

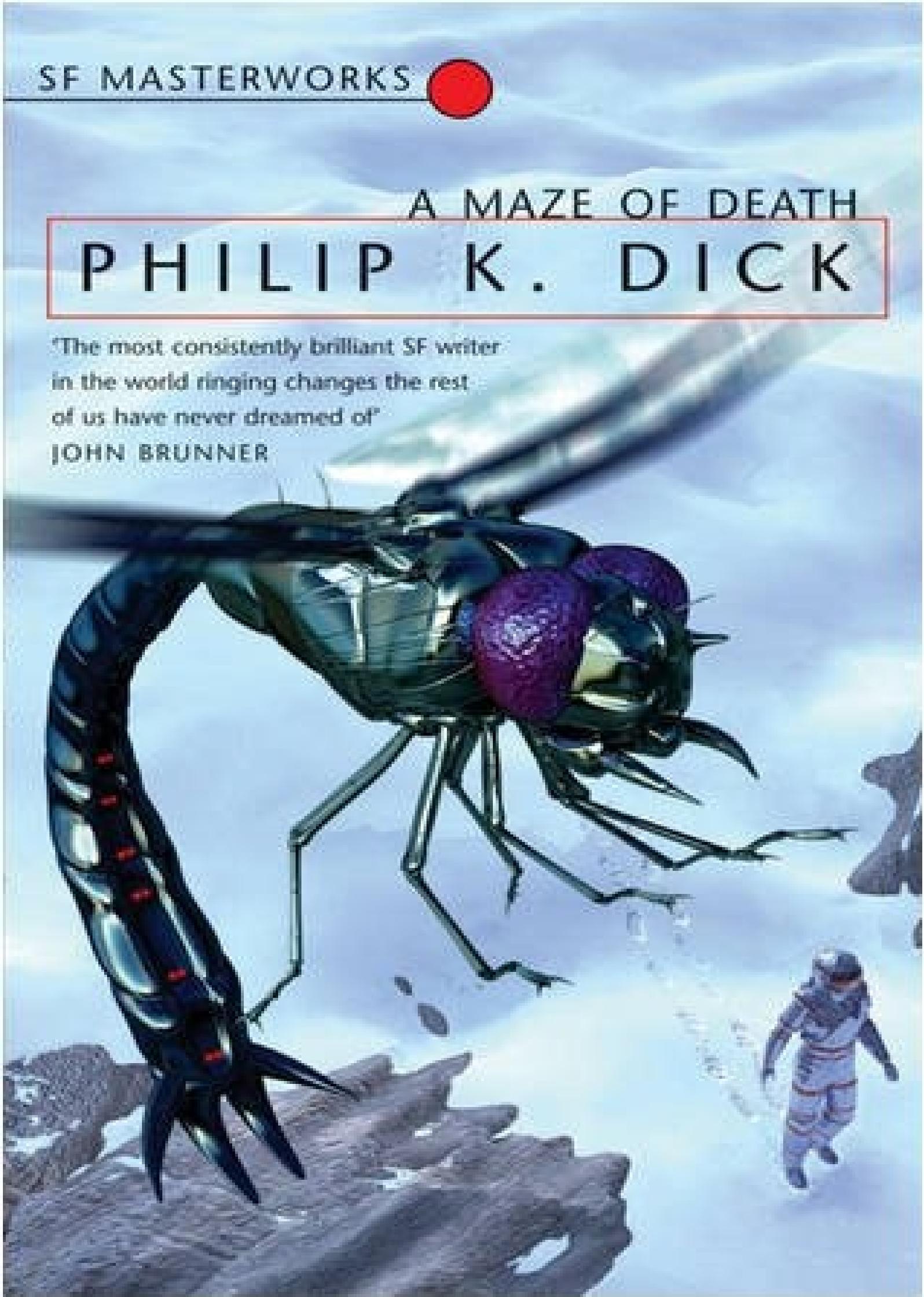
SF MASTERWORKS



A MAZE OF DEATH

PHILIP K. DICK

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A MAZE OF DEATH

Philip K. Dick

Science Fiction Masterworks Volume 63

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To my two daughters, Laura and Isa

