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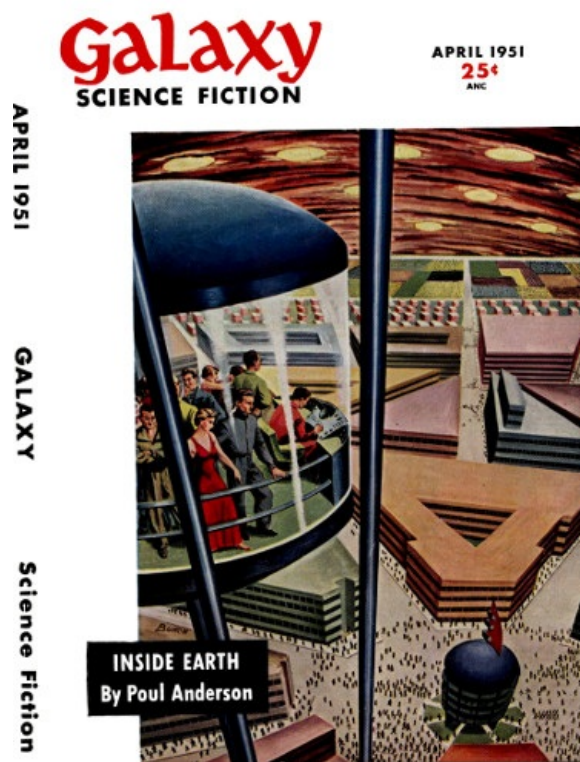
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK I, THE UNSPEAKABLE ***



I, the Unspeakable

By WALT SHELDON

Illustrated by LOUIS MARCHETTI

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**"What's in a name?" might be very dangerous
to ask in certain societies, in which sticks
and stones are also a big problem!**

I fought to be awake. I was dreaming, but I think I must have blushed. I must have blushed in my sleep.

"Do it!" she said. *"Please do it! For me!"*

It was the voice that always came, low, intense, seductive, the sound of your hand on silk ... and to a citizen of Northem, a conformist, it was shocking. I was a conformist then; I was still one that morning.

I awoke. The glowlight was on, slowly increasing. I was in my living machine in Center Four, where I belonged, and all the familiar things were about me, reality was back, but I was breathing very hard.

I lay on the pneumo a while before getting up. I looked at the chroner: 0703 hours, Day 17, Month IX, New Century Three. My morning nuro-tablets had already popped from the tube, and the timer had begun to boil an egg. The egg was there because the realfood allotment had been increased last month. The balance of trade with Southem had just swung a decimal or two our way.

I rose finally, stepped to the mirror, switched it to positive and looked at myself. New wrinkles—or maybe just a deepening of the old ones. It was beginning to show; the past two years were leaving traces.

I hadn't worried about my appearance when I'd been with the Office of Weapons. There, I'd been able to keep pretty much to myself, doing research on magnetic mechanics as applied to space drive. But other jobs, where you had to be among people, might be different. I needed every possible thing in my favor.

Yes, I still hoped for a job, even after two years. I still meant to keep on plugging, making the rounds.

I'd go out again today.

The timer clicked and my egg was ready. I swallowed the tablets and then took the egg to the table to savor it and make it last.

As I leaned forward to sit, the metal tag dangled from my neck, catching the glowlight. My identity tag.

Everything came back in a rush—

My name. The dream and *her* voice. And her suggestion.

Would I dare? Would I start out this very morning and take the risk, the terrible risk?

You remember renumbering. Two years ago. You remember how it was then; how everybody looked forward to his new designation, and how everybody made jokes about the way the letters came out, and how all the records were for a while fouled up beyond recognition.

The telecomics kidded renumbering. One went a little too far and they psycho-scanned him and then sent him to Marscol as a dangerous nonconform.

If you were disappointed with your new designation, you didn't complain. You didn't want a sudden visit from the Deacons during the night.

There had to be renumbering. We all understood that. With the population of Northem already past two billion, the old designations were too clumsy. Renumbering was efficient. It contributed to the good of Northem. It helped advance the warless struggle with Southem.

The equator is the boundary. I understand that once there was a political difference and that the two superstates sprawled longitudinally, not latitudinally, over the globe. Now they are pretty much the same. There is the truce, and they are both geared for war. They are both efficient states, as tightly controlled as an experiment with enzymes, as microsurgery, as the temper of a diplomat.

We were renumbered, then, in Northem. You know the system: everybody now has six digits and an additional prefix or suffix of four letters. Stateleader, for instance, has the designation AAAA-111/111. Now, to address somebody by calling off four letters is a little clumsy. We try to pronounce them when they are pronounceable. That is, no one says to Stateleader, "Good morning, A-A-A-A." They say, "Good morning, Aaaa."

Reading the last quote, I notice a curious effect. It says what I feel. Of course I didn't feel that way on that particular morning. I was still conformal; the last thing in my mind was that I would infract and be psycho-scanned.

Four letters then, and in many cases a pronounceable four letter word.

A four letter word.

Yes, you suspect already. You know what a four letter word can be.

Mine was.

It was unspeakable.

The slight weight on my forehead reminded me that I still wore my sleep-learner. I'd been studying administrative cybernetics, hoping to qualify in that field, although it was a poor substitute for a space drive expert. I removed the band and stepped across the room and turned off the oscillator. I went back to my egg and my bitter memories.

I will never forget the first day I received my new four letter combination and reported it to my chief, as required. I was unthinkably embarrassed. He didn't say anything. He just swallowed and choked and became crimson when he saw it. He didn't dare pass it to his secretarial engineer; he went to the administrative circuits and registered it himself.

I can't blame him for easing me out. He was trying to run an efficient organization, after all, and no doubt I upset its efficiency. My work was important—magnetic mechanics was the only way to handle quanta reaction, or the so-called non-energy drive, and was therefore the answer to feasible space travel beyond our present limit of Mars—and there were frequent inspection tours by Big Wheels and Very Important Persons.

Whenever anyone, especially a woman, asked my name, the embarrassment would become a crackling electric field all about us. The best tactic was just not to answer.

The chief called me in one day. He looked haggard.

"Er—old man," he said, not quite able to bring himself to utter my name, "I'm going to have to switch you to another department. How would you like to work on nutrition kits? Very interesting work."

"Nutrition kits? *Me?* On nutrition kits?"

"Well, I—er—know it sounds unusual, but it justifies. I just had the cybs work it over in the light of present regulations, and it justifies."

Everything had to justify, of course. Every act in the monthly report had to be covered by regulations and cross-regulations. Of course there were so many regulations that if you just took the time to work it out, you could justify damn near anything. I knew what the chief was up to. Just to remove me from my post would have taken a year of applications and hearings and innumerable visits to the capital in Center One. But if I should infract—deliberately infract—it would enable the chief to let me go. The equivalent of resigning.

