax. All at once, a trembling seized his entire body and he could hardly keep from falling over.

Thank you, God. Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you...

He slowly levered himself to his feet, feeling a thousand years old. *Thank you, God*, he kept repeating. *I won't ever tell anyone again. Maybe it's all wrong the theory should work I don't know and I don't care!* He knew he was becoming incoherent, but he simply didn't care. He started to turn back toward the village.

Suddenly, the sky above the summit turned incandescent.

Tarns whirled back, feeling his bowels turn to water. For a moment, he saw the trees on the ridge, silhouetted against the light. Then they seemed to literally vaporize into flame as the glare became blinding. Involuntarily, he staggered back, his eyes squeezed tightly shut, as a wave of heat crashed into him like an almost solid wall of force. When he managed to force his eyes open again, the mountaintop was a treeless black outline against an actinic background. The vegetation below the summit was already on fire.

Like a robot, drawn by the horror of what he had helped create, he slowly began climbing toward the summit. Around him, trees and brush were catching fire, but he hardly noticed. For a moment his mind returned to an old story he had heard in his childhood, about three young men who had been thrown into a furnace of fire and lived. He doubted that God would send an angel to protect him, though. Unlike those three young men, he was far from innocent.

He reached the summit and his eyelids once again slammed shut as a fresh wave of heat roasted his exposed skin. He could feel his face reddening. For a moment he wished that he could simply cast himself forth into the heart of the beast. But he knew that was impossible.

He forced his eyelids open again. Along the horizon hung a tremendous, flattened fireball, as brilliant as the sun, spreading out for hundreds of miles and reaching all the way above the atmosphere into outer space. All around it a mist was rising as the sea boiled away. Below, on the side of the mountain facing the blast, a pall of black smoke roiled and churned, shot through with flickering flames. Here and there the ground peeked through, glowing cherry red.

He felt the sudden urge to spread his arms, to welcome a flood of gamma rays to vaporize him into the bliss of unconsciousness. Again, visions from his childhood of the Day of Judgment flashed through his brain. *Yes, Your Honor, Lord, God... I plead guilty.*

It was no less than he deserved.

But the gamma ray blast was over. It had ignited everything in sight and probably created a burst that some alien astronomer on some planet a billion light years away and a billion years in the future would puzzle over, but it was past. There would be no instant immolation. Only a slow death, tortured by the everlasting What If. What If he had never said anything to Wayne Quiller? What If he had never even considered the whole idea in the first place?

What If he had simply never existed?

It would have been a small price to pay to avoid all this.

Numbly, he turned away and started down the path, neither knowing nor caring what would happen, leaving the flames of Hell behind. He stumbled into the clearing and stood unmoving, instinctively trying to turn his brain off, to simply stop thinking.

Sharon, I love you...

The ground suddenly seemed to leap up beneath him, hurling him onto his face. The shock sent him tumbling and rolling. Without thought, he grabbed an outcropping of rock and hung on, reduced to simple survival instincts. Another shock followed, then another, until it blended into a tremendous, titanic shaking and roaring that seemed to go on and on. Around him, rocks and

boulders tumbled past. Finally, it died away. A few more stones rattled down, then it was silent, except for the crackling of flames.

He forced himself to his feet again and took a few steps, then collapsed against a dislodged boulder. *Ground shock*, his scientific brain automatically informed him. The air shock would be next.

Without thinking, he got up and started down the path again, still without any clearly definable goal. In the back of his mind some vestigial sense seemed to be dragging him back to the Papuan village. He entertained a brief image of himself kneeling before his missionary friend and confessing to the whole thing.

As he passed along a narrow ledge below a short cliff, a sudden gust of wind blew a scattered handful of sand over him. In the distance he heard the beginning of a low rumble. Before he had time to even stop and think about it, the rumble rose to a tremendous, thunderous shriek, and a blast of dirt and debris shot past him overhead as if from the mouth of a cannon. He caught a glimpse of burning trees being ripped up like matchsticks and instantly hurled away. An instant later came a sound so huge and powerful that his ears simply refused to accept it.

It was as if someone had driven railroad spikes into his auditory canals. At the same time the hurricane of debris scaled upward until Tarns felt the very air being sucked from his lungs. Only the presence of the cliff kept him from being carried away like Dorothy to the Land of Oz. Dirt, rocks and debris hurled overhead so fast that it was just a blur.

And then it was over. Tarns huddled, deafened, looking around. The world had changed. There wasn't a tree or shrub in sight; the ground had been completely scoured clean by the terrible force of the shock wave. Overhead, the atmosphere was hazy with dust and smoke, and stank with the smell of scorched earth and timber. Clouds were boiling up, racing south away from the center of the blast. A few raindrops fell. Tilting his face toward the rapidly darkening heavens, Tarns tasted silt and salt.

He shuddered and stumbled on.

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"Hey, mate! You alive?"

Tarns barely heard the shout above the nearly ceaseless roar of thunder and rain. He rolled soggily over onto his side, fuzzily recalling the horrible trip down from the summit that ended as he stumbled into the wreckage of the Papuan village. He remembered looking around at the flooded, shapeless sprawl that had once been a group of huts, seeing the bloody, shattered bodies lying in impossible positions, then collapsing. He had evidently passed out. Now he saw a man in a rain soaked uniform approaching. Behind him, two others were shifting through wreckage. Further off stood a helicopter, shedding water in sheets like a shimmering, transparent garment.

Seeing Tarns move, the uniformed man slogged through the mud and knelt down next to him. "Hey, let me help you," he said with a strong Australian accent. He looked Tarns over. "Anything broken?" he asked anxiously.

Tarns slowly shook his head. "No. Nothing." *Just the whole world.* "I'm okay." *Although I'm the one who should be dead.*

A pair of strong arms helped him into a sitting position as the Aussie hollered over at one of his buddies. Another man ran over, hunched against the downpour, his feet splashing mud with every step. "This guy's alive," the first one told him.