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

The theology in this novel is not an analog of any known religion. It stems from an attempt made by William Sarill and myself to develop an abstract, logical system of religious thought, based on the arbitrary postulate that God exists. I should say, too, that the late Bishop James A. Pike, in discussions with me, brought forth a wealth of theological material for my inspection, none of which I was previously acquainted with. In the novel, Maggie Walsh's experiences after death are based on an L.S.D. experience of my own. In exact detail. The approach in this novel is highly subjective; by that I mean that at any given time, reality is seen – not directly – but indirectly, i.e., through the mind of one of the characters. This viewpoint mind differs from section to section, although most of the events are seen through Seth Morley's psyche. All material concerning Wotan and the death of the gods is based on Richard Wagner's version of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, rather than on the original body of myths. Answers to questions put to the tench were derived from the *I Ching*, the Chinese *Book of Changes*.

"Tekel upharsin" is Aramaic for, "He has weighed and now they divide." Aramaic was the tongue that Christ spoke. There should be more like him.

ONE

His job, as always, bored him. So he had during the previous week gone to the ship's transmitter and attached conduits to the permanent electrodes extending from his pineal gland. The conduits had carried his prayer to the transmitter, and from there the prayer had gone into the nearest relay network; his prayer, during these days, had bounced throughout the galaxy, winding up – he hoped – at one of the godworlds. His prayer had been simple. "This damn inventory-control job bores me," he had prayed. "Routine work – this ship is too large and in addition it's overstaffed. I'm a useless standby module. Could you help me find something more creative and stimulating?" He had addressed the prayer, as a matter of course, to the Intercessor. Had it failed he would have presently readdressed the prayer, this time to the Mentufacturer. But the prayer had not failed.

"Mr. Tallchief," his supervisor said, entering Ben's work cubicle. "You're being transferred. How about that?"

"I'll transmit a thankyou prayer," Ben said, and felt good inside. It always felt good when one's prayers were listened to and answered. "When do I transfer? Soon?" He had never concealed his dissatisfaction from his supervisor; there was now even less reason to do so.

"Ben Tallchief," his supervisor said. "The praying mantis."

"Don't you pray?" Ben asked, amazed.

"Only when there's no other alternative. I'm in favor of a person solving his problems on his own, without outside help. Anyhow, your transfer is valid." His supervisor dropped a document on the desk before Ben. "A small colony on a planet named Delmak-O. I don't know anything about it, but I suppose you'll find it all out when you get there." He eyed Ben thoughtfully. "You're entitled to use one of the ship's nosers. For a payment of three silver dollars."

"Done," Ben said, and stood up, clutching the document.

He ascended by express elevator to the ship's transmitter, which he found hard at work transacting official ship business. "Will you be having any empty periods later today?" he asked the chief radio operator. "I have another prayer, but I don't want to tie up your equipment if you'll be needing it."

"Busy all day," the chief radio operator said. "Look, Mac – we put one prayer through for you last week; isn't that enough?"

Anyhow I tried, Ben Tallchief mused as he left the transmitter with its hardworking crew and returned to his own quarters. If the matter ever comes up, he thought, I can

say I did my best. But, as usual, the channels were tied up by nonpersonal communications.

He felt his anticipation grow; a creative job at last, and just when he needed it most. Another few weeks here, he said to himself, and I would have been pizzling away at the bottle again as in lamented former times. And of course that's why they granted it, he realized. They knew I was nearing a break. I'd probably have wound up in the ship's brig, along with – how many were there in the brig now? – well, however many there were in There. Ten, maybe. Not much for a ship this size. And with such stringent rules.

From the top drawer of his dresser he got out an unopened fifth of Peter Dawson scotch, broke the seal, unscrewed the lid. Little libation, he told himself as he poured scotch into a Dixie cup. And celebration. The gods appreciate ceremony. He drank the scotch, then refilled the small paper cup.

To further enlarge the ceremony he got down – a bit reluctantly – his copy of *The Book: A. J. Specktowsky's How I Rose From the Dead in My Spare Time and So Can You*, a cheap copy with soft covers, but the only copy he had ever owned; hence he had a sentimental attitude toward it. Opening at random (a highly approved method) he read over a few familiar paragraphs of the great twenty-first century Communist theologian's *apologia pro sua vita*.