"I'll infract," I said. "Rather than go on nutrition kits, I'll infract."

He looked vastly relieved. "Uh—fine," he said. "I rather hoped you would."

It took a week or so. Then I was on Non-Productive status and issued an N/P book for my necessities. Very few luxury coupons in the N/P book. I didn't really mind at first. My new living machine was smaller, but basically comfortable, and since I was still a loyal member of the state and a verified conformist, I wouldn't starve.

But I didn't know what I was in for.

I went from bureau to bureau, office to office, department to department—any place where they might use a space drive expert. A pattern began to emerge; the same story everywhere. When I mentioned my specialty they would look delighted. When I handed them my tag and they saw my name, they would go into immediate polite confusion. As soon as they recovered they would say they'd call me if anything turned up....

A few weeks of this and I became a bit dazed.

And then there was the problem of everyday existence. You might say it's lucky to be an N/P for a while. I've heard people say that. Basic needs provided, worlds of leisure time; on the surface it sounds attractive.

But let me give you an example. Say it is monthly realfood day. You go to the store, your mouth already watering in anticipation. You take your place in line and wait for your package. The distributor takes your coupon book and is all ready to reach for your package—and then he sees the fatal letters N/P. Non-Producer. A drone, a drain upon the State. You can see his stare curdle. He scowls at the book again.

"Not sure this is in order. Better go to the end of the line. We'll check it later."

You know what happens before the end of the line reaches the counter. No more packages.

Well, I couldn't get myself off N/P status until I got a post, and with my name I *couldn't* get a post.

Nor could I change my name. You know what happens when you try to change something already on the records. The very idea of wanting change implies criticism of the State. Unthinkable behavior.

That was why this curious dream voice shocked me so. The thing that it suggested was quite as embarrassing as its non-standard, emotional, provocative tone.

Bear with me; I'm getting to the voice—to *her*—in a moment.

I want to tell you first about the loneliness, the terrible loneliness. I could hardly join group games at any of the rec centers. I could join no special interest clubs or even State Loyalty chapters. Although I dabbled with theoretical research in my own quarters, I could scarcely submit any findings for publication—not with my name attached. A pseudonym would have been non-regulation and illegal.

But there was the worst thing of all. I could not mate.

Funny, I hadn't thought about mating until it became impossible. I remember the first time, out of sheer idleness, I wandered into a Eugenic Center. I filled out my form very carefully and submitted it for analysis and assignment. The clerk saw my name, and did the usual double-take. He coughed and swallowed and fidgeted.

He said, "Of course you understand that we must submit your application to the woman authorized to spend time in the mating booths with you, and that she has the right to refuse."

"Yes, I understand that."

"M'm," he said, and dismissed me with a nod.

I waited for a call in the next few weeks, still hoping, but I knew no woman would consent to meet a man with my name, let alone enter a mating booth with him.

The urge to reproduce myself became unbearable. I concocted all sorts of wild schemes.

I might infract socially and be classified a nonconform and sent to Marscol. I'd heard rumors that in that desolate land, on that desolate planet, both mingling and mating were rather disgustingly unrestricted. Casual mating would be terribly dangerous, of course, with all the wild irradiated genes from the atomic decade still around, but I felt I'd be willing to risk that. Well, almost....

About then I began to have these dreams. As I've told you, in the dream there was only this woman's seductive voice. The first time I heard it I awoke in a warm sweat and swore something had gone wrong with the sleep-learner. You never hear the actual words with this machine, of course; you simply absorb the concepts unconsciously. Still, it seemed an explanation. I checked thoroughly. Nothing wrong.

The next night I heard the woman's voice again.

"*Try it,*" she said. "*Do it. Start tomorrow to get your name changed. There will be a way. There*

must be a way. The rules are so mixed up that a clever man can do almost anything. Do it, please—for me."

She was not only trying to get me to commit nonconformity, but making heretical remarks besides. I awoke that time and half-expected a Deacon to pop out of the tube and turn his electric club upon me.

And I heard the voice nearly every night.

It hammered away.

"What if you do fail? Almost anything would be better than the miserable existence you're leading now!"

One morning I even caught myself wondering just how I'd go about this idea of hers. Wondering what the first step might be.

She seemed to read my thoughts. That night she said, *"Consult the cybs in the Govpub office. If you look hard enough and long enough, you'll find a way."*

Now, on this morning of the seventeenth day in the ninth month, I ate my boiled egg slowly and actually toyed with the idea. I thought of being on productive status again. I had almost lost my fanatical craving to be useful to the State, but I did want to be busy—desperately. I didn't want to be despised any more. I didn't want to be lonely. I wanted to reproduce myself.

I made my decision suddenly. Waves of emotion carried me along. I got up, crossed the room to the directory, and pushbuttoned to find the location of the nearest Govpub office.

I didn't know what would happen and almost didn't care.

II

Like most important places, the Govpub Office in Center Four was underground. I could have taken a tunnelcar more quickly, but it seemed pleasanter to travel topside. Or maybe I just wanted to put this off a bit. Think about it. Compose myself.

At the entrance to the Govpub warren there was a big director cyb, a plate with a speaker and switch. The sign on it said to switch it on and get close to the speaker and I did.

The cyb's mechanical voice—they never seem to get the "th" sounds right—said, "This is Branch Four of the Office of Government Publications. Say, 'Publications,' and/or, 'Information desired,' as thoroughly and concisely as possible. Use approved voice and standard phraseology."

Well, simple enough so far. I had always rather prided myself on my knack for approved voice, those flat, emotionless tones that indicate efficiency. And I would never forget how to speak Stasese. I said, "Applicant desires all pertinent information relative assignment, change or amendment of State Serial designations, otherwise generally referred to as nomenclature."

There was a second's delay while the audio patterns tripped relays and brought the memory tubes in.

Then the cyb said, "Proceed to Numbering and Identity section. Consult alphabetical list and diagram on your left for location of same."

"Thanks," I said absent-mindedly.

I started to turn away and the cyb said, "Information on tanks is military information and classified. State authorization for—"

I switched it off.

Numbering and Identity wasn't hard to find. I took the shaft to the proper level and then it was only a walk of a few hundred yards through the glowlit corridors.

N. & I. turned out to be a big room, somewhat circular, very high-ceilinged, with banks of cyb controls covering the upper walls. Narrow passageways, like spokes, led off in several directions. There was an information desk in the center of the room.

I looked that way and my heart went into free fall.

There was a girl at the information desk. An exceptionally attractive girl. She was well within the limits of acceptable standard, and her features were even enough, and her hair a middle blonde—but she had something else. Hard to describe. It was a warmth, a buoyancy, a sense of life and intense animation. It didn't exactly show; it radiated. It seemed to sing out from her clear complexion, from her figure, which even a tunic could not hide, from everything about her.

