

Man Proposes

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At first what they said made little sense. Words were no more than sounds - some more familiar than others, but slowly words and sounds became clearer and more meaningful and now above the ringing in his ears, he could understand snatches of what they said. Now he could recognise the clang of the bolts on the heavy, steel door each time they opened it; he could sense them standing around his couch, looking down at him.

"Our numbers grow fewer."

The voice rose and fell with a strange cadency as if relayed over an immeasurable distance.

"In time, there will be none of us left."

He felt himself forming the words with his own lips as they were spoken, whispering them into his face-mask as a secret is whispered into the ear of a loved one.

"What science has foretold, will be - all mankind will die and you alone will live, Here, in your crypt, isolated and protected by all Man's ingenuity, you will live."

The voice echoes and rumbled about him, then faded into a silence filled only with the sounds of his own breathing.

The sound of the voice startled him. Each word was spoken with a clarity unknown in those other voices of long ago. He tried to open his eyes, to turn and see the speaker.

The voice was joined by another.

"Do as we tell you and there is nothing to fear."

He remembered then, what they had told him and he felt again, the old fear welling up inside him. These were the voices of people long since dead. They were the voices of doctors and scientists he had once known - voices imprinted within the endless circuits of his own mind by some fiendish method of science and psychiatry. 'Advanced communication', they had called it; voices which at some predetermined time, would arise from the depths of his subconscious to instruct and reassure.

He opened his eyes.

A strange half-light filtered into the chamber. He could barely make out the rough, rock roof as a grey blur above his head.

The voice in his mind spoke again. "You will wake quite easily. It is much like sodium pentothal - one moment you will be semi-conscious, the next, wide awake."

He flexed the fingers of each hand. He moved his head on the hard, plastic headrest. The place on his left arm where they had given him the injection, still smarted painfully as if the needle had been plunged in only a moment ago.

"There will be no lasting after-effects - a slight pain behind the eyes perhaps; a metallic taste in the mouth; some slight difficulty at first, in adjusting your breathing to its normal rate and depth. Perhaps there will be a ringing in your ears. But all this will soon pass."

Another voice joined the first, and another. "There is a tablet in your left breast pocket; it is sealed in a capsule."

"Undo your air-purifier mask and suck the tablet."

"Do not move until it is completely dissolved. Do you understand that?"

He found himself nodding his head as if the words had only just been spoken.

He undid the straps on the face-mask; he removed the mask and placed it carefully at his side. He took a deep breath and, when he exhaled, he watched the moist air mist the inner surface of the quartzalloy dome above his head.

He felt for the capsule. It was a thin, aluminium tube a half-inch long with a rip-tab at one end. He tore the tab and the small, white disc fell into the palm of his hand. The tablet was bitter to the taste and it brought a strange, tingling sensation to his mouth.

A woman's voice came to him now. A husky, sensuous voice which filled his whole being with a vague yet intense longing and made him stir uneasily on his couch.

"When the tablet has dissolved, pull the release handle at your side. You may then sit at the edge of the couch. Sit there for a while before you try to walk."

He gripped the stainless steel handle at his right side and pulled it towards him. The dome made a hollow clang as it fell away and he felt the fresh air cool against his face. Slowly, carefully, he swung his legs off the couch and sat on its edge. Above the ringing in his ears, he could hear the insistent drip of water.

The couch stood high off the floor; it could have been a narrow, contoured operating table in a hospital and when he sat on its edge, his feet barely touched the ground.

Things were coming into proper focus now. The darkness was not so dark and soon he could make out the four, rough, rock walls of the small chamber and he could see the round, gleaming door with its shiny handles and levers. Water dripped steadily from the rock above the door and a wide, dark pool of it lay near his feet.

He moved a few steps from the couch and his cloths crackled and rustled with an unfamiliar sound; he felt the material with enquiring fingers and found that he was dressed in a type of one-piece overall, well-provided with pockets and pouches. The material, some synthetic fibre, was smooth and cold to the touch and glowed in the darkness with a strange, luminescent sheen.

"In the ready-cabinet on the far wall, you will find food and weapons."

Again the voice startled him. It seemed to echo about him in the small chamber, to blot out the ringing in his ears and mask the dull, monotonous sound of the dripping water.

They had tried to explain, of course - they had tried to tell him as best they could, what it would be like. They had tried to warn him of the weirdness and the startling reality of these voices that spoke in his own mind only, but each time he heard them, he was filled with surprise and disbelief.

He shuffled across to the long, stainless steel cabinet which hung on the wall, reached up and pulled the stubby release handle and the doors slid back easily and smoothly. Inside, in their sealed eternapacks, there were food, tools, weapons and a dozen other things of which he might have immediate need.

"Take a rifle, a length of rope, matches, a hatchet, a pack of food."

He picked up a light, automatic carbine, stripped off the tough, plastic eternapack covering and examined the weapon carefully. It was as shiny and new as the day it had been packed and stored away.

