
The Plateau of Leng

by

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0:

The year was 1984. Mark Mason's dorm was alive with the noises of packing--lofts being torn apart, boxes being dropped, and doors slamming. Mark's room was an oasis of tranquility; he was sitting on the floor, listening to the Grateful Dead and trying to relax. Relaxation was a big part of his life, mainly as an attempt to control his tension problems. He was a big human male, with shoulder-length black hair.

The door slammed as his soon-to-be ex-roommate Phill came in. Phill was already shaking down a bag of marijuana.

Mark didn't look up. "Are your folks here yet?"

Phil sat down, still jiggling the plastic bag. "No, I got one last chance to get high before they show. Sure you don't wanna?"

Mark suddenly twisted at the waist, snatching at the window-crank. The window made a screeching noise as he opened it.

Phil looked fuzzily startled; he dug out his papers and began rolling the joint. "I just thought you might."

"I quit." Mark went back to his relaxation.

"Yeah, well, I think if you gotta live at home this summer you should at least start getting high again."

Mark sighed and really did relax, but depression was mixed in with the release of tension. "I'm not goin' home."

"Did your dad come through with the money then?"

"To follow the Dead? No." Mark had planned to travel with the Grateful Dead on their summer tour, but that had proved to be too expensive. "I found a summer program."

"Uh-oh! Look out! The king of summer programs strikes again!"

Mark grinned.

"I hope it's better than working in that place you went to last summer."

"Arkham Asylum?"

Phil struck a kitchen match on his zipper, lighting the joint. "Yeah."

"Yeah, it's better than that. I'm going to India--"

"No shit!" Phil inhaled and bore down on the smoke in his chest, looking at Mark expectantly.

"I'm auditing an Indian Studies class that's going to India with my Ghandian instructor." He was waiting for the burst of smoke that Phil would exhale. Mark got his table fan out of the box and plugged it in.

Phil's words were visible in distinct carbon monoxide puffs: "Now--that's--really cool."

"It is cool, huh?" Mark turned on the fan and watched as Phil's words were blown out of the window. "This way I don't have to stay home and work with my dad."

"Your dad, hell--it's just cool to get to go to India--"

"Yeah."

"Well, congratulations, anyway. How did you get in?"

"I explained the situation to my Ghandian instructor, and he let me in. He knows about my dad...." Mark shut up. The tension was returning to him.

1:

Mark sloshed soapy water out of the bucket and spread it around on the tile floor of the bar. Outside the big windows, Katmandu was dark; it was late, and the neighborhood had no streetlights. In the back room, the owner was counting the currency of several nations.

Mark looked up as a man in khakis came through the door. "We're closed," Mark said, "do you speak English? We're closed...." He wondered how to say 'closed' in Nepalese.

The khaki man came in, closing the door behind himself. His voice was flat and Midwest-American: "You're Mark Mason?"

Mark squinted at the man; not many people knew he was in Nepal. "Uh, yeah. Can I help you?"

The newcomer held out his hand. "I'm Gerrard Minfit." Minfit was tall, rangy, and looked about fifty years old. His eyes were pale and vacantly blue.

"What's up?" Mark leaned the mop against the bar and shook hands with him; he found Minfit's grip callused and over-tight.

"I learned about you from the woman at the youth hostel. Can we talk?"

"Can I get you a beer?"

Minfit was amused. "Do you serve Budwiser, Mark?"

Hesitantly, Mark pulled out a barstool and sat down. "We're about six thousand miles from Milwaukee, man. We have all kinds of beer, but if you want a Bud you should go down the street. They're really expensive. Have a seat."

Minfit remained leaning on the bar. He rubbed his temples, and began: "I understand you're looking for work. Perhaps I could ask you some questions?"

Mark nodded. "Sure. Well, I'm not all that desperate for work. I just wanted to work down in here, you know, to see some of the local color.... A bar's a good place for that."

"But if the work was interesting enough, you'd be interested in changing jobs, correct?"

Mark nodded. "Well, it would have to be under the table--"

"You are an American, correct?"

"Yes."

"And a college student?"

"Duke University."

"That's in North Carolina, correct? What do you study?"