"Yeah, I can see that," the newcomer replied. "Who are you?" he asked Tarns. "Are you the missionary? We heard there was one in this village. Lucky for you you're white. We'd have never spotted a black fellow in all this muck."

Tarns shook his head. "No, I'm not the missionary. I'm an anthropologist," he lied.

The two men lifted Tarns to his feet and helped him over to the helicopter. The second one spoke again. "I take it you were visiting the village."

Tarns nodded. "Jared's a friend of mine. Was," he added soberly.

“Who’s that? The missionary?” Tarns nodded.

“Yeah, well, pardon me if I’m not too sympathetic,” the Aussie growled. “I’ve seen more people dead today than I ever thought possible.” He shook his head slowly, still in disbelief. “Just count yourself lucky to be alive, mate.”

They reached the chopper and the men helped him climb in. One of them reached across his lap to fasten the seat belt. “Hang on tight,” the first man said. “This weather’s a real mess. Shouldn’t even be flying, but some bird colonel wanted us to see if there was anyone left alive here.” He sloshed around to the other side, still shaking his head at the stupidity of senior officers, then pulled himself in, jammed his own seat belt into its buckle, and hollered at the pilot. Overhead, the blades started to rotate, and a minute later the aircraft lurched skyward.

From the vantage of altitude, Tarns gained a new perspective on the devastation wrought by the blast. Trees had been blown to matchsticks, villages shredded, and any piece of land that thrust itself higher than the mountains to the north was bare, scorched, melted rock. And at lower altitudes, everything had been washed clean by flooding.

Nothing lived.

Tarns was beyond tears, beyond grief. For an instant he felt the urge to unbuckle his seat belt and leap into the oblivion of death. But he couldn’t. Maybe it was a part of him deep inside that insisted that he remain around to face the consequences of his mad idea. Maybe he was just plain chicken. It didn’t matter. He stayed seated.

The Aussie leaned over and shouted in his ear. “It wasn’t so bad here on this side, but you should see the other side of the island. Ain’t nothin’ left. What didn’t burn got swamped. Wave must have been a kilometer high at least. Got our coast as well. You’ll see. Where we set up camp was completely washed out. We had to dig out mud just to have a place to set the chopper down!”

Tarns roused himself enough to ask, “What about other places? Asia? South America? Did they get a tidal wave?” He was sure they did, but he had to ask.

The man nodded slowly. “Yeah,” he said in a somber voice. “A lot worse than we got it. Somebody said it wasn’t so bad here because most of the water boiled away before it could get so high. Over on the coast of Chile and Peru they say it was three or four kilometers high.”

Three or four kilometers high? His sick feeling of horror became a knife in the guts. He swallowed, clenching his fists, wanting to throw up. The Aussie continued.

“Singapore’s gone. So is Hong Kong, most of Malaysia, Taiwan, Tokyo, you name it. Tidal wave went quite a ways into China, Viet Nam, places like that. There’s got to be at least a hundred million dead, probably a lot more.”

The knife in his guts turned red hot. Maybe his duodenal ulcers would all let go at once and kill him right now. But how could his one life pay for all that death and destruction? At least it would be a start. *I’m guilty, Your Honor, Lord, God. I plead guilty...*

“Where are you from in the States?” the man asked, interrupting his thoughts.

“The Midwest,” Tarns replied without thinking. *Guilty... guilty...*

“Do you have family on the coast?”

Tarns instinctively realized what the man was trying to say. “No,” he breathed. “We’re all in the Midwest. Ohio. Indiana. That part of the country. Why? Was California...?”

“All the way to the Rocky Mountains in some places. The wave went up that gulf, I can’t remember what it’s called, you know, that part of Mexico south of California? Well, it went up there and hit California like a shotgun blast.” He stopped talking, seeing the expression on Tarns’ face.

“The Sea of Cortez,” Tarns said automatically. “Yeah, I suppose it would do that.” He imagined something similar north of the Persian Gulf, in Pakistan and any place located at the end of a narrow body of water open to the sea. “How about the East Coast?”

“Not as bad, but the cities are gone. We haven’t had as much radio contact with Europe, but what little we heard sounds like it’s a real mess there as well. We got most of this in the first few

hours after it happened. There ain't nothing coming out now. This weather has wrecked radio communications."

"Satellite?" Tarns asked.

The man shook his head. "They're gone. Don't ask me how, but every satellite on this side of the world went out the same time whatever it was hit and did all this."

Of course, Tarns thought. *Radiation from the blast probably fried all the electronics in anything in line-of-sight.* He took a breath, found the courage to ask what he had been dreading to ask ever since being picked up.

"Does anyone know what happened?"

The man shook his head. "I've heard 'comet' or 'asteroid' from a few people, but nobody's sure. Nobody saw anything coming in. But nobody can think of anything else that could have done all this. Not even the biggest nuclear bomb anyone ever made could cause that big a blast."

They continued in silence as the helicopter passed the shore and headed out over water. All around, the storm continued to lash wind and rain at them and bathe them in nearly constant lightning. In the glow of the almost constant flashes, Tarns could see that the water below was murky and brown.

A while later they passed over land again. There was nothing to see. Nothing but a sea of mud and debris stretching all the way to the horizon. In places there was standing water. But nothing lived or moved, except at the whim of the wind. Finally, after what seemed like hours, an encampment appeared. The helicopter was heading straight for it.

* * * * *

"You guys want to get in out of that rain!" yelled a man as Tarns and the other two climbed out of the helicopter. They were in what was obviously a temporary encampment, erected in haste. Tents and pre-fab Army-style huts wallowed in a sea of mud. The few people he saw outside were bundled up in rain slickers and carried umbrellas, as if they didn't want the water to touch them at all.