And if I were to state my business, I would have to tell her my name.

I almost backed out right then. I stopped momentarily. And then common sense took hold and I

realized that if I were to go through with this thing, here would be only the first of a long series of embarrassments and discomforts. It had to be done.

I walked up to the desk and the girl turned to face me, and I could have sworn that a faint smile crossed her lips. It was swift, like the shadow of a bird across one of the lawns in one of the great parks topside. Very non-standard. Yet I wasn't offended; if anything, I felt suddenly and disturbingly pleased.

"What information is desired?" she asked. Her voice was standard—or was it?

Again I had the feeling of restrained warmth.

I used colloquial. "I want to get the dope on State Serial designations, how they're assigned and so forth. Especially how they might be changed."

She put a handsteno on the desk top and said, "Name? Address? Post?"

I froze. I stood there and stared at her.

She looked up and said, "Well?"

"I—er—no post at present. N/P status."

Her fingers moved on the steno.

I gave her my address and she recorded that.

Then I paused again.

She said, "And your name?"

I took a deep breath and told her.

I didn't want to look into her eyes. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't find a decent excuse to. I saw her eyes become wide and noticed for the first time that they were a warm gray, almost a mouse color. I felt like laughing at that irrelevant observation, but more than that I felt like turning and running. I felt like climbing and dashing all over the walls like a frustrated cat and yelling at the top of my lungs. I felt like anything but standing there and looking stupid, meeting her stare—

She looked down quickly and recorded my name. It took her a little longer than necessary. In that time she recovered. Somewhat.

"All right," she said finally, "I'll make a search."

She turned to a row of buttons on a console in the center of the desk and began to press them in various combinations. A typer clicked away. She tore off a slip of paper, consulted it, and said, "Information desired is in Bank 29. Please follow me."

Well, following her was a pleasure, anyway. I could watch the movement of her hips and torso as she walked. She was not tall, but long-legged and extremely lithe. Graceful and rhythmic. Very, very feminine, almost beyond standard in that respect. I felt blood throb in my temples and was heartily ashamed of myself.

I would like to be in a mating booth with her, I thought, the full authorized twenty minutes. And I knew I was unconformist and the realization hardly scared me at all.

She led me down one of the long passageways.

A few moments later I said, "Don't you sometimes get—well, pretty lonely working here?" Personal talk at a time like this wasn't approved behavior, but I couldn't help it.

She answered hesitantly, but at least she answered. She said, "Not terribly. The cybs are company enough most of the time."

"You don't get many visitors, then."

"Not right here. N. & I. isn't a very popular section. Most people who come to Govpub spend their time researching in the ancient manuscript room. The—er—social habits of the pre-atomic civilization."

I laughed. I knew what she meant, all right. Pre-atomics and their ideas about free mating always fascinated people. I moved up beside her. "What's your name, by the way?"

"L-A-R-A 339/827."

I pronounced it. "Lara. Lah-rah. That's beautiful. Fits you, too."

She didn't answer; she kept her eyes straight ahead and I saw the faint spot of color on her cheek.

I had a sudden impulse to ask her to meet me after hours at one of the rec centers. If it had been my danger alone, I might have, but I couldn't very well ask her to risk discovery of a haphazard, unauthorized arrangement like that and the possibility of going to the psycho-scan.

We came to a turn in the corridor and something happened; I'm not sure just how it happened. I

keep telling myself that my movements were not actually deliberate. I was to the right of her. The turn was to the left. She turned quickly, and I didn't, so that I bumped into her, knocking her off balance. I grabbed her to keep her from falling.

For a moment we stood there, face to face, touching each other lightly. I held her by the arms. I felt the primitive warmth of her breath. Our eyes held together ... proton ... electron ... I felt her tremble.

She broke from my grip suddenly and started off again.

After that she was very business-like.

We came finally to the controls of Bank 29 and she stood before them and began to press button combinations. I watched her work; I watched her move. I had almost forgotten why I'd come here. The lights blinked on and off and the typers clacked softly as the machine sorted out information.

She had a long printed sheet from the roll presently. She frowned at it and turned to me. "You can take this along and study it," she said, "but I'm afraid what you have in mind may be—a little difficult."

She must have guessed what I had in mind. I said, "I didn't think it would be easy."

"It seems that the only agency authorized to change a State Serial under any circumstances is Opsych."

"Opsych?" You can't keep up with all these departments.

"The Office of Psychological Adjustment. They can change you if you go from a lower to higher E.A.C."

"I don't get it, exactly."

As she spoke I had the idea that there was sympathy in her voice. Just an overtone. "Well," she said, "as you know, the post a person is qualified to hold often depends largely on his Emotional Adjustment Category. Now if he improves and passes from, let us say, Grade 3 to Grade 4, he will probably change his place of work. In order to protect him from any associative maladjustments developed under the old E.A.C, he is permitted a new number."

I groaned. "But I'm already in the highest E.A.C.!"

"It looks very uncertain then."

"Sometimes I think I'd be better off in the mines, or on Marscol—or—in the hell of the pre-atomics!"

She looked amused. "What did you say your E.A.C. was?"

"Oh, all right. Sorry." I controlled myself and grinned. "I guess this whole thing has been just a little too much for me. Maybe my E.A.C.'s even gone down."

"That might be your chance then."

"How do you mean?"

"If you could get to the top man in Opsych and demonstrate that your number has inadvertently changed your E.A.C., he might be able to justify a change."

"By the State, he might!" I punched my palm. "Only how do I get to him?"

"I can find his location on the cyb here. Center One, the capital, for a guess. You'll have to get a travel permit to go there, of course. Just a moment."

She worked at the machine again, trying it on general data. The printed slip came out a moment later and she read it to me. Chief, Opsych, was in the capital all right. It didn't give the exact location of his office, but it did tell how to find the underground bay in Center One containing the Opsych offices.

We headed back through the passageway then and she kept well ahead of me. I couldn't keep my eyes from her walk, from the way she walked with everything below her shoulders. My blood was pounding at my temples again.

I tried to keep the conversation going. "Do you think it'll be hard to get a travel permit?"

"Not impossible. My guess is that you'll be at Travbur all day tomorrow, maybe even the next day. But you ought to be able to swing it if you hold out long enough."

I sighed. "I know. It's that way everywhere in Northem. Our motto ought to be, 'Why make it difficult when with just a little more effort you can make it impossible?'"

She started to laugh, and then, as she emerged from the passageway into the big circular room, she cut her laugh short.

A second later, as I came along, I saw why.

There were two Deacons by the central desk. They were burly and had that hard, pinched-face look and wore the usual black belts. Electric clubs hung from the belts. Spidery looking pistols were at their sides.

I didn't know whether these two had heard my crack or not. I know they kept looking at me.