"God is not supernatural. His existence was the first and most natural mode of being to form itself."

True, Ben Tallchief said to himself. As later theological investigation had proved. Specktowsky had been a prophet as well as a logician; all that he had predicted had turned up sooner or later. There remained, of course, a good deal to know . . . for example, the cause of the Mentufacturer's coming into being (unless one was satisfied to believe, with Specktowsky, that beings of that order were self-creating, and existing outside of time, hence outside of causality). But in the main it was all there on the many-times-printed pages.

"With each greater circle the power, good and knowledge on the part of God weakened, so that at the periphery of the greatest circle his good was weak, his knowledge was weak – too weak for him to observe the Form Destroyer, which was called into being by God's acts of form creation. The origin of the Form Destroyer is unclear; it is, for instance, not possible to declare whether (one) he was a separate entity from God from the start, uncreated by God but also selfcreating, as is God, or (two) whether the Form Destroyer is an aspect of God, there being nothing – "

He ceased reading, sat sipping scotch and rubbing his forehead semi-wearily. He was forty-two years old and had read *The Book* many times. His life, although long, had not added up to much, at least until now. He had held a variety of jobs, doing a modicum of service to his employers, but never ever really excelling. Maybe I can begin to excel, he said to himself. On this new assignment. Maybe this is my big

chance.

Forty-two. His age had astounded him for years, and each time that he had sat so astounded, trying to figure out what had become of the young, slim man in his twenties, a whole additional year slipped by and had to be recorded, a continually growing sum which he could not reconcile with his selfimage. He still saw himself, in his mind's eye, as youthful, and when he caught sight of himself in photographs he usually collapsed. For example, he shaved now with an electric razor, unwilling to gaze at himself in his bathroom mirror. Somebody took my actual physical presence away and substituted *this*, he had thought from time to time. Oh well, so it went. He sighed.

Of all his many meager jobs he had enjoyed one alone, and he still meditated about it now and then. In 2105 he had operated the background music system aboard a huge colonizing ship on its way to one of the Deneb worlds. In the tape vault he had found all of the Beethoven symphonies mixed haphazardly in with string versions of *Carmen* and of Delibes and he had played the *Fifth*, his favorite, a thousand times throughout the speaker complex that crept everywhere within the ship, reaching each cubicle and work area. Oddly enough no one had complained and he had kept on, finally shifting his loyalty to the *Seventh* and at last, in a fit of excitement during the final months of the ship's voyage, to the *Ninth* – from which his loyalty never waned.

Maybe what I really need is sleep, he said to himself. A sort of twilight of living, with only the background sound of Beethoven audible. All the rest a blur.

No, he decided; I want to *be!* I want to act and accomplish something. And every year it becomes more necessary. Every year, too, it slips further and further away. The thing about the Mentufacturer, he reflected, is that he can renew everything. He can abort the decay process by replacing the decaying object with a new one, one whose form is perfect. And then that decays. The Form Destroyer gets hold of it – and presently the Mentufacturer replaces that. As with a succession of old bees wearing out their wings, dying and being replaced at last by new bees. But I can't do that. I decay and the Form Destroyer has me. And it will get only worse.

God, he thought, help me.

But not by replacing me. That would be fine from a cosmological standpoint, but ceasing to exist is not what I'm after; and perhaps you understood this when you answered my prayer.

The scotch had made him sleepy; to his chagrin he found himself nodding. To bring himself back to full wakefulness: that was necessary. Leaping up as he strode to his portable phonograph, took a visrecord at random, and placed it on the turntable. At once the far wall of the room lit up, and bright shapes intermingled with one another, a mixture of motion and of life, but unnaturally flat. He reflexively adjusted the depth-circuit; the figures began to become three dimensional. He turned up the sound as well.

". . . Legolas is right. We may not shoot an old man so, at unawares and unchallenged, whatever fear or doubt be on us. Watch and wait!"

The bracing words of the old epic restored his perspective; he returned to his desk, reseated himself and got out the document which his supervisor had given him. Frowning, he studied the coded information, trying to decipher it. In numbers, punch-holes and letters it spelled out his new life, his world to come.