They followed the man into the nearest building, their shoes alternately sucking and splattering sloppy brown muck with each step. "What gives, Charlie?" demanded the man who had rescued Tarns.

"Radiation," was the curt answer. "There's fallout or something in the rain."

Tarns' rescuer looked stunned. "Radiation? I thought they said it was a comet. They said no atom bomb could be that big..."

"Yeah, I know," Charlie answered. "But there's fallout, all the same. Not much, but it seems to be getting worse, if that's possible. You'd think it'd die down instead of increasing."

It's possible, Tarns thought. *I should have realized it. When the gamma ray blast went off it probably irradiated the whole bottom of that crater it carved out. Heaven only knows what kinds of filthy isotopes it created.* And it was boiling away the sea as the water cascaded into it, carrying away all that radioactive stuff. Yeah, it'd get worse. As it cooled, more water would boil away, carrying away more radioactive crap, until it finally cooled enough to stop boiling. But who knew how long that would take? Fresh horror flooded his mind.

The door opened and a man came in. He was older, and from his uniform Tarns guessed that he was a high-ranking officer. The other men came to attention. The officer looked at Tarns.

"Is this the chap you fellows found on New Guinea?" he asked.

Tarns' rescuer replied. "Yes, Colonel. We found him in a village near the top of a mountain. Says he's an anthropologist who was visiting the village. I guess he knew the missionary or something."

"Is that correct?" the colonel demanded.

"Yes, sir," Tarns lied again. "I was doing research on the way of life of Papuan villagers. Jared Irving's a friend of mine. He was the missionary. He invited me to come out."

“Where are you from?” There was suspicion in his voice. Tarns had a horrible feeling that the colonel knew more than he was saying.

“Purdue University,” he continued to lie. “Department of Anthropology.”

The colonel nodded. “Of course, we have no way of checking that out now,” he said. “Radio’s gone down the toilet. All this lightning and stuff. No satellites.” He fixed Tarns with a glare. “One of my boys remembered something he’d heard from a Navy buddy a couple of days ago. Something about some sort of test on some island about twelve hundred klicks north of New Guinea. They were supposed to keep everyone at least a hundred and fifty kilometers away. Now what do you suppose they were testing, son?” The term was relative. Tarns was in his forties, but the colonel looked to be in his fifties.

“How would I know?” he said.

The colonel cocked his head to one side, then back. “Yeah, maybe you’re telling the truth. This Navy fellow said that the guys doing this test were supposed to be on an island about thirty klicks from where they were doing it. They’re all dead, of course. It’s kind of funny, you, an American scientist, in the same area at the same time that all this happened. But I suppose it’s just a coincidence. Still, I wonder how it was you managed to do just the right things to stay alive. You know we found absolutely nobody else alive in the whole area?”

“I guess I just got lucky,” Tarns said. Every lie ate away further at his inner being. Part of him wanted to just spill it all, confess that yes, he was the one who came up with the theory that made all this happen. But the same cowardice or whatever had kept him from jumping out of the helicopter wouldn’t let him.

The colonel nodded slowly. “Yeah, maybe you did at that.” He turned to the other soldiers. “Take him to the guest barracks,” he ordered. “Put him with the others.” He turned back to Tarns. “We’ve found a few other Americans here who were in Australia when this happened. We got our hands on a QANTAS airliner and are arranging to fly them back. The plane leaves in a couple of days, when we can get the mud cleared from the runway. I have no idea where they’ll land.” He smiled thinly. “I guess you can worry about that when you get there. We’re sending you back with them.”

4

Tarns gazed unseeing at the empty rows of seats filling the airliner. Here and there, a handful of other solitary passengers sat, each isolated in his or her own private thought. Halfway to the front sat the only couple. They had not ceased to cling to one another since boarding at Dallas. They were young. They should have had their entire life ahead of them. Would it have been any worse if the plane had been hijacked to Cuba or blown up by Muslim terrorists?

He wondered what the Muslim terrorists were doing now.

During the flight from Australia Tarns had been subjected to the speculations of the crew and his fellow passengers. According to one of the pilots, it was the “warning shot” preceding an alien invasion. Listening to him, if Tarns hadn’t known better he would have been expecting at any moment to see flying saucers land and disgorge hordes of pointy-eared, green aliens with feelers. One of the passengers insisted that Halley’s comet had gone off course and plowed into the Earth.

A small amount of real news had leaked through. Martial law had been declared in just about every nation on Earth. There were rumors of mass riots in European cities and revolutions in South America. In South Africa, the white minority had reportedly gone on a rampage and was slaughtering blacks by tens of thousands.

And the radioactive fallout had reached even America.

Looking out of the window, Tarns thought it deceptive just how peaceful, even beautiful, the clouds below looked. An endless vista of white cotton, resembling the snowfields he had seen in

northern Alberta one winter when he had gone on a cross-country skiing vacation. It was hard to imagine the deadly poison that lay hidden within it.

It was impossible to say just how much the general public knew. Certainly the government would have attempted to throw a blanket of secrecy over the whole thing. Otherwise, the panic that would roar through society would probably end up burning whole cities to the ground.

And how many nations with a grudge against their neighbors would simply decide to settle matters once and for all, since there was nothing to lose any more? He recalled his wondering about Muslim terrorists and thanked God and every Power-That-Was that he did not live in the Middle East.

He remembered a snatch of a song that he had loved as a child. It was a sad song, redolent of death and loss.

“We had joy, we had fun, we had seasons in the sun.
But the wine and the song, like the seasons, have all gone.
All our lives, we had fun, we had seasons in the sun.
But the hills that we climbed were just seasons out of time.”

Yes, he thought, *the seasons really are all gone*. It was spring now, the time of year when life renewed itself. The time of year that looked forward to the vibrant health and beauty of summer.

How long, now, until the cold hand of winter conquered all?
And after the winter, what would then come?