Lara and I crossed the room silently, she back to her desk, I to the exit door. The Deacons' remote, disapproving eyes swung in azimuth, tracking us.

I walked out and wanted to turn and smile at Lara, and get into my smile something of the hope that someday, somewhere, I'd see her again—but of course I didn't dare.

III

I had the usual difficulties at Travbur the next day. I won't go into them, except to say that I was batted from office to office like a ping pong ball, and that, when I finally got my travel permit, I was made to feel that I had stolen an original Picasso from the State Museum.

I made it in a day. Just. I got my permit thirty seconds before closing time. I was to take the jetcopter to Center One at 0700 hours the following morning.

In my living machine that evening, I was much too excited to work at theoretical research as I usually did after a hard day of tramping around. I bathed, I paced a while, I sat and hummed nervously and got up and paced again. I turned on the telepuppets. There was a drama about the space pilots who fly the nonconformist prisoners to the forests and pulp-acetate plants on Mars. Seemed that the Southem political prisoners who are confined to the southern hemisphere of Mars, wanted to attack and conquer the north. The nonconformists, led by our pilot, came through for the State in the end. Corn is thicker than water. Standard.

There were, however, some good stereofilm shots of the limitless forests of Mars, and I wondered what it would be like to live there, in a green, fresh-smelling land. Pleasant, I supposed, if you could put up with the no doubt revolting morality of a prison planet.

And the drama seemed to point out that there was no more security for the nonconformists out there than for us here on Earth. Maybe somewhere in the universe, I thought, there would be peace for men. Somewhere beyond the solar system, perhaps, someday when we had the means to go there....

Yet instinct told me that wasn't the answer, either. I thought of a verse by an ancient pre-atomic poet named Hoffenstein. (People had unwieldy, random combinations of letters for names in those days.) The poem went:

Wherever I go,
I go too,
And spoil everything.

That was it. The story of mankind.

I turned the glowlight down and lay on the pneumo after a while, but I didn't sleep for a long, long time.

Then, when I did sleep, when I had been sleeping, I heard the voice again. The low, seductive woman's voice—the startling, shocking voice out of my unconscious.

"You have taken the first step," she said. "You are on your way to freedom. Don't stop now. Don't sink back into the lifelessness of conformity. Go on ... on and on. Keep struggling, for that is the only answer...."

I didn't exactly talk back, but in the queer way of the dream, I *thought* objections. I was in my thirties, at the mid-point of my life, and the whole of that life had been spent under the State. I knew no other way to act. Suppressing what little individuality I might have was, for me, a way of survival. I was chockful of prescribed, stereotyped reactions, and I held onto them even when something within me told me what they were. This wasn't easy, this breaking away, not even this slight departure from the secure, camouflaged norm....

"The woman, Lara, attracts you," said the voice.

I suppose at that point I twitched or rolled in my sleep. Yes, the voice was right, the woman Lara attracted me. So much that I ached with it.

"Take her. Find a way. When you succeed in changing your name, and know that you can do things, then find a way. There will be a way."

The idea at once thrilled and frightened me.

I woke writhing and in a sweat again.

It was morning.

I dressed and headed for the jetcopter stage and the ship for Center One.

The ship was comfortable and departed on time, a transport with seats for about twenty passengers. I sat near the tail and moodily busied myself watching the gaunt brown earth far below. Between Centers there was mostly desert, only occasional patches of green. Before the

atomic decade, I had heard, nearly all the earth was green and teemed with life ... birds, insects, animals, people, too. It was hard rock and sand now, with a few scrubs hanging on for life. The pre-atomics, who hadn't mastered synthesization, would have a hard time scratching existence from the earth today.

I tried to break the sad mood, and started to look around at some of the other passengers. That was when I first noticed the prisoners in the forward seats. Man and woman, they were, a youngish, rather non-descript couple, thin, very quiet. They were manacled and two Deacons sat across from them. The Deacons' backs were turned to me and I could see the prisoners' faces.

They had curious faces. Their eyes were indescribably sad, and yet their lips seemed to be ready to smile at any moment.

They were holding hands, not seeming to care about this vulgar emotional display.

I had the sudden crazy idea that Lara and I were sitting there, holding hands like that, nonconforming in the highest, and that we were wonderfully happy. Our eyes were sad too, but we were really happy, quietly happy, and that was why our lips stayed upon the brink of a smile.

I sighed. My mood was just as sad, if not sadder, than it had been before.

Later, in the rest room, I had a chance to talk to one of the Deacons guarding these two. I was washing my hands when he came in, and he nodded to me briefly and said, "Nice day for a flight."

He seemed pleasant enough, more than I would expect a Deacon to be. He was tall and blond and rather lithe; his shoulders sloped forward like a boxer's.

"Taking those prisoners to Center One?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yup. Habitual nonconforms. About as bad as they come."

"What did they do?"

He chuckled lasciviously. "Kept meeting each other in the rec centers. Didn't know they were being watched. We nabbed 'em topside after they'd gone out in the desert together."

"What happens to them now—Marscol?"

"They'd be lucky, brother, if that was only it. Oh, we'll ship 'em to Mars sooner or later, but first they got to be interviewed."

"You mean for reclassification?"

"No. Just interviewed. We do it routine with everybody we pick up now. Specially morals cases. That's how we crack down on other nonconforms. They got a regular organization, you know."

"They *have*?"

"Sure. They're all Southem spies. Trying to weaken us for an attack, that's all. I can spot 'em a mile away."

I frowned and cleared my throat a little. "Wouldn't you think that any spies would try to act as normal as possible and not call attention to themselves by infracting morally?"

He put a big finger on my chest. "Listen, you got no idea. I see these buzzards in operation all the time. I know what goes on."

"Of course. I'm sure you do." I kept the sarcasm out of my voice, but it was a struggle.

The finger tapped my chest, once to every word, it seemed. "We interview 'em all. Some of 'em, they really got nothing to tell us and the interview kind of breaks 'em. Know what I mean? But we got to do it. If we only get dope on other nonconforms from one out of ten, we figure we didn't waste our time."

"You mean these—interviews of yours are a form of *torture*?"

He gave me a hard eye and said, "We don't call it that, brother. We don't call it that."

"Of course," I said again, and went back to washing my hands.

I watched the prisoners for the rest of the flight. I couldn't stop watching them. And all this time I kept thinking of Lara, visualizing her, seeing her young figure and her light hair and her mouse-colored eyes, and not really knowing why.

I had the overpowering desire to spring forward and throttle the two Deacons and help the prisoners to escape. *Almost* overpowering. I didn't, naturally.

The jetcopter lowered toward the great green parks that cover the topside area of Center One. It was really refreshing to see them. I understood that the lucky residents of Center One were allowed to wander in these parks, and look at the growing things and the sky. Then, presently, the parks were out of sight again and we were settling on the concrete landing stage and I was back to reality.