"I'm a psych major. I'm in my third year--"

Minfit nodded. "How did you come to be in Nepal?"

"Well," Mark said, "I had planned to follow the Grateful Dead on tour, you know, but that fell through. I had time to sign up for Dr. Moser's Indian trip, so I flew over here with them--Dr. Moser leads a class through India every summer, for the University; I'm getting college credit for this."

Minfit was paying close attention. "The tour was to India?"

"Yeah, but after the tour I caught a plane up here to Kathmandu. I've always wanted to see Nepal--I'm just working in this bar to see some of the local color."

"And last summer, you....?"

"I worked in an exchange program with Miskatonic University, in Massachusetts--I slept in one of their dorms and worked at a place called Arkham Asylum all summer."

Minfit nodded, as if this was important. He was looking at Mark's long hair. "Are you a communist, Mark?"

After a moment, Mark said, "No. Are you?"

"I hate communists. Are you a hippie, Mark?"

Mark pointed at Minfit. He spoke gently: "If you have a problem of some kind, then maybe you shouldn't've come in here looking to hire me, man."

Minfit was unaffected. "I have no problem."

"Okay, good. I mean, not that I could have done anything about it if you had--"

"Because you're a pacifist?"

"I'm into nonviolence and I don't know what this job is."

Minfit seemed to think this was funny; he covered it well. "I'm running an archeological survey in, ah, the mountains, and one of my men seems to have suffered a nervous breakdown. I need some help with him."

Mark sighed. "Well, I don't have the experience anyway--"

"You worked at Arkham."

"I was an intern. I'm not going to be licensed for three to four years...." Mostly to himself, he said, "If I even decide to be a therapist."

Slowly, Minfit sat on the barstool beside Mark. He looked down the bar to the office and said quietly, "The site is in Tibet."

"Tibet!"

"Please keep your voice down."

"Shit, man," Mark whispered, "what are you doing in Tibet? Is the border open?"

Minfit glowered. "I don't work with communists. This is a secret."

"Yeah, I bet." Tibet had been controlled by China for about twenty years; the country was closed off to westerners. "What are you looking for?"

"I can't discuss it."

"Okay. He's really in Tibet?"

Minfit nodded. "I understand that you are looking for passage north of the border."

"Well, I've always wanted to see Tibet, man. Damn. I guess I could take a look at him."

"Any help you could give us would be appreciated. Really, I'm in something of a bind here. Not many Nepalese psychiatrists want to take a secret flight out of the country."

Mark grinned. "Sure, I'll take a look at him. No promises, though."

"Can you leave tonight?"

"Yeah!" Mark shook his head in amazement. "I can't believe you're just dropping this in my lap. Do I meet you at the airport, or what?"

Minfit's eyes flickered from the office door to Mark. "You would have to come with me now. We can go by the hostel to get your clothes, if you like, but I can't tell you where we will be departing from."

"Okay." The cloak-and-dagger stuff was obnoxious, but Mark supposed that it had to be done; Minfit didn't know who he could trust. And anyway, Mark thought, he only just met me. Aloud he said, "I guess we can go now."

"Beautiful." Minfit snatched up Mark's mop and tossed it into the bucket; soapy water sloshed. "I have only a few more things to pick up, and then we can go out to the field...."

2:

As they boarded the plane, Minfit said, "I hope you don't mind a bumpy ride. It's going to be a very bumpy ride. The Chinese air defense system is primitive, but we'll be flying very low. That makes for a bumpy ride."

"Sure, whatever." Mark threw his duffel bag into the back of the cargo plane. The plane was filled with canned and dried food, most of it with Indian labels. It was a small plane, battered and long-used, and they were on a small runway outside Katmandu. Mark had noticed that it wasn't an official airport.

"You shouldn't be too worried," Minfit continued. "The best air defense system in the world is in America--at our own border with Mexico. It is constantly crossed by drug smugglers." He pulled aside the curtain at the front of the plane and leaned up into the cockpit. He announced, "I have found us a psychiatrist."

This was greeted by some applause and clapping. Once Minfit was out of the way, a fat American in a green parka leaned out. When he saw Mark, the man said, "God, a fuckin' hippie."

Mark was mild: "Fuck you."