* * * * *

The streets of Columbus were deserted, just like the airport, except for here and there squads of soldiers dressed in bulky, radiation-proof suits. They were heavily armed. Once a squad had waved him over at an intersection. Fortunately, they had merely taken a cursory look, then waved him on.

He had not wanted to open his window and let in the rain.

Businesses were closed. Some were boarded over. Some had smashed display windows. Here and there, burned out automobile hulks lay rotting and rusting in the rain. Tarns drove on, thankful that he had left his own car in a secure lot at the airport while he was gone.

Only once did he see signs of people other than soldiers. As he was turning off of the main downtown avenue onto the secondary street that led to his neighborhood, he caught sight of a mob up ahead in the distance, running through another intersection. He couldn't tell what they were doing, but a strong air of violence hung over them. He shuddered.

How long before everyone else went crazy?

A few minutes later he turned onto the side street where he lived. As he approached his own driveway he saw that there were lights on inside. He closed his eyes briefly, feeling his guts knot up again. *Sharon... Michelle...Andy...*

Where is your future?

Have I killed it?

He hit the automatic garage door opener and the big panel lifted up and out. Another light came on inside, revealing two empty parking spots, stained with old grease. In the back, tools hung up behind his workbench reflected light from his headlamps. He wondered momentarily where the other car was. He punched the button to close the door behind him, and the doorway to the kitchen opened and Sharon came out.

She didn't say a word, but simply put her arms around him and hugged him. She had been weeping, he could tell. Finally, she looked up and spoke. “You're home,” was all she said. Then he realized that she had probably given him up for dead. For a guilty instant he felt that he had thrown away a golden opportunity to slink away and die without her knowledge.

Tarns continued to hold his wife. He could feel her shaking as she began weeping again, and he could hear her murmuring. "I thought you were dead," she kept repeating. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again."

He could think of nothing to say.

* * * * *

"After it happened I called the Department," Sharon told him a half-hour later. They were inside the house, seated on the sofa in the living room. Tarns still hadn't said much.

"I talked to Peter Stegg," she went on. "He said you'd gone to the south Pacific. I told him I already knew that. He couldn't tell me any more, though, except that you'd gone to New Guinea."

Tarns nodded absently. "I was there when it happened," he said. "I saw it all." In spite of his arms about her, his voice was a million miles away.

Sharon was silent for a minute. "You said you were going to check out sites for telescopes," she finally said. She looked up at him, forcing him to look her in the eyes. "Was that really why you went?" she asked softly.

Tarns tried to answer, but the lump in his throat prevented speech. He felt tears burning in his own eyes. He said nothing, but shook his head slowly.

"It had something to do with that experiment, didn't it?" she asked. "That one you were always talking about. The one you were trying to stop."

Now the tears fell as he nodded. "He didn't think it would work," he blurted. "Even I wasn't sure. I tried to tell him, but he just wouldn't listen. All he could think about was money. It was just a joke to him..."

She hugged him tightly. "It's not your fault," she whispered as he sobbed on her shoulder. "You did your best."

"No, I didn't!" he cried. "I should have wrecked his equipment, gone to the head of the department. Maybe talked to Senator Heiss. Anything but this!"

After a moment Sharon asked, "Is it as bad as they say?"

"Probably worse," Tarns answered. "I don't know what they've told you, but it's really, really bad."

"How bad?"

Tarns nearly choked as he replied. "Bad enough to kill everyone in the whole world."

Sharon pulled away from him with a gasp of horror. "No! You can't mean that," she said.

He nodded again. "Yes, I can."

"How? I mean, it was on the other side of the world! I know a lot of people have died, but everyone? No, you're exaggerating." Her face was a mask of denial.

"I'm not exaggerating," Tarns insisted tonelessly. "You know about the radioactivity in the rain?" She nodded. "Well, it's going to get a lot worse before it goes away."

"I don't believe this," Sharon shot back with a violent shake of her head. "Can't people just stay inside until it's over? What about shelters? Didn't they build all those fallout shelters back in the '60s when everyone thought World War III was just around the corner?"

Tarns fought to stay calm. "Yes, they did," he said. "But this is much worse. The fallout will contaminate the soil. All the plants will die. Even if someone could stay inside some kind of shelter long enough, there wouldn't be anything to eat when he came out. And even if he took some seeds in with him, they wouldn't grow when he came out. Maybe in the bottom of the ocean something will survive, but that's about all."

She bit her lip. "I can't believe this," she murmured. "What about Andy and Michelle? Are you telling me they won't get a chance to have a life? Get married and have kids of their own? I just can't believe this."

Once again, Tarns was thankful that his son had not come home from college. It was difficult enough facing his wife. To face his children would be even worse. And his daughter was...

“Where’s Michelle?” he asked suddenly, feeling another cold chill pass through him.

“Out,” his wife murmured. “She went with some friends to something at the school. Why?” she added with sudden bitterness. “Do you want to tell her, too? Tell her she’s going to die without ever getting a chance to grow up?” Michelle was sixteen.

Tarns was stung. “You really think I want that? You don’t think this hurts? I thought about killing myself more than once rather than coming home and having to face you!” He looked away. “I just didn’t have the guts,” he added lamely.

“Didn’t have the guts?” Sharon demanded fiercely. “Killing yourself would have really been gutless! Don’t ever say anything like that again!”

He shook his head in wonder. “After what I’ve done you really want me here?”

She threw her arms around him. “I don’t care,” she whispered. “*You* didn’t do it.” She held him tightly.

Outside, the deadly rain continued to pour.

* * * * *

“Why do you have to go look for her?” Sharon demanded. “I’m sure she’ll be okay.”

Tarns gripped his wife’s hands in his own. “She’s my daughter,” he answered quietly. “She’s *our* daughter.” He released her and she wrapped her arms around him.