The first contact at the Office of Psychological Adjustment was, as usual, an information desk.

There were people instead of cybs to greet you and I suppose that was because of the special complications of problems brought here. The cybs have their limits, after all.

A gray man with a gray eye and a face like a mimeographed bulletin looked at me and said, in approved voice and standard phraseology, "what information is desired?"

I told him.

His eyebrows rose, as if suddenly buoyant. "*Change your name?* That's impossible."

I quoted, verse and chapter, the regulation covering it. "H'm," he said. His eyebrows came down, cuddling into a scowl. "Well, that's highly unusual procedure. Better let me see your identity tag."

I gave that to him and he saw my N/P status, and then my unspeakable name, and his eyebrows went up again.

"Perhaps you'd better get this straightened out with General Administration first," he said. He scribbled a slip of paper, showing me how to get there.

The rat race was on.

I found General Administration. They sent me to Activity Control. Activity Control said they couldn't do a thing until I was registered. I went to Registration. Registration said oh, no, I shouldn't have been sent there—although they'd try to direct me to the proper office if I got an okay from Investigation and Security. I. & S. said the regulation I quoted had been amended and I would have to have the amendment first and I could find that in Records. Records sent me back to the first place to get a Search Permit.

And so on.

I kept at it doggedly. Toward the end of the day my legs ached and head felt like a ball of granite. I had discovered that Opsych had nearly as many levels and tunnels and bays as Center Four in its entirety, and I had taken the intercom cars when possible, but most of it had been walking. I tightened my jaw and pulled my stomach in. I'd get to see the Chief if it took me a year.

That was hyperbole, of course. No man could last a year walking those dim, monotonous, aseptic corridors. How can I describe the feeling? The corridors are the same wherever you go. The glowlight comes steadily, unblinkingly, from the walls. The color is a dead oyster white.

There is always the feeling of being lost—even when you know, or think you know, exactly where you are.

It was near the end of the day and I was back at the information desk.

"You again," said the gray man with the gray eye.

"Records says I need a Search Permit. I have to find an amendment on the regulation covering my case."

"Why don't you just give up? You're causing us a great deal of trouble, you know. We have other work to do. Important work."

"So have I. I'm a magnetic mechanics expert. I could be working for the State right now if I could get a post. I can't get a post till my name's changed."

"That's ridiculous."

"I agree. But it's true just the same."

"Well, here's your Search Permit. But I still think you'd be wiser to forget it. And you'd save us a lot of fuss."

I leaned across the desk. "You could save the whole organization a lot of fuss if you'd direct me to the Chief's office. Then I could take my case up with him directly. I've been keeping my eye open for it, but I can't find it anywhere, and of course nobody'll direct me there, even if they know where it is."

He stared at me with mild horror. "*Go direct to the Chief's office? Without going through channels?*"

"Well, that's what I had in mind."

"Then you'd better get it out of your mind. That's pretty dangerous thinking. That's close to infraction."

"All right." I sighed. "I'll do it the hard way." I took the Search Permit and went back to Records. I was still searching for the amendment when closing time came.

I went back into the dim white corridors and found a foodmat, got some nutro-pills and reviewed the day. These workers here in Center One were experts at putting you off. They were much more skilful than the officials in Center Four. Maybe that was why they were in Center One. Maybe I never would wear them down.

That thought came along and formed a ball of ice right in the bottom of my stomach.

I had to think. I had to think and rest. Real air and a night breeze would help.

I found a shaft and went topside.

I started walking along a winding trail in the great park. The stars were out. They were diamonds, ground to dust, and thrown carelessly across the black velvet of the sky. The moon had not yet risen. There was a breeze, cool and light, and it brought temporary sanity. At least it helped me realize I was tired.

I came to a little brook, and, instead of crossing the foot bridge, I turned and followed the brook upstream. It led through groves of trees and presently I found a little clearing where the bank sloped gently and was covered with soft moss. At the water's edge, the bank and a rock formation made a kind of overhanging ledge and I sat on this a while and stared at the water, liquid silver, tumbling below.

Finally I moved up the bank a little, wrapped my cloak around me and lay down. I looked at the stars. I wondered which one might be Mars. It was red, I'd heard, but I saw nothing like that. Probably it wasn't visible now. I got to thinking about Mars, and I got to thinking about the prison colony there, and then I got to thinking about the primitive life, and then free-mating.

That made me think of Lara, and her firm body and long, clean limbs and blonde hair and mouse-colored eyes.

I drifted off to sleep. Lara stayed with me; she stepped into my dream. It was a wonderful dream. Her voice, when she broke from standard, was thrilling and delicious. It was linked with the tumbling of the brook somehow. She was warm and vibrant in my arms. She was alive, so alive. She was all movement.

We were laughing together and....

I awoke to the sound of shooting.

The moon had risen and the broad glades were silver green and the trees were casting shadows. Voices were barking back and forth within the woods.

"Over that way!" called one.

"Cut 'em off! Cut 'em off!" yelled another.

A man and woman, both entirely naked, both speckled with wounds and bruises, all standard in questioning, stumbled into the clearing. Their eyes were wild, big for their faces. They were thin. They gasped for breath. They looked around them, rats in mazes, and then saw me.

They drew back.

"This way!" called a voice from the wood.

Another shot rang out.

I stared at the man and woman, still too surprised to know what to do or say.

They were the two prisoners I had seen in the jetcopter on my way to Center One.

IV

Maybe I was not quite awake. Maybe I was not really bright, though everybody thinks of himself as bright, I suppose. Maybe it was everything that had happened since the renumbering. Maybe I was fed up and maybe something about the quiet woods called out: *Rebel! Rebel!*

I don't know.

I pointed to the brook, the overhanging bank, and said, "In there! Quick!"

They scuttled. They passed me and looked at me half-thankfully, half-fearfully.

The voices came nearer.

"Come on! This way! They can't get far!"

I wrapped myself in my cloak and sat down and pretended to be gazing at the stars.

A moment later three Deacons burst upon the clearing. I turned slowly, and stared at them, showing mild artificial surprise. Handsome, burly fellows. The one in the middle was a positive Apollo; I was sure that he waved his hair. He glared at me.

"You," he said.

"Me?"

"Yes, you. What are you doing here?"

I said, "I'm sitting here."

"What for?"

"The night air. To study the stars. Get a change of scene." I shrugged.

Apollo stepped forward and held out his hand. "Your tag."

This was it. When he saw my four letter name he'd really start working on me. I unsnapped the

tag from my neck band and handed it to him.

He looked at it, but didn't change expression. The Deacons are well-trained. He looked up again. "N/P, eh?"

"Yes."

"And you belong in Center Four."

"Yes."

"Explain."