Minfit laughed as he sat down on a pile of sleeping bags. "I thought you were 'into nonviolence,' hippie."

"Well," Mark said, "I try to stay out of trouble."

Minfit laughed again; the fat man went back to his tasks.

Mark got out his cigarettes. "I guess there's no 'No Smoking' light on this airline, right?"

"May I have one?" Minfit took the cigarette, and lit it with a silver Zippo. On the side of the Zippo was some kind of embossed, winged emblem. "Maybe you should cut your hair," he said, "some of my people don't like you left-wing types."

"My hair stays."

"If you like."

The engines started.

"Finally!" Minfit glanced out of one of the few windows; "I hate working in these countries. There is no respect for timekeeping outside of the West."

"Yeah, I spent most of my time in India waiting for trains." Mark was trying to get settled on a bunch of crates, and the plane yanked forward; he slid around and then braced himself.

"India is the armpit of the universe," Minfit said. "There is only one place that is worse than India."

"What's that?"

"California."

The plane yanked up as it took off; Mark braced himself again. They rose steeply; Mark wondered if he'd be able to get any sleep during the flight. It was dark in the back of the plane, and he stretched out and thought about Tibet.

Suddenly, the plane began diving up and down in long arcs, some so steep that the load began sliding around in the back of the plane. Mark found his way to a seat and started untangling the belt.

Minfit was a dark shape amongst the cargo. "Got a weak stomach, hippie?"

"My name's Mark, and luckily I haven't eaten anything since last night."

"That's lucky for all of us, then."

Mark had managed to get the ancient belt to lock around his waist; there was no shoulder harness. "Does he have to fly like this, or what?"

Minfit seemed happy. "Look, Mark, the pilot absolutely must keep low to the ground during this flight. It's a matter of life and death. That means hugging our way through the valleys and jumping over the peaks as quickly as possible. What we're talking about is a Chinese missile striking the side of the fuselage, coming right into the cabin with us, and exploding in our laps with enough force to knock down the apartment building you grew up in. Now, are there any questions?"

Mark glared at him. "Yeah, but we're not even in Tibet, yet. Why don't we just fly normally to the border and then sneak our way into Tibet?"

"Oh." Minfit thought about it. "I guess Tony just likes to fly that way, then." His eyes twinkled as if he'd just delivered a tremendous punchline, and he repeated, "I guess--hah, hah--Tony just likes to fly that way. Not funny, Mark?"

The plane took an abrupt dive, the motors whining, and after a second Mark's ears popped. He knocked over a pile of K-rations to look out a window; in the moonlight he saw a sheer wall of rock. The top and bottom of the cliff face were not visible. "How long?"

"What?"

The motors were really roaring now, and Mark shouted: "HOW LONG BEFORE WE GET TO TIBET?" There was an instant of weightlessness, and then he was yanked back into his seat as the plane headed up at a steep angle. The engines relaxed.

Minfit was burrowing deeper into the pile of sleeping bags. He looked irritated at the turbulence. "I may have told you a little lie."

Mark stared at him. "What? Oh, shit." He leaned back and rubbed his forehead. After a second he looked around the plane, and reluctantly decided that there wasn't any way to hijack it. "All right, man, just tell it to me. Where the hell are we going, and

what the hell are you going to do with me? You mother-fucker. You fucking--"

Minfit waved at him. "No, no. Everything's exactly as I told it to you, with one tiny exception. One little, tiny exception."

"We're not going to Tibet."

Minfit grinned; his teeth shone in the darkened cargo hold. "That's right, hippie."

"Okay, okay." Mark sat back. "So, where are we headed?"

"The site is actually inside China."

"You work for the Chinese?"

"No," Minfit said sternly, "I told you that I hate communists. They won't know we're there."

Mark was trying not to throw up; he was becoming so airsick that fear was strictly a secondary consideration.

"China's a big country," Minfit shouted over the engines. "We'll be going to an isolated area. They won't even know that we've come visiting."

The sudden changes in altitude were hurting Mark's eardrums, and he swallowed to pop them.

Outside, dawn was filtering through. The rock walls had been replaced by the eternal blue sky of the Himalayas.