“Just be careful,” she whispered. He nodded, and she released him.

Overnight, since his return home, things had changed. The mob he had seen in the distance yesterday had grown into a vast throng, looting and burning whole city blocks in the downtown area. And more had sprung up. During the night he had wakened several times to the sounds of sirens and gunshots, and once to a series of sharp explosions. So far, the madness had not spread into his own neighborhood. A very real part of him could understand this madness very well. A long time ago, someone had written, “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow ye die.” That part of him thought it summed up the situation very well.

Michelle had not returned. Tarns and his wife had stayed up late, talking occasionally, waiting for her. But they had never heard the sound of a car pulling into their driveway, nor seen headlights in the window. Throughout the evening Sharon had vacillated between urging Tarns to go out and look for her and demanding that he stay home and safe. In the morning she seemed to have reached a truce with herself.

He got into the car and activated the door opener. As he backed out, the last thing he saw before the door folded back down was his wife’s face, streaked with tears. Resolutely, he turned the wheel and headed down the street, watching the windshield wipers slap away the deadly drops.

Michelle’s high school was only a couple of miles away. Tarns reflected sadly back to the days of his own youth, when a high school was an open place, full of windows and activity, where students walked in and out innocently chattering with one another. Sure, there had been drugs and drinking and the occasional fist fight, but teenagers in his day and age were more concerned with the performance of their football team than with guns and bombs. *Things change*, he told himself. Michelle’s school resembled a prison fortress rather than a place of learning, bristling with metal detectors and bomb-sniffing dogs.

And now things were changing again.

Why couldn’t there ever be change for the better?

He was only a half-mile away from the school when he saw the first direct signs of the violence that had taken over the city during the night. A gang of nearly a dozen youth and young men was sauntering down the sidewalk, dressed in raincoats and armed with shotguns and lengths of pipe. Tarns felt a moment of terror as one of them leveled a double-barreled twelve-gauge at him. Then the punk grinned, whirled around and blasted out a storefront window instead.

If he had known who was driving the car, he probably wouldn't have wasted his ammo on a sheet of glass, Tarns mused bitterly. He pressed the accelerator and drove a bit faster. Plucka-plucka...

A few minutes later he pulled up in front of the school.

* * * * *

The parking lot was over half full, Tarns noted. Here and there, lights shone out of windows. But there was no one outside. No gang of malcontents huddled on the steps, smoking cigarettes. No boy-girl pairs walking up the sidewalk hand-in-hand. Momentarily, a snatch of old song ran through his head: "Walkin' in the rain with the one I love... on my mind." Unh-unh. No way. This was a hater's rain, a place to send the one you loathed for a few pleasant little sprinkles. A real baptism-by-fire.

He thrust the grim poetry from his mind and opened the door, extending his umbrella until it flapped open. Then he got out and walked up to the front door. It was unlocked. He peered in, but couldn't see anyone in the dimly lit hall. He pushed the door open and went inside.

Leaving his umbrella next to the deserted metal detector, he started down the corridor. On either side were open doors leading to deserted rooms, filled with rows of desks and the smell of chalk dust. He remembered coming here once with Michelle for a school activity. She had showed him around. But he remembered none of these rooms.

Ahead in the distance he heard voices, like the low murmur of the crowd just before the start of a baseball game. He came to a corner, turned it, and saw light spilling out of an open set of double doors up ahead. The murmur grew louder. A couple of boys came out of another door, glanced briefly at him, then hurried through the double doors.

Tarns wondered what kind of activity was going on. Certainly it wasn't any kind of normal school function; since the fallout had started school had been canceled, along with just about everything else. No, this was something spontaneous.

What kind of spontaneous activities do high school students perform to celebrate the end of the world?

Michelle had been reasonably active in school. A good student, she was also involved in several clubs, as well as playing on the girls' volleyball team. Last year she had brought home her first boyfriend. Tarns shook his head as he recalled the young fellow. At the time he had been torn between the realization that he was actually a very nice young man and the frightening feeling a father has when his daughter begins dating. It hadn't lasted; they were both too young for real commitment. But afterward he remembered looking forward to the day when she did find her true love and presented him with grandchildren.

Oh, Michelle! What have I done to you?

He reached the double doors and peered in. It was the lunch room, and around nearly half of the tables students were gathered, ceaselessly jabbering. Off in one corner he caught sight of several couples making out. In another corner, two boys furiously played table tennis. A haze of cigarette smoke hung over everything. In the smoke he caught other smells than tobacco. He felt a momentary anger, then it left as quickly as it had come.

What difference did it make any more?

He caught sight of his daughter almost immediately. She was seated at a table only about thirty feet away, along with three other girls and a couple of fellows. Like everyone else they were talking animatedly. Tarns thought he sensed an air of desperation in their conversation. The same sense pervaded the entire room.

She saw him when he was only a table length away. He saw the surprise on her face, then a curiously blank expression. Slowly, she stood up and came over to him. He could see tears running down her cheeks. Wordlessly, she put her arms around him and hugged him. He returned the gesture, feeling his own eyes brimming over.

After nearly a minute he felt her stiffen and pull back. When he looked down she was looking up at him. In that instant he felt a knife pierce his very soul.

“Oh Daddy,” she whispered. “Why did you do it?”

* * * * *

Tarns toyed with his pen, unscrewing the cap and removing the ink cartridge and spring, then putting it back together. It was a nervous habit he had had since junior high. *Maybe that was what led me into science*, he mused. The necessity to take things apart and see how they worked.

Maybe I should have been a garbage collector instead.

He glanced up again at the knot of students on the far side of the dining hall. His daughter was not with them; she was sitting by herself at the next table, head bowed, with her face in her hands. From time to time her shoulders shook. Tarns did not know if she was crying because she was ashamed of what her father had done, or if she was afraid of what the other students would do. A part of him wanted to scream, *What difference would it make? Just get it over with.*

Yet he didn't want to hurt Michelle any more than he already had.