". . . You speak as one that knows Fangorn well. Is that so?" The visrecord played on, but he no longer heard it; he had begun to get the gist of the encoded message.

"What have you to say that you did not say at our last meeting?" a sharp and powerful voice said. He glanced up and found himself confronted by the gray-clad figure of Gandalf. It was as if Gandalf were speaking to him, to Ben Tallchief. Calling him to account. "Or, perhaps, you have things to unsay?" Gandalf said.

Ben rose, went over to the phonograph and shut it off. I do not feel able at this time to answer you, Gandalf, he said to himself. There are things to be done, real things; I can't indulge myself in a mysterious, unreal conversation with a mythological character who probably never existed. The old values, for me, are suddenly gone; I have to work out what these damn punch-holes, letters and numbers mean.

He was beginning to get the drift of it. Carefully, he replaced the lid on the bottle of scotch, twisting is tight. He would go in a noser, alone; at the colony he would join roughly a dozen others, recruited from a variety of sources. Range 5 of skills: a class C operation, on a K-4 pay scale. Maximum time: two years of operation. Full pension and medical benefits, starting as soon as he arrived. An override for any instructions he had already received, hence he could go at once. He did not have to terminate his work here before leaving.

And I have the three silver dollars for the noser, he said to himself. So that is that; nothing else to worry about. Except – .

He could not discover what his job would consist of. The letters, numbers and punch-holes failed to say, or perhaps it was more correct to say that he could not get them to divulge this one piece of information – a piece he would much have wanted.

But still it looked good. I like it, he said to himself. I want it. Gandalf, he thought, I have nothing to unsay; prayers are not often answered and I will take this. Aloud he said, "Gandaif, you no longer exist except in men's minds, and what I have here comes from the One, True and Living Deity, who is completely real. What more can I hope for?" The silence of the room confronted him; he did not see Gadalf now because he had shut the record off. "Maybe someday," he continued. "I will unsay this. But not yet; not now. You understand?"

He waited, experiencing the silence, knowing that he could begin it or end it by a mere touch of the phonograph's switch.

TWO

Seth Morley neatly divided the Gruyère cheese lying before him with a plastic-handled knife and said, "I'm leaving." He cut himself a giant wedge of cheese, lifted it to his lips via the knife. "Late tomorrow night. Tekel Upharsin Kibbutz has seen the last of me." He grinned, but Fred Gossim, the settlement's chief engineer, failed to return the message of triumph; instead Gossim frowned even more strongly. His disapproving presence pervaded the office. Mary Morley said quietly, "My husband applied for this transfer eight years ago. We never intended to stay here. You knew that."

"And we're going with them," Michael Niemand stammered in excitement. "That's what you get for bringing a top-flight marine biologist here and then setting him to work hauling blocks of stone from the goddam quarry. We're sick of it." He nudged his undersized wife, Clair. "Isn't that right?"

"Since there is no body of water on this planet," Gossim said gratingly, "we could hardly put a marine biologist to use in his stated profession."

"But you advertised, eight years ago, for a marine biologist," Mary Morley pointed out. This made Gossim scowl even more profoundly. "The mistake was yours."

"But," Gossim said, "this is your home. All of you – " He gestured at the group of kibbutz officials crowded around the entrance of the office. "We all built this."

"And the cheese," Seth Morley said, "is terrible, here. Those quakkip, those goat-like suborganisms that smell like the Form Destroyer's last year's underwear – I want very much to have seen the last of them and it. The quakkip and the cheese both." He cut himself a second slice of the expensive, imported Gruyère cheese. To Niemand he said, "You can't come with us. Our instructions are to make the flight by noser. Point A. A noser holds only two people; in this case my wife and me. Point B. You and your wife are two more people, ergo you won't fit. Ergo you can't come."

"We'll take our own noser," Niemand said.

"You have no instructions and/or permission to transfer to Delmak-O," Seth Morley said from within his mouthful of cheese.

"You don't want us," Niemand said.

"Nobody wants you," Gossim grumbled. "As far as I'm concerned without you we would do better. It's the Morleys that I don't want to see go down the drain."

Eying him, Seth Morley said tartly, "And this assignment is, a priori, 'down the drain.'"