He unpacked and put in his pockets, a tin of special rations, a packet of matches, five loaded magazines for the carbine. To his belt he fastened the coil of thin, spun-metal rope, the short, double-headed, alloy axe and a long stainless steel knife in its stainless steel sheath.

He turned to the door and noticed then, for the first time, the larger, black box which stood in his way. Once, perhaps four feet square, it now had an odd, crumpled appearance. One metal side panel had fallen off and when he poked it with the butt of his carbine, the whole thing collapsed in a flurry of dust. He bent closer to look and among the bits of rusted metal and decayed plastic, he saw fragments of wire and the now-blank faces of dials and meters. A strange tangle of rusted leads led from it to the couch.

The fear hugged him tighter now. It was cool in the vault which was ventilated in some way unknown to him, but the sweat stood out on his brow and his hands felt clammy and cold.

He stepped over the pile of dust and decayed metal which long ago, had been a sophisticated piece of electronics. Wired to him as he lay asleep on his couch in the sealed capsule, it had told them, while they were here to be told, about the state of his mind.

He turned to the door and the moment he touched it, fear seized him again and icy fingers clutched at his throat. What if the door was jammed, the passage blocked! But the heavy door opened easily; the bolt clicked back, the seals parted and as it swung open, it sighed on its hinges with that old familiar sound.

Without looking back, he stepped out into the tunnel and shuffled slowly up its gently sloping floor and as he walked, the dust of ages whispered around his feet. It rose to his face in a fine cloud and smelt and tasted of death and decay.

There were many voices now. Each spoke in turn but some, in their eagerness, interrupted others and merged with them.

"Your mind has been conditioned but there will still be surprise and amazement."

"And fear. You will still be afraid."

"There will be shock and fear. No human mind can absorb all that..."

"You will be afraid. We have told you what to expect..."

"Even now, you know what you will find, but still there will be a sense of shock, disbelief."

"Walk slowly to the tunnel's end - to the mouth of the cave and look!"

The place was different from when he had seen it last. The narrow tunnel opened out into the wide, high-mouthed cave as before, but now the cave was cluttered with blocks of rock that had fallen from the mountain face above and from the roof of the cave itself. Tall trees, wind-bent and leafless, grew out of the rubble of stone. He stretched out his arm and touched the smooth trunk of the nearest tree. He picked up a fragment of broken rock and felt the cold weight of it in his hand.

He clutched the weapon tighter and stumbled across the jumble of rocks to the cave's edge.

Below, there were only smooth plains of wind-ruffled grass. The low hills on his left, were covered with a dense forest of unfamiliar trees. An unknown stream, sparkling in the bright sunlight, wandered between the hills. Birds fluttered and sang in the tall bushes which grew about him; one settled on his shoulder and peered at him with curious eyes.

Beyond, lay the blue, eternal sea and, in-between, where once the City had stood, rose a huge, formless mound of dust and rubble.

He turned away and now the voices spoke again - eagerly excitedly. Soon they would be silent and his mind would be filled with its own thoughts only.

"A thousand years you have slept! A thousand years while man and his cities have died and decayed!"

"A thousand years!" He shouted the words aloud and the birds wheeled away from him and answered his voice with their own harsh cries.

The voices crowded in on him again. Softly they spoke - insistent, full of hope.

"A thousand years you have slept."

"In you, all mankind has placed its trust."

"Civilisation will grow again - not in your time, but in your children's children's time."

The voices grew louder now. They joined in a chorus which shouted the words in his mind so that he dropped his weapon to clap his hands over his ears as if to shut them out.

"As science has destroyed mankind, so will science recreate it and Man will walk this Earth."

And when it was quiet and the voices had ceased to shout and even the birds had flown away, he fell to his knees and put his arms around the boulder before him and felt it smooth and cold against his face.

The second tunnel was cold and dank. It led far down and wound back upon itself and as he stumbled down its length, he passed the sealed doors of a dozen other man-made caverns carved deep in the living rock.

Here, in these vaults, was the complete record of Man's achievements; here were the sealed cabinets of microfilm which described his inventions, philosophies, religions, sciences. Here filed and catalogued in their individual, time-resistant containers, were examples of his technology, of his arts. Man's greatest storehouse of accumulated knowledge awaited only his rebirth.

He reached the tunnel's end and when he touched the levers, the door sighed on its hinges and swung open.

The woman lay beneath a quartzite dome just as he had lain. Her long hair burnt golden in the dim light; it partly covered the dull, black respirator mask which hid her face. Her bare arms were folded on her breasts. The tight-fitting suit moulded the curve of her thighs and hips. In a moment now, she would wake.

He grasped the release handle on the outside of the dome and as the dome fell away, he kicked it aside.

He sat on the narrow bed and waited and the voices seem to whisper in his mind as if from far away - "Adam and Eve; Adam and Eve."

And then he stretched out his hand and touched her arm and felt the flesh turn to dust beneath his fingers...