One of the group of students glanced his way with an unreadable expression. Only two weeks ago, he thought, he would have never seen such an expression on a high school face. Maybe among inner city students, on some young man with a hopeless future. But not here. Most of the students here were from upper middle class homes, such as his own. Only two weeks ago that same young man would have been smiling at some young woman, his own daughter, perhaps.

Tarns doubted that the police would even drive past the school. They had far more than enough to keep themselves occupied elsewhere.

The students were now a law unto themselves.

And why not? Tarns thought bitterly. The generation of their parents—his generation—had done nothing except condemn them to a lingering death with no hope of even leaving behind descendants. Eat, drink and be merry...

The knot of students was breaking up now. Several of them went and sat down at a nearby table. Three came purposefully toward Tarns. He sat unmoving, watching them approach. They halted in front of him.

The leader, a thin boy with wire rim glasses and pimples on his nose, cleared his throat. “Mr. Tarns,” he said in a tone that struggled for manhood, “we are placing you under arrest for crimes against humanity.”

5

Where did they all come from? Tarns wondered silently, gazing out at the huge, seething throng that filled the auditorium from wall to wall and lapped out into the halls. *Who told?* He shook his head slowly. After all, it no longer mattered.

The stage had been transformed. For all he knew they were using props from some student presentation, performed back in days when the sky didn't pour down poison and people looked forward to taking vacations at the beach. They were pretty authentic, he had to admit. The judge's bench could have come from some city courtroom. The witness stand was a bit out-of-place, but it was at least well made.

The gallery was simply a free-for-all. Some people had dragged in their own chairs. Others had swiped them from classrooms. Still others were camped out on the floor as if this whole affair were merely an afternoon picnic. The only thing they had in common was their hostility.

The judge was the same pimply faced boy who had led the gang that arrested him in the first place. His name, Tarns had learned, was Robert MacLeash. He remembered the name vaguely from something Michelle had once mentioned. He was quite an intelligent lad, someone that,

under different circumstances, Tarns might have tried to recruit to come to Ohio State and study science. Maybe that was what had made the difference.

Most of the others had wanted to haul Tarns outside and execute him on the spot. They had discussed various means, ranging from simply taking a gun and blowing his brains out to staking him out in the rain to die slowly from radiation poisoning. It was MacLeash who had at least insisted on the appearance of a trial. Tarns still wasn't sure if it came from some innate sense of American justice or from the desire to drag things out and give everyone in the city a chance to see him on public display.

The so-called "trial" bore little resemblance to any American courtroom performance that he had ever seen. Rather, it was more of an opportunity to parade his crimes before the public than an effort to determine guilt or innocence. Again, he found that he simply didn't care. *Yes, Your Honor, Lord, God... I plead guilty. Just get it over with, then take me out and shoot me or hang me or whatever you're going to do to me.*

The only one who cared was Michelle.

She was in a chair near the front of the auditorium. Several times he had noted other students trying to talk to her. It was impossible to hear her response, but in the end none of them stayed. Most of the time she sat with her head bowed.

Twice, she had looked up at him.

And each time he had felt the sting of tears in his own eyes.

He had never imagined it possible to both love a person and hate them at the same time. Or more accurately, he had never imagined the full depth that both feelings could take. He still recalled instances in his youth, before he met and married Sharon, of falling in love and being rejected. In at least one instance he had felt afterward that his love had turned to hatred. He now realized that he had barely tasted the surface of the terrible emotional conflict that his daughter was now going through.

Oh, Michelle!

His torment was interrupted by the pounding of the judge's gavel. His head snapped around. MacLeash was looking at him with a self-righteous expression. On the other side of the bench two more boys stood, one of them a huge hunk of a football player, and the other a seemingly ordinary looking fellow with a thin mustache. The mustachioed fellow had played the role of prosecutor, in this instance merely an endless tirade of accusations and insults designed to goad the assembled mob into a frenzy of hatred. The football goon called himself bailiff, but had acted more like the prosecutor's hired muscle.

There was no jury.

"All rise!" the muscled goon bawled. He glared at Tarns as if daring him to defy his order. Tarns levered himself to his feet.

MacLeash cocked his head slightly to one side, as if Tarns were an interesting but disgusting specimen under a microscope. Then he turned back to the audience. An expectant silence had stilled the low murmur of quiet conversation.

"Ladies and gentlemen," MacLeash began in a voice that cracked slightly. Under other circumstances Tarns might have laughed; here was a nerd if there ever was one. The pencilneck continued.

"The court has heard the arguments presented by the prosecution. The defendant, one Abraham Lance Tarns, has been accused of the crime of mass genocide, along with several other lesser charges. The penalty, if found guilty, is death."

At that, a low murmur rose from the crowd. "Yeah! Kill the murdering freak!" someone shouted. "String him up by the thumbs and shoot him in the belly!" Tarns saw Michelle's head whip around, a shocked and hurt expression on her face.

MacLeash rapped for order and the room quieted. "The court acknowledges public opinion," he intoned. "However, given the gravity of the matter, we feel that we must not rush to a decision.

Therefore, at this time, I would like to give anyone present who wishes an opportunity to speak on behalf of the defendant.”

A moment of silence followed, then several members of the audience yelled at once. “Drop dead!” “No way! He’s guilty!” “Are you crazy?” “Kill him!” “Drag him outside and blow his freaking brains out!” Several people yelled “Guilty!” at once, then repeated it like a chant. The chant grew, until after about ten seconds the entire auditorium thundered with it.

Suddenly, the rhythmic invocation of verdict ceased as quickly as it had started, and a hush fell. Into that hush came growing murmurs. Tarns followed the general gaze.

Michelle was making her way up to the platform.