3:

The plane came down in a very long, shallow dive, and then bounced twice. We've crashed, Mark thought, and then the back end was sliding around like a hydroplaning car. Mark clutched the arms of his seat and turned to look out the window. He saw a wide, muddy field, and realized that Tony was landing the plane.

When they finally lurched to a stop, Minfit abruptly stood. The old man was clearly dizzy, even to Mark's sight, but Minfit staggered to the plane's door and flung it open. Outside, the terrain was brown and wet.

Mark suddenly realized that they had landed. He thought, Oh, my god. I'm as dizzy as I've ever been in my life.... When he undid the belt and tried to stand, the wall of the plane leaped up at him and then he was lying on the floor.

The fat man in the parka--Tony the pilot, Mark guessed from the floor--stepped over Mark and leaned out the door, taking deep breaths.

Mark said, "I have never been this dizzy before. Either you are one hell of a good pilot, or you're one hell of a bad pilot. I dunno enough about it to tell which one." The plane was spinning around him; his eyes were tearing up.

Tony looked down at Mark for a moment, spat on him, and then jumped out. There was a heavy sound as he leaped out of the plane--the splat of someone landing in mud.

"Aw, Jesus." Mark managed to get up on all fours. He wondered if he'd upset Tony with the crack about the flying, or if Tony was just being a jerk. He hoped it wasn't the second alternative. When he was able, Mark climbed down out of the plane.

"Pleased to meet you." The speaker was a black man in muddy camouflage; he held an AK-47 automatic rifle, in the port arms position. The black man grinned, showing a few broken teeth. "I'm going to be your guard for the day; my name is Adam. Welcome to the Red Chinese Playboy Club."

Mark paid no real attention to this. He was staring, enthralled, at the largest open area he'd ever seen. The mountains curved out to the right and left like a gigantic wall; all of the peaks were ice-covered. The flat land was still high, judging by the thinness of the air, but it was much lower than the surrounding mountains. It was heavily forested, but the plane had landed on an empty escarpment, and Mark could see that a strange jungle ran to the horizon and out of sight. Crusty, half-melted snow was on the tops of the trees below them.

The air was cold, just above freezing, but humid. It smelled like mud and rotting plants. Mark turned to the black man and said, "What did you say your name was?"

"Adam."

"Adam what?"

"Just Adam."

"Shit." Mark looked around again; there was no sign of human habitation at all, only a few tracks in the snow. "What the hell is this place?"

Adam laughed. "You're at the ass-end of the universe, hippie. You're way out in the woods."

"My name's Mark."

"Where are you from?"

"Durham, North Carolina."

Adam nodded. "I'm from Chicago, but I ain't been back there in years."

Mark breathed deeply. The dizziness was passing, but the smells in the air were making him nauseous again. "I don't think it's changed too much."

"Let's go down and talk to Colonel Minfit."

Colonel? Mark thought as he walked ahead of Adam, following the muddy tracks, Colonel? This isn't any good. I'm in deep trouble, here.

The trail led to the edge of the escarpment, and down the steep side; Mark had to go down it backwards and on all fours.

Above him, Adam was managing to walk upright. He was holding the AK-47 carefully and he said, "Now, don't go running off in the woods, or you might have to get a bullet in the back. Getting shot in the back isn't any sort of death, for a man."

"Shit," Mark said, "No kind of death is about my speed."

"Ain't that the truth..."

"Quit worrying about it. I don't have anyplace to run to, anyway."

Adam didn't reply until they had reached the bottom of the hill. "Well," he said, "People try to do funny things, sometimes."

The forest was a mess of trees like Mark had never seen before, all of them tangled in heavy vines and bushes. The mud was thick and he was having to take big, careful steps; off in the woods was the sound of a river. "Come here often?"

"Hell, no. Watch your step, there!"

"What? What? I don't see anything-"

"Just step around that place. The Colonel had us plant a buncha punji sticks down here when we first landed--they all sank in the mud, but they're still there."

Mark navigated out of the mud and into the woods, where the ground was a little

firmer. "What are punji sticks?"

"Little pieces of wood, point up to catch intruders! Don't they teach you anything?"

"What the fuck, man," Mark asked, "What the hell is going on? What are we doing out here?"