"It's some kind of experimental work," Gossim said, "As far as I can discern. On a

small scale. Thirteen, fourteen people. It would be for you turning the clock back to the early days of Tekel Upharsin. You want to build up from that all over again? Look how long it's taken for us to get up to a hundred efficient, well-intentioned members. You mention the Form Destroyer. Aren't you by your actions decaying back the form of Tekel Upharsin?"

"And my own form too," Morley said, half to himself. He felt grim, now; Gossim had gotten to him. Gossim had always been good with words, amazing in an engineer. It had been Gossim's silver-tongued words which had kept them all at their tasks throughout the years. But those words, to a good extent, had become vapid as far as the Morleys were concerned. The words did not work as they once had. And yet a glimmer of their past glory remained. He could just not quite shake off the bulky, dark-eyed engineer. But we're leaving, Morley thought. As in Goethe's *Faust*, "In the beginning was the deed." The deed and not the word, as Goethe, anticipating the twentieth century existentialists, had pointed out.

"You'll want to come back," Gossim opined.

"Hmm," Seth Morley said.

"And you know what I'll say to that?" Gossim said loudly. "If I get a request from you – both of you Morleys – to come back here to Tekel Upharsin Kibbutz, I'll say, 'We don't have any need of a marine biologist; we don't even have an ocean. And we're not going to build so much as a puddle so that you can have a legitimate reason for working here.' "

"I never asked for a puddle," Morley said.

"But you'd like one."

"I'd like *any* kind of body of water," Morley said. "That's the whole point; that's why we're leaving and that's why we won't be coming back."

"You're sure Delmak-O has a body of water?" Gossim inquired.

"I assume – " Morley began, but Gossim cut him off.

"That," Gossim said, "is what you assumed about Tekel Upharsin. That's how your trouble began."

"I assumed," Morley said, "that if you advertised for a marine biologist – " He sighed, feeling weary. There was no point trying to influence Gossim; the engineer – and chief officer of the kibbutz – had a closed mind. "Just let me eat my cheese," Morley said, and tried an additional slice. But he had grown tired of the taste; he had eaten too much. "The hell with it," he said, tossing his knife down. He felt irritable and he did not like Gossim; he felt no desire to continue the conversation. What mattered was the fact that no matter how he felt, Gossim could not revoke the transfer. It carried an

override, and that was the long and the short of it . . . to quote William S. Gilbert.

"I hate your bloody guts," Gossim said. Morley said, "I hate yours, too."

"A Mexican standoff," Niemand said. "You see, Mr. Gossim, you can't make us stay; all you can do is yell."

Making an obscene gesture toward Morley and Niemand Gossim strode off, parting the group gathered there, and disappeared somewhere on the far side. The office was quiet, now. Seth Morley immediately began to feel better.

"Arguments wear you out," his wife said.

"Yes," he agreed. "And Gossim wears me out. I'm tired just from this one interchange, forgetting the eight full years of it which preceded today. I'm going to go select a noser." He rose, made his way from the office and into the midday sun.

A noser is a strange craft, he said to himself as he stood at the edge of the parking field surveying the lines of inert vessels. First of all, they were incredibly cheap; he could gain possession of one of these for less than four silver dollars. Secondly, they could go but never return; nosers were strictly one-way ships.

The reason, of course, was simple: a noser was too small to carry fuel for a return trip. All the noser could do was kick off from a larger ship or a planetary surface, head for its destination, and quietly expire there. But – they did their job.

Sentient races, human and otherwise, flocked throughout the galaxy aboard the little pod-like ships. Goodbye, Tekel Upharsin, Morley said to himself, and made a brief, silent salute to the rows of orange bushes growing beyond the noser parking lot. Which one should we take? he asked himself. They all looked alike: rusty, discarded. Like the contents of a used car lot back on Terra. I'll choose the first one with a name on it beginning with M, he decided, and began reading the individual names.

The *Morbid Chicken*. Well, that was it. Not very transcendental, but fitting; people, including Mary, were always telling him that he had a morbid streak. What I have, he said to himself, is a mordant wit. People confuse the two terms because they sound similar. Looking at his wristwatch he saw that he had time to make a trip to the packaging department of the citrus products factory. So he made off in that direction.