* * * * *

Her face was streaked with tears and her lower lip was trembling. She shot her father a gaze that lay somewhere between longing love and the hurt of betrayal. Then she turned to MacLeash.

“Robbie, you can’t do this!”

At that, a number of people out in the audience shouted epithets. A couple of football player types got up and started for the front. MacLeash waved them back. They stopped at the foot of the platform, but did not return to their seats.

MacLeash stood up. “I don’t understand you, Michelle. I thought this was your idea.”

Her face crumpled. “I never meant it this way!” she cried. “I just wanted to... I mean...” She stopped, confused. “You heard what he told you, didn’t you? He didn’t do it! He even tried to stop it! What’s the matter with you?”

“He did enough!” someone in the audience yelled. “He invented the whole thing. Now he’s killed us all. Why don’t we just tie him up outside and let him have a taste of his own medicine!” Shouts of approval greeted the suggestion.

Michelle whirled around. “No!”

MacLeash came around from behind the bench, and the bailiff goon joined him. “Look, Michelle, what difference does it make?” he demanded. “Like the man said, we’re all going to die. I don’t care if he is your dear old dad, it’s his fault. Yeah, I heard what he said. But if he’d kept his mouth shut in the first place none of this would have happened. So he’s guilty.” His voice held a flat finality.

Michelle stamped up to him, fists clenched at her sides. “What difference does it make? He’s not your father. He’s mine!” Abruptly, she started sobbing. Turning towards Tarns, she said, “I’m sorry, Daddy. I’m sorry.” She started toward him.

The bailiff goon came up behind her and grabbed her by the shoulders. Yelling, she twisted and elbowed him in the gut. The goon hunched over slightly with an “Oof!”, but managed to hold on to her left arm. She whirled and slapped him in the face. He snarled and grabbed her other wrist. At that moment the mustachioed prosecutor came up and grabbed her from the right side. In a few seconds they had her firmly held between them, one to each arm. She continued to struggle and scream. The babble from the audience was deafening.

Tarns was up and out of his chair. Throughout this mockery of a trial he had sat still, unable to rouse himself. He had apathetically answered the questions put to him and described the entire series of events. When the crowd had begun chanting “Guilty!” he had silently agreed. *Yes, Your Honor, Lord, God... I plead guilty.*

But Michelle was innocent. During the trial, the only thing that had had continued to pierce his soul with grief was the knowledge that she, too, was doomed. And now these two apes were manhandling her, hurting her, abusing her...

He had nearly reached her, drawn by the pleading look in her eyes, when the two football goons that had been standing at the base of the platform grabbed him by the arms. Michelle screamed again. “No! Leave him alone!” She continued to struggle and sob.

MacLeash said something to her that Tarns couldn’t quite catch, and she nearly escaped from the grasp of her captors in her rage. She spat at MacLeash, yelling epithets in his face. He

backed away hastily, then came over to Tarns. The football goons held him securely. He did not attempt to struggle.

“Mr. Tarns,” MacLeash said, almost quietly. “In another few weeks, in spite of our best efforts, most of us are going to either be starving to death or else puking our guts up from radiation sickness. Personally, the prospect does not appeal to me. I would have liked to have had a chance to grow up, go to college, even become a scientist like you. In another reality I could have admired you. Instead, you have killed me.

“Maybe my reaction is childish, even infantile. But the truth is that I no longer care. So in order to satisfy my desire for revenge, as well as please this mob gathered here for this purpose, I am declaring you guilty and ordering that you be taken outside and tied to the flagpole. There you can die from radiation poisoning yourself, if you don’t starve to death first.”

Tarns stared. As he had earlier surmised, MacLeash was an intelligent, articulate young man. What if he had lived? Become a scientist like himself, just as he had said?

Would he have done better with the responsibilities thrust upon him?

“Son,” Tarns said quietly, “I understand your bitterness. But as you have me hauled away, ask yourself what you would have done in my place, had you been the one with the idea instead.”

MacLeash glared at him for a moment, then looked down. “I don’t know,” he admitted in a mumble. “But it’s too late now.” He lifted his head again and motioned to the goons. “Take him away.” With that, he turned his back on Tarns.

As the goons dragged him across the platform he caught a final glimpse of Michelle. “No, Daddy, please!” she cried out, still struggling against the hands holding her, trying to follow him. Then he and his escort reached the steps and he was hauled down and she vanished from sight.

The crowd parted to form a corridor, lined with screaming, hate-filled faces. As he passed, people spat upon him. Fists reached past the goons to pound him. Rocks, bits of debris and epithets pelted him. “Murderer!” “Nazi!” “Muslim terrorist!”

I don’t even believe in God, he told himself as he heard the last name. He recalled his promise, back on New Guinea, to convert if a merciful Deity had chosen to spare the world from paying the price of his big mouth. None had. If there was a God, he decided, then His ways were incomprehensible to man.

They reached the door, and the goons paused to don rain gear. Another student, a girl a year or so younger than Michelle, ran up with a very large umbrella. She would have been quite pretty, Tarns decided, if her face hadn’t been so twisted with hate. The large double doors opened, and cold, rain-washed air blew in.

Instinctively, Tarns flinched. The goons snarled and thrust him forward, and the girl followed with the umbrella. Behind them, Tarns sensed the sea of humanity pressed against the entrance, held back by an invisible barrier of fear. Radioactive rain beat against the umbrella with a steady rattle.

The sky was dark with the heavy clouds. Puddles dotted the parking lot, interspersed with randomly parked cars. The grass was already turning brown. The street was deserted. Tarns thought he saw a dog, almost skeletal, with most of its hair gone, huddled near a dying hedge on the other side. Lightning flashed, followed several seconds later by a dull rumble of thunder.