I did. Or tried to. Things were roiling around inside me, keeping me from thinking clearly. Once, as I talked, I thought I heard movement under the bank, but the Deacons didn't seem to notice anything. I tried to tell them of my troubles.

There was no sympathy in their eyes.

Apollo said, "See anybody pass by here?"

"Pass by?" I hoped my look was innocent. "Who?"

"Two fugitives. Nonconforms. Escaped during interview. Got the force screen turned off somehow—must have had spies helping them. You didn't see them, eh?"

I shook my head. "I haven't seen anyone for several hours."

Apollo and his two friends traded glances. The one on the right was bull-necked and red-headed; the one on the left had a neck and nose like a crane. It was the one on the left who suddenly smiled. Not a pleasant smile. He stepped up to Apollo and whispered something in his ear. Then Apollo smiled and turned to me again.

"You're *sure* you haven't seen anyone."

He knew something. I didn't know what, but it was too late to back out now. I said, "Of course I'm sure."

Apollo kept his eyes on me, hard, flat, stony, and held out his hand to the cranelike Deacon. "Your light," he said. The other handed it to him. Apollo flashed it on the ground. It came to rest upon unmistakable footprints in the soft moss. They led to the bank.

I could be certain of arrest, and one of their little interviews now. I really had nothing to lose. Nothing that wasn't already lost—

"Run!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. "They're coming!"

There was a rustling under the bank.

I leaped at Apollo. I leaped hard, with my feet solid, pushing me forward. My shoulder hit him in the midriff. He went down. I scrambled over him and jammed my thumb into his shoulder. He screamed.

There was a buzzing sound and the smell of burned flesh, and a tenth of a second later I felt pain. One of the others had jammed his electric truncheon into the small of my back. It bored in, it burned, and I writhed and yelled. I couldn't help it. I rolled over.

Someone was kicking at me. I grabbed his leg and pulled him down and when he struck the ground I twisted. Another shape blurred toward me—Apollo, recovered and on his feet again. Then buzzing, burned flesh, and the pain this time in the back of my neck. My head swirled. I thrashed, trying to get away. Get away where? That made not much difference. Away, that was all.

The buzzing continued. It was through my flesh now and touching the spine. It would destroy the nerves in a moment. I would be dead—or even worse, a limp cripple, a rag doll.

The smell of roasted flesh and hair was a thick, choking, sickening fog of decay. I couldn't breathe. There was blackness, swirling and concentric, closing in.

I think one of them kicked me in the groin before I lost consciousness.

I couldn't be sure. I couldn't be sure of anything.

Coming out. Sound before sight and I heard the low voices. My eyes were already open. Nebulous shapes, now sharpening.

I was in a small room with gleaming metal walls and I was on my back on a sort of table. Three men were in the room with me, standing over me. Apollo ... the bull-necked man ... the man with the nose like a crane.



Apollo was smiling. Pour water over that smile and immediately a film of ice would form.

"A spy," said Apollo, looking into my open eyes. "Another damn spy."

I shook my head. Ridiculous, but that's what I did. The movement pulled at the wound in the back of my neck and sharp pain, starting there, shot through my whole body. I grimaced and groaned.

Apollo laughed, then suddenly brought his club hard across my face. My cheekbone seemed to make a crunching sound.

"A spy, a damned spy," said Apollo.

"We got a confession for you to sign," said the Crane.

Apollo said, "Shut up. Not yet. We got to interview him first."

"Look," I said, trying to lift my head, trying to rise upon my elbows, "call your chief. Call anybody like that. I can explain this whole thing. It's a long story—"

He hit me again across the other cheekbone.

Shall I describe the next timeless endless hour? All the details? I don't remember all of them, of course, just the moments of sharpest pain that lifted me from the daze. Just the sound of my own screaming at times, and the helpless dryness of my own throat, and the sounds that kept coming from it even when the vocal cords were numb.

Apollo and his pals had fun.

There were the electric clubs. They become so hot at the tip that they will burn through an inch of pine in a couple of seconds. They go even quicker through flesh. After a while the smoke of my own burning flesh was thick in the room, and we all choked a little on it.

They had more fun with their fists, though. They didn't burn me in the worst places. They saved them for their fists and hands.

After a while I couldn't scream. Only a hoarse, helpless, retching sound came out whenever I opened my mouth.

Did I hear their voices then? I couldn't be sure whether I heard them speak, or whether I dreamed that they spoke.

"He can't feel it any more now." That was Apollo's voice.

"Wake him up again," said the Crane. "Give him a shot."

"Oh, hell, I'm hungry," said Apollo.

"All right," said the Crane, "let's go get something to eat. We can always come back again."

Blackness, sweet blackness, and the sense of floating among the stars. Nothingness. It was exquisite now ... even the touch of agony that still seeped through was exquisite.

How much of this, I don't know.

I heard a voice again, and at first I thought my precious blackness was leaving me. I struggled to keep it. I grasped out, clutching with my mind.

"Don't give up ... we are coming..."

It was *her* voice. The low, seductive voice of my dreams. But I didn't want to hear it now; this was the last thing I wanted to hear. This voice had brought me here, and I never wanted to hear it again.

"No matter what they say ... no matter what they offer you or tell you ... don't give up."

I fought it off. I drove it away by sheer mind-power. Either that or it stopped of itself. I didn't know and didn't care; all I wanted was peace and blackness again if I could find it.

And then, after a while, I was awake, truly awake, and I knew this because I ached and burned all over. I could scarcely move. I lay on the tablelike thing and stared at the gleaming metal ceiling, not really seeing it.

"How do you feel?" said somebody.

I turned my head. The somebody was sitting beside me. He was a man of about fifty, thick-set and gray-haired with skin that looked like fine porcelain. His eyes were blue and they seemed able, intelligent. He was not exactly smiling, but his expression was pleasant. Poised—that was the word. Here was a man who would quietly control things wherever he would go.

I said, "Lousy. And you?"

Ghost of a smile. "Sorry you had to go through it. We pick the Deacons because they're sadistically inclined. That makes for efficiency in the long run. Some people suffer, of course, but it's for the common good."

I didn't say anything. If I had, it would have been insulting, unreasonable, blasphemous, obscene and treasonable. So I didn't say anything. I just kept staring at him.

He continued to smile. "I'm N-J-K-F one seven seven three four nine, Chief of the Office of Psychological Adjustment. I'm usually simply Chief. I want you to consider me your friend—within the limits of State good, that is."

I still didn't say anything.

"Yours is quite a case, and of course I understand it. I think I had a quick insight into it the moment I spotted the arrest report on you. You're really lucky I happened to go through the arrest reports a little while ago, and got to you before the three Deacons who interviewed you returned. They were going to interview you some more."

"Yes. I'm very lucky." My voice was flat, lifeless.