"Ten pint jars of class AA marmalade," he said to the shipping clerk. It was either get them now or not at all.

"Are you sure you're entitled to ten more pints?" The clerk eyed him dubiously, having had dealings with him before.

"You can check on my marmalade standing with Joe Perser," Morley said. "Go ahead, pick up the phone and give him a call."

"I'm too busy," the clerk said. He counted out ten pint jars of the kibbutz's main product and passed them to Morley in a bag, rather than in a cardboard carton.

"No carton?" Morley said.

"Scram," the clerk said. Morley got one of the jars out, making sure that they were indeed class AA. They were. "Marmalade from Tekel Upharsin Kibbutz!" the label declared. "Made from genuine Seville oranges (group 3-B mutational subdivision). Take a pot of sunny Spain into your kitchen or cooking cubicle!"

"Fine," Morley said. "And thanks."

He lugged the bulky paper bag from the building and out once more into the bright sun of midday. Back again at the noser parking area he began getting the pints of marmalade stored away in the *Morbid Chicken*. The one good thing this kibbutz produces, he said to himself as he placed the jars one by one within the magnetic grip-field of the storage compartment. I am afraid this is one thing I'll miss.

He called Mary on his neck radio. "I've picked out a noser," he informed her. "Come on down to the parking area and I'll show it to you."

"Are you sure it's a good one?"

"You know you can take my mechanical ability for granted," Morley said testily. "I've examined the rocket engine, wiring, controls, every life-protect system, everything, completely." He pushed the last jar of marmalade away in the storage area and shut the door firmly.

She arrived a few minutes later, slender and tanned in her khaki shirt, shorts and sandals. "Well," she said, surveying the *Morbid Chicken*, "it looks rundown to me. But if you say it's okay it is, I guess."

"I've already begun loading," Morley said.

"With what?"

Opening the door of the storage compartment he showed her the ten jars of marmalade. After a long pause Mary said, "Christ."

"What's the matter?"

"You haven't been checking the wiring and the engine. You've been out scrounging up all the goddam marmalade you could talk them out of." She slammed the storage area door shut with venomous ire. "Sometimes I think you're insane. Our lives depend on this goddam noser working. Suppose the oxygen system fails or the heat circuit fails or there're microscopic leaks in the hull. Or –"

"Get your brother to look at it," he interrupted. "Since you have so much more trust in

him than you do in me."

"He's busy. You know that."

"Or he'd be here," Morley said, "picking out which noser for us to take. Rather than me."

His wife eyed him intently, her spare body drawn up in a vigorous posture of defiance. Then, all at once, she sagged in what appeared to be half-amused resignation. "The strange thing is," she said, "that you have such good luck – I mean in relation to your talents. This probably is the best noser here. But not because you can tell the difference but because of your mutant-like luck."

"It's not luck. It's judgment."

"No," Mary said, shaking her head. "That's the last thing it is. You have no judgment – not in the usual sense, anyhow. But what the hell. We'll take this noser and hope your luck is holding as well as usual. But how can you live like this, Seth?" She gazed up plaintively into his face. "It's not fair to me."

"I've kept us going so far."

"You've kept us here at this – kibbutz," Mary said. "For eight years."

"But now I've gotten us off."

"To something worse, probably. What do we know about this new assignment? Nothing, except what Gossim knows – and he knows because he makes it his business to read over everyone else's communications. He read your original prayer. . . I didn't want to tell you because I knew it would make you so – "

"That bastard." He felt red, huge fury well up inside him, spiked with impotence. "It's a moral violation to read another person's prayers."

"He's in charge. He feels everything is his business. Anyhow we'll be getting away from that. Thank God. Come on; cool off. You can't do anything about it; he read it years ago."

"Did he say whether he thought it was a good prayer?"

Mary Morley said, "Fred Gossim would never say if it was. I think it was. Evidently it was, because you got the transfer."

"I think so. Because God doesn't grant too many prayers by Jews due to that covenant back in the pre-Intercessor days when the power of the Form Destroyer was so strong, and our relationship to him – to God, I mean – was so fouled up."