They reached the flagpole. There was no flag waving; Tarns recalled some regulation against flying the National Symbol in inclement weather. He snorted quietly. *Yeah, inclement weather. Wait until you see the next forecast...*

As they turned Tarns around to face away from the pole he saw that the bailiff goon had accompanied them. He grinned, a nasty expression that revealed a row of teeth that hadn’t seen a toothbrush in quite a while, then held up a set of handcuffs. Going around behind Tarns, he grabbed his wrists. Tarns felt first one cuff, then the other snap over his wrists. He was securely held.

The bailiff scuttled back under the umbrella and favored Tarns with one last expression of combined hate and satisfied revenge. "Die slow, killer," he snarled. Then the three goons and the girl holding the umbrella moved away. Shorn of its protection, the rain now cascaded over Tarns, soaking him to the skin in icy rivulets. He sighed, then lowered his head and prepared to die.

* * * * *

Tarns raised his head, startled back into awareness by the staccato roar of exhaust thundering out of glass-pak mufflers. A sports car full of hoodlums masquerading as high school students whipped past. Tires squealed, a window rolled down, and an empty bottle of whiskey shot out and sailed past his head. Curses followed, then the car vanished down the street.

Another bolt of lightning struck fairly close, illuminating the school building in the gathering gloom of nightfall. In the distance Tarns could see the orange flicker of flames and hear occasional yells and gunshots. Once, something exploded less than a mile away.

He looked up into the dark heavens, ignoring the deadly raindrops falling on his naked eyeballs. Only a few hundred miles away the universe went on as it had since its unknown and unknowable beginning, however many eons ago in the dreams of whatever gods inhabited super-space. *Do You care?* he wondered. *Are You really there? I said I didn't believe in You.*

Was all this really necessary?

Couldn't You have found a less drastic solution to whatever problems You had with the human race?

Someday aliens will probably discover this solar system, he mused. What would they think when they find the wreckage of our once proud civilization? Would they know what happened?

Maybe they would simply consider humanity one of the stupider races, one simply destined to die because it couldn't find the brains to go on living.

A rustling sound grabbed Tarns' attention and his head whipped around. He saw a darker shadow moving toward him, walking through the matted, dying grass. For a moment he stiffened; in spite of his intellectual resignation to death, the instinctive will to live still managed to send a squirt of adrenaline into his system.

The figure broke into a run. An instant later he recognized her as she threw her arms around him, sobbing and crying, "Daddy! Oh, Daddy!"

Tarns felt his control going as he wanted so much to reach out and embrace her himself, but could not because of the handcuffs that held him to the flagpole. Instead, he felt his own tears mingling with the rainwater running down his face, and allowed his precious daughter to hold him.

After a few minutes he raised his head. She was looking at him, her face full of broken love, her lips trembling as she fought for control. He noticed that she was not wearing a raincoat. Her hair was soaked as if she had been taking a shower.

"Oh, sweetheart," he croaked in a half-sob. "I love you so much."

She suddenly reached into a jacket pocket and pulled out something small and silvery. "I got the key, Daddy," she said, half-whispering, as if she were afraid that someone would be standing nearby, listening.

He started to open his mouth to thank her, then stopped. Deep within, he could feel the hidden knot of courage, present within every human being, finally begin to make its presence known. Ever since that dreadful day in New Guinea when he had witnessed the explosion and realized what he had done, he had often told himself that death would be preferable to whatever shred of life might still remain. But he had been afraid. Simply afraid.

Now, he found that he was afraid no longer.

Slowly, gently, he shook his head.

"No."

Michelle's mouth dropped open in shock. "But Daddy, you'll die!" The tears started again.

He shook his head again. "It's already too late," he said. Actually, he didn't know. Maybe it was even true. He had been out in the poisonous rain long enough to have taken a significant dose of radiation. At the very least he faced severe illness. He imagined that he could already feel his guts starting to churn within him.

"What do you mean, 'too late'?" his daughter asked.

He looked directly into her eyes, willing compassion. "I've already been out in the rain too long, sweetheart. It's too late to save me. Besides," he added, "if your friends find out that you turned me loose they'll probably kill you. I couldn't stand that."

Her face crumpled. "But didn't you say we're all going to die anyway? Why should I care if they kill me now?"

"I care," Tarns answered quietly but firmly.

Now Michelle was sobbing freely again. She threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly. "Why?" she demanded in a muffled voice. "What difference does it make if I die now or later?" She lifted her face.

"Your mother needs you," Tarns said, gently.

"Mom?"

"Yes, Mom. Look," he went on, "whether or not they kill you, they'll hunt me down for sure. I can never go home. That's the first place they'll look. And Andy's gone. You're the last one left. She needs you."

"I still don't get it," Michelle insisted. "If we're all going to die, what difference does it make?"

"It'll make a difference in how you spend your last days," Tarns said. Inwardly, something died the moment he said "last days." Up until then, a part of him had been able to pretend that this wasn't real, that he would wake up and find the sun shining and everything all right. The act of saying those two simple words had finally forced reality upon him.

"I love you, Daddy," Michelle said again.

"And I love you, sweetheart," Tarns answered softly. "I just wish I could have given you a better life. I'm sorry. For everything."

She bit her lip. "I know," she said in an almost inaudible voice. Suddenly, she squeezed him tightly once more, then pulled back. "Good bye, Daddy," she sobbed. She turned and stumbled away into the dark, weeping.

Tarns watched her go. In less than a minute she had vanished into the night. He continued to stare at the spot where he had seen her last, listening to the sounds of a dying world off in the distance. Then he started singing softly.

"We had joy, we had fun, we had seasons in the sun.

But the wine and the song, like the seasons, have all gone..."

Epilogue

There was no summer that year. The cloud cover kept temperatures low enough for glaciers to march down as far south as Texas. Slowly, the wound in the Pacific Ocean healed and filled in, and the rain ceased. Eventually, the sun shone once again on the planet Earth.

But there was nobody around to care.

The End