He leaned back easily in the chair. For all that he was thick-set, he was graceful. He was handsome. His head, and deep, pleasant voice, and the cut of his porcelain features all were handsome. Trust in me, said this handsomeness, I am a father to all men.

"Naturally, we want to excuse your actions, and all the infractions you have committed in your rather desperate struggle for escape from your situation. Of course we'll have to re-evaluate your Emotional Adjustment Category. It must be very low by now. And I think I'll be able to assign a new name to you, and have it justify."

Funny, here was the thing I'd sought and fought for, and now I had it, and this was the end of the long fight, and I didn't feel triumphant at all. I didn't even feel pleased. Funny.

The chief said, "You can undoubtedly find a post suitable to a lower E.A.C. You can work your way up again. At least you'll be on productive status and have all the privileges that go with it."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I suppose so."

"So there's really nothing to worry about now, is there?"

"No, I suppose not."

"There's just one little thing I'd like to go into before I take the steps necessary to get you on your feet again." Even his magnificent poise couldn't conceal the feather touch of slyness then.

"One little thing?" I asked.

The pain was with me again. My body wasn't flesh; it was all raw, clinging pain.

"We'll have to know who started you on your little quest. Who influenced you to try to have your name changed."

I said, "I don't understand what you're talking about."

He looked patient, smilingly patient. "It's rather obvious, you know. You wouldn't have acted as you did purely on your own impulses. I know that, because I cybed for your master file after I saw the report of arrest. Up until two days ago, your actions have always been satisfactorily conformal. A man doesn't change overnight like that without some sort of external influence."

"But there wasn't any," I protested. "I mean, nobody told me to do anything. Nobody real."

He chuckled. "Come now, you don't expect me to believe that, do you? After all, I deal with cases like this quite often. You're not the only one who has tried to upset the efficiency of the State. There's a pattern in these things, my friend. Almost invariably we find that a deliberate influence has gone to work on our infractor. There's a dangerous, organized underground movement that spends its time bringing these things about. One of its members unquestionably contacted you, suggested that you take the steps you have taken. Now, then, who was it?"

"Nobody." I looked blank because I felt blank.

The Chief sighed. "You've changed more than I thought. Probably you're emotionally angry with the State now, after that little interview with the Deacons. That's understandable. But you'll have to come back to your senses. Let's put it this way, old man. *If I don't get this information from you right now, the Deacons will.*"

"Listen," I said, "what I'm telling you is the truth. There was nobody who told me to do anything. There was—well, there was a kind of voice that used to come into my dreams. A woman's voice. It suggested, in my dreams, that I go ahead and try to get my name changed. That's all."

He wasn't smiling any more. "Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"It's the truth, I tell you. It's the truth!"

"Perhaps whoever influenced you did it subtly. Perhaps you never even realized it. Think back now. Who helped you? Who departed from standard and gave you any kind of aid?"

Realization came like a cold wash. There had been help. Lara. She had gone out of her way back there in N. & I. She had been warm and real and she had dropped the mask of efficiency. Could it have been with a purpose? No matter. Guilty or innocent, if I mentioned her name, she would be interviewed. I didn't want that to happen to Lara. I shook my head and said, "No one helped me. I did it all myself. You've got to believe that."

"I don't," said the Chief, and got up. He looked at me for just a moment before he turned away. He said, "The boys will be able to have their fun, after all. I suppose it's just as well. It keeps their morale up to be able to interview somebody once in a while."

"No! You can't! You can't send them in here again!" I shouted, without meaning to. I struggled to rise and found that I was strapped to the table. "No! No!"

He was standing at the doorway to the room. He held a key-box oscillator in his hand and I knew that a force screen held me in the cubicle here, and that without a key-box I could beat my head forever against that invisible barrier and never pass through that doorway. He said, "I'll give you one hour to decide. I'll be back. I'll ask you if you're ready to talk. If you aren't—well, you'll talk to the Deacons instead of me."

The key-box hummed and he walked through the doorway and turned and disappeared.

I stared after him and fought back my sudden nausea.

V

How long, then, lying there before a key-box hummed again? I didn't know. My time sense had been dulled. Even the pain was dull now; it was something that had always existed.

I looked at the shining ceiling.

The glowlights began to dim and I supposed that since my arrest in the park another day had passed.

Most of all, I wondered. Something had happened to me, something that I could almost feel as a physical change, but I didn't know quite what it was. I knew its results. I knew that I was no longer standard, no longer conformal, no longer well-behaved and moral and an efficient, useful citizen of the State. I hated the State. I hated all States. I hate all efficiency and common sense and hate.

It suddenly came to me that I didn't care whether I was in Southem or Northem, or which of them ruled the world.

I lay there.

And presently a key-box hummed and I didn't even look that way. The stink of my own burning flesh still clung to my nostrils, the dull pain was still with me, but I didn't care. It was too much. When horror becomes too great, it stops being horror. The mind is smart. It doesn't believe; it doesn't register. The curve of sensation flattens out, stops, almost.

When such horror looms, you go on doing whatever you are doing.

I was lying there, so I went on lying there.

"Don't speak," whispered a voice. "Don't ask questions."

Something fumbled at the straps. I turned my head, and two people were in the room. They were thin, and their eyes were overlarge and they were naked and covered with bruises. The fugitives of the park last night!

"What are you doing here?"

Finger to the lips. That was the man. He was taking the straps from my legs. The woman was releasing my arms and shoulders.

"But—"

"Sh!" That was the woman.

In a moment they had me free. I started, confidently, to rise, and the pain streaked through me like a powder rocket. They helped me. I stood there, amazed that I could stand. They helped me go forward. I took several dizzy steps, and after that it wasn't as bad. We moved through the doorway; there was no force screen. The man held the key-box. He pressed it as we moved away, to bring the force screen into place once more.

I said, "Where are we—?"

I was shushed again. We went on through the corridors. Dead oyster white corridors. I walked as through a sea of marshmallow. Time sense was gone again and we were pushing on and on and there was no end in sight and we had already forgotten the beginning.

We took an automatic shaft to another level and walked more corridors.

Once we passed an opening and tunnelcars filled with people roared past. I had a flash glimpse of them. They sat there staring straight ahead, wearing the efficient expressions of good workers. State corpses.

Suddenly we emerged into the dark. It was the dark of night, but after the tunnels it was practically sunrise. The air was clean—no, it was not actually as clean as the conditioned air below. It was more than clean. It was *alive*.

We were on the edge of a great concrete paved area. About a hundred yards ahead, a massive, shining, fat needle rose into the air, and squatted there against the stars. It was a spaceship in its launching cradle. There were low buildings near it, a few floodlights, and people standing around. It took a moment to realize that the men walking up and down and along the groups of people, the men with rifles on their shoulders, were guards.