"I can see you back in those days," Mary said. "Kvetching bitterly about everything

the Manufacturer did and said."

Morley said, "I would have been a great poet. Like David."

"You would have held a little job, like you do now." With that she strode off, leaving him standing in the doorway of the noser, one hand on his row of stored-away marmalade jars. His sense of impotence rose within him, choking his windpipe. "Stay here!" he yelled after her. "I'll leave without you!"

She continued on under the hot sun, not looking back and not answering.

For the remainder of the day Seth Morley busied himself loading their possessions into the *Morbid Chicken*. Mary did not show herself. He realized, toward dinnertime, that he was doing it all. Where is she? he asked himself. It's not fair. Depression hit him, as it generally did toward mealtime. I wonder if it's all worth it, he said to himself. Going from one no-good job to another. I'm a loser. Mary is right about me; look at the job I did selecting a noser. Look at the job I'm doing loading this damn stuff in here.

He gazed about the interior of the noser, conscious of the ungainly piles of clothing, books, records, kitchen appliances, typewriter, medical supplies, pictures, wear-forever couch covers, chess set, reference tapes, communications gear and junk, junk, junk. What have we in fact accumulated in eight years of work here? he asked himself. Nothing of any worth. And in addition, he could not get it all into the noser. Much would have to be thrown away or left for someone else to use.

Better to destroy it, he thought gloomily. The idea of someone else gaining use of his possessions had to be sternly rejected. I'll burn every last bit of it, he told himself. Including all the nebbish clothes that Mary's collected in her jaybird manner. Selecting whatever's bright and gaudy. I'll pile her stuff outside, he decided, and then get all of mine aboard. It's her own fault: she should be here to help. I'm under no mandate to load her kipple. As he stood there with an armload of clothes gripped tightly he saw, in the gloom of twilight, a figure approaching him. Who is it? he wondered, and peered to see.

It was not Mary. A man, he saw, or rather something like a man. A figure in a loose robe, with long hair falling down his dark, full shoulders. Seth Morley felt fear. The Walker-on-Earth, he realized. Come to stop me. Shaking, he began to set down the armload of clothes. Within him his conscience bit furiously; he felt now the complete weight of all the baddings he had done. Months, years – he had not seen the Walker-on-Earth for a long time, and the weight was intolerable. The accumulation which always left its mark within. Which never departed until the Intercessor removed it. The figure halted before him. "Mr. Morley," it said.

"Yes," he said, and felt his scalp bleeding perspiration. His face dripped with it and he tried to wipe it away with the back of his hand. "I'm tired," he said. "I've been working for hours to get this noser loaded. It's a big job."

The Walker-on-Earth said, "Your noser, the *Morbid Chicken*, will not get you and your little family to Delmak-O. I therefore must interfere, my dear friend. Do you understand?"

"Sure," he said, panting with guilt.

"Select another."

"Yes," he said, nodding frantically. "Yes, I will. And thank you; thanks a lot. The fact of the matter is you saved our lives." He peered at the dim face of the Walker-on-Earth, trying to see if its expression reproached him. But he could not tell; the remaining sunlight had begun to diffuse into an almost nocturnal haze.

"I am sorry," the Walker-on-Earth said, "that you had to labor so long for nothing."

"Well, as I say – "

"I will help you with the reloading," the Walker-on-Earth said. It reached its arms out, bending; it picked up a pile of boxes and began to move among the parked, silent nosers. "I recommend this," it said presently, halting by one and reaching to open its door. "It is not much to look at, but mechanically it's perfect."

"Hey," Morley said, following with a swiftly snatched-up load. "I mean, thanks. Looks aren't important anyhow; it's what's on the inside that counts. For people as well as nosers." He laughed, but the sound emerged as a jarring screech; he cut it off instantly, and the sweat gathered around his neck turned cold with his great fear.

"There is no reason to be afraid of me," the Walker said.

"Intellectually I know that," Morley said. Together, they labored for a time in silence, carrying box after box from the *Morbid Chicken* to the better noser. Continually Morley tried to think of something to say, but he could not. His mind, because of his fright, had become dim; the fires of his quick intellect, in which he had so much faith, had almost flickered off.

"Have you ever thought of getting psychiatric help?" the Walker asked him at last.

"No," he said.

"Let's pause a moment and rest. So we can talk a little."

Morley said, "No."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to know anything; I don't want to hear anything." He heard his voice bleat out in its weakness, steeped in its paucity of knowledge. The bleat of foolishness, of the greatest amount of insanity of which he was capable. He knew this, heard it and

recognized it, and still he clung to it; he continued on. "I know I'm not perfect," he said. "But I can't change. I'm satisfied."

"Your failure to examine the *Morbid Chicken*."

"Mary made a good point; usually my luck is good."

"She would have died, too."

"Tell her that." Don't tell me, he thought. Please, don't tell me any more. I don't want to know! The Walker regarded him for a moment. "Is there anything," it said at last, "that you want to say to me?"

"I'm grateful, damn grateful. For your appearance."

"Many times during the past years you've thought to yourself what you would say to me if you met me again. Many things passed through your mind."

"I – forget," he said, huskily.

"May I bless you?"

"Sure," he said, his voice still husky. And almost inaudible. "But why? What have I done?"

"I am proud of you, that's all."

"But why?" He did not understand; the censure which he had been waiting for had not arrived. The Walker said, "Once years ago you had a tomcat whom you loved. He was greedy and mendacious and yet you loved him. One day he died from bone fragments lodged in his stomach, the result of filching the remains of a dead Martian root-buzzard from a garbage pail. You were sad, but you still loved him. His essence, his appetite – all that made him up had driven him to his death. You would have paid a great deal to have him alive again, but you would have wanted him as he was, greedy and pushy, himself as you loved him, unchanged. Do you understand?"

"I prayed then," Morley said. "But no help came. The Mentufactorer could have rolled time back and restored him."

"Do you want him back now?"

"Yes," Morley said raspingly.

"Will you get psychiatric help?"

"No."

"I bless you," the Walker-on-Earth said, and made a motion with his right hand: a slow

and dignified gesture of blessing. Seth Morley bowed his head, pressed his right hand against his eyes . . . and found that black tears had lodged in the hollows of his face. Even now, he marveled. That awful old cat; I should have forgotten him years ago. I guess you never really forget such things, he thought. It's all in there, in the mind, buried until something like this comes up.

"Thank you," he said, when the blessing ended.

"You will see him again," the Walker said. "When you sit with us in Paradise."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Exactly as he was?"

"Yes."

"Will he remember me?"

"He remembers you now. He waits. He will never stop waiting."

"Thanks," Morley said. "I feel a lot better."

The Walker-on-Earth departed.

Entering the cafeteria of the kibbutz, Seth Morley sought out his wife. He found her eating curried lamb shoulder at a table in the shadows of the edge of the room. She barely nodded as he seated himself facing her.

"You missed dinner," she said presently. "That's not like you."

Morley said, "I saw him."

"Who?" She eyed him keenly.

"The Walker-on-Earth. He came to tell me that the noser I picked out would have killed us. We never would have made it."

"I knew that," Mary said. "I knew that – *thing* would never have gotten us there."

Morley said, "My cat is still alive."

"You don't have a cat."

He grabbed her arm, halting her motions with the fork. "He says we'll be all right; we'll get to Delmak-O and I can begin the new job."

"Did you ask him what the new job is all about?"

"I didn't think to ask him that, no."

"You fool." She pried his hand loose and resumed eating. "Tell me what the Walker looked like."

"You've never seen it?"

"You *know* I've never seen it!"

"Beautiful and gentle. He held out his hand and blessed me."

"So it manifested itself to you as a man. Interesting. If it had been as a woman you wouldn't have listened to – "

"I pity you," Morley said. "It's never intervened to save you. Maybe it doesn't consider you worth saving."

Mary, savagely, threw down her fork; she glowered at him with animal ferocity. Neither of them spoke for a time.

"I'm going to Delmak-O alone," Morley said at last. "You think so? You really think so? I'm going with you; I want to keep my eyes on you at all times. Without me – "

"Okay," he said scathingly. "You can come along. What the hell do I care? Anyhow if you stayed here you'd be having an affair with Gossim, ruining his life – " He ceased speaking, panting for breath. In silence, Mary continued eating her lamb.