"Luck, now, that's all we need. A little luck," said the thin man beside me. It was the first time I had heard his voice. It was a low voice; he spoke with emotion. It was not approved standard.

The woman moved beside him and put her hand upon his arm.

I said, "May I talk now?"

He turned to me, smiling. The smile had something of that sadness I had first noticed when he sat a prisoner in the jetcopter. "You want an explanation, don't you? Of course you do. But I'm afraid I can't tell you very much, except that we were sent to get you."

"Sent? By whom? How did you have a key-box? And—"

He laughed. "Wait, one question at a time. I was a force screen technician before—before we were arrested. Cells are the same everywhere. I know how to short the screens out from the inside; it's troublesome, but it can be done. That's how we escaped the first time. Then they discovered we were gone, chased us, and *you* gave us our second chance. We came here to the rendezvous. There were six here, including our elected leader. When we told the leader what had happened, she arranged for us to return, find you, and help you escape. It wasn't any problem to lift a key-box from the rack where they're usually kept."

I felt as though I had been put upon the end of a huge oscillating spring. I said, "The leader? She?"

"You'll meet her," he said. "After blastoff you'll meet her. Right now our problem is to slip in among those prisoners without being seen."

"Among the *prisoners*?"

"Haven't time to explain more. You'll have to trust us. Unless you want to stay here and have the Deacons hunt you till they find you."

He was right: wherever I was going, I had to go. I couldn't go back now. Ever. I said, "I trust you. Let's go."

Slipping in wasn't really difficult. There were only one or two guards for each group of prisoners, and they were looking for someone to escape, not join their flock. Some of the prisoners were dressed, some naked. Some looked bruised and beaten; some did not. It all depended on whether they had been questioned. They all looked dull-eyed, resigned. They paid remarkably little attention as we moved in among them, and stood there.

The guards began to call out orders presently and the groups shuffled forward, and then single lines moved up the ramp and into the spaceship. The thin man and his woman were still with me. "They don't bother to count," he whispered, "so we won't be noticed."

I wanted to ask him other questions, but we were divided into groups and they weren't in mine.

Minutes later I found myself in the vast hull, sitting on one of the tiers that hold the seats vertical when the ship is tail-based for blastoff. It was very dim here and I couldn't readily make out the faces of the people on the same tier with me.

A loudspeaker came to life; a deep, impersonal voice. "Fasten your webbings carefully!"

I did that and heard the rustling sounds about me as the others did it, too.

"Stand by for blastoff!"

There was a dead pause, then a sudden low throbbing roar and the feeling of life in the floor plates and the bulkheads. I felt the slightest weight of pressure against the seat. The seat began to tilt slightly.

Suddenly a soft voice on my left spoke: "*We're on our way. They can't stop us now, can they?*"

It was the same low, provocative woman's voice that I had heard in my dreams!

I whirled my head. I could see only the shape of flowing hair, no features. "Who are you?"

She laughed. "No wonder you don't recognize me. The natural voice is different than approved standard, isn't it? Listen. Do you remember this?" The head cocked to one side and a crisp, formal voice came out. "Information you desire is in Bank 29."

"Lara!" I said. I pushed toward her, but the webbing held me back.

"Yes. It's I. And we're together now and we'll have a long, long time to find out about each other. It's ten weeks to Mars."

I ran my hand over my forehead. "I don't get it. I don't get any of it. Your voice—I mean your real voice, not the standard one—I dreamed about it, and—"

"I know." I could see her nod. "It wasn't a dream, though. I *was* talking to you. Each time. That was the way we planned it from the beginning."

"Talking to me? But—but *how*? Through the sleep-learner?"

"No, we'd never have been able to arrange that. It was through your identity tag, which would almost always be in contact with your skin when you slept. It has a microscopic electrical circuit, both between its metal halves and painted on its surface. The same principle as the sleep-learner, tactile induction, and, of course, a highly selective one-channel receiver. All I needed to do was put my transmitter on that same frequency."

I shook my head. "I follow, I guess, but I'm still baffled. Why all this? When did—"

"Wait for me to finish," she said. "We've been organized and underground, just as the Deacons suspect, for some time. One of our members worked on the identity tags and, when renumbering came about, it was a perfect opportunity to plant the receivers. We picked our people carefully. We picked doctors and hydroponic experts and chemists and rocket pilots—and we picked you because of your knowledge of space drive theory. Someday we'll go on to the stars; someday you'll help us do that. Anyway, all these people we have picked—or most of them—are joining us on Mars. There's where mankind will begin again while Northem and Southem sit upon earth and glare at each other across the equator and wait for war."

"But Mars—there's an equator there, too."

She laughed. "Northem and Southem prisoners there mingle all the time. There aren't enough guards to notice it, or stop it if they did notice it. There have even been hundreds of intermarriages."

"Marriages? You mean like the pre-atomics?"

"Exactly. But we'll get to that later. We needed you for our colony, only it wasn't likely that you'd infract all by yourself. You were too standard, too adjusted. We had to give you something to shake you out of it, to make you realize that the security of the State was not security, but slavery. And so one of our members in the renumbering bureau arranged for you to have that four letter word of yours for a name. One thing led to another, then, not always exactly as we'd planned it, but always in the same general direction. Our whole plan nearly failed when the Deacons nabbed you in the park. Fortunately, I'd come along to stow away on this trip, and I sent those others back after you."

"But what if I'd actually managed to get my name changed?"

The ship was swaying now, balanced on its rocket trail. The acceleration was increasing. The seat was swinging back. The roar was becoming louder.

"It was unlikely enough to take a chance on it. We felt at the very least you'd be kept on N/P status and then we could work on you some more until you infracted, and got sent to Marscol as a nonconform. Funny, that seems a terrible fate to most people. Actually, it's the only escape. From what I hear of Mars we'll like it there."

I was recovering a little now and I dared to say, "If you're there, too, I'll like it. I know that."

"Oh, you'll like other things. You'll like everything. And on Mars they'll call you by your present name if you wish, and no one will be at all shocked by it." There was a slight pause and then she said, "In fact, it's a very nice name. I—I wouldn't mind having it myself."

"Is that what the pre-atomics called a proposal?"

She laughed. "I'm not sure. But at least we have ten weeks to talk it over—"

And then the acceleration pressed hard and the gray curtain began to come, and I knew that when it was lifted we would be on our way through space. I thought in that moment of the name that had brought all this about—the unspeakable four letter word that no conformist would ever dare voice, or even think of; the word, the dangerous word inimical to all that the warring, efficient State meant and stood for.

The word, I realized, that eventually would destroy all that.

I dared to say it now. I spelled it out first, and then I pronounced it. Just loud enough for Lara to hear above the growing roar. "L-O-V-E," I said. "Love."

I heard Lara repeat it before the momentary blackout came.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK I, THE UNSPEAKABLE ***

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