"The Colonel can explain everything like he likes. Over there...."

Mark forced his way through a mass of branches. Behind it was a cleared area, as muddy as anyplace else, with a few green canvas tents. The river ran alongside the cleared place; it was about twenty feet wide, muddy, and moving fast. The edges of the river were nearly overflowing the banks, and the splashing was noisy.

They stopped. A muddy, humiliated-looking oriental was tending a fire in the center of the campsite; he rose, bowed quickly to Adam, and ran inside a tent. A moment later, he reappeared and waved Mark inside. Mark pulled back the canvas flap and went in, moving carefully.

"Hello, hippie." Colonel Minfit said pleasantly. He was sitting at a folding table and smoking a cigarette; he looked like a talk-show host.

"My name's Mark."

Minfit stared at him expressionlessly. "Are you sure?"

Mark sighed and shrugged. "Look, man," he said, "what the hell do you want? Here we are--wherever the hell here is--in your ballpark. Just tell me what you want."

Minfit nodded. "It's as I explained," he said, "one of my men has suffered.... Ah, some sort of nervous breakdown. I need you to help him."

Privately, Mark thought that Minfit was not very sane, either. He himself had no idea what to do about his 'patient;' he'd never treated anyone. "Well, what if I can't help him?"

Minfit looked across his cigarette at Mark. "If you are not capable of pulling your weight around here, we will have no reason to provide for you."

"Oh," Mark said, "Okay."

Minfit looked disappointed. He waited awhile, expectantly, and then asked, "Do you know what that means?"

Mark sighed and stared at Minfit disgustedly. "Go ahead, man, say it. You know? Say whatever you want."

"Fix him or I'll have you shot."

Mark said, "Yeah." He thought about it. "Well," he said finally, "you know, you are a real asshole. I hope you get AIDS, man. I hope you fuckin' get hit by a car, you son of a bitch."

Minfit nodded. "People say that," he said mildly, "I've seen, oh, maybe twenty serious interrogations. Everyone either curses or begs for mercy, when their life's on the line."

Mark sighed. The guy didn't even care if he cursed him. "What are you doing up here, or is it some kind of secret?"

"Just what I explained on our flight in, archeological diggings--"

"You must be looking for the missing link, then, 'cause nothing else would have come out here to die."

"Oh, you're wrong." Minfit leaned back, putting his feet up on the table. "This valley

has been controlled by several civilizations. It is also the site of several temples built under different Chinese dynasties. You're right, though, we are very isolated; we are actually still in the Himalayas. This isn't even a valley, really, it's only a plateau--but compared to the mountains around it, it's the deepest area for a thousand miles." He grinned. "It's a swamp. It's a swamp the size of Lake Superior. They call it the Plateau of Leng."

Mark frowned, inhaled, and took two steps backward. He said, "There is no such place as the Plateau of Leng."

Minfit seemed pleased to be taken seriously. "I can see you've heard of it."

"At Arkham they had me read all those books," Mark said rapidly, "so that I'd know what the hell the inmates were talking about, and let me tell you I've had it up to here with that bullshit." He indicated his neck and pointed at Minfit. "I didn't come to India to see any more of that sort of thing."

"You do know about these things!" Minfit was excited. "What books are we talking about--the Necronomicon?"

Mark sighed again. "Yeah, that and about five others. They gave me a notebook of photocopies.... It was about five hundred pages of things people had written down after they went insane, if you ask me. The problem they have up there at Arkham is that people get obsessed by that sort of thing-" He was pointing at Minfit. "-and they actually go out looking for it. Not to mention the human sacrifices. Look at yourself, man! You're in China!"

"My interest in these matters is purely financial." Minfit replied assuredly, "Do you realize how much that notebook of photocopies you mentioned would be worth?"

"Well, they had me sign for it-"

"At least five hundred dollars to the right people."

"Yeah, but they wouldn't be buying it for the antiquity, or they'd want the originals."

"Exactly. Fanatics will pay tremendous amounts for the right material."

Mark shook his head. "Yeah, well, if you really want to deal with those people, you're welcome to it. I'd rather have 'em on the other side of a big piece of Plexiglas, myself--we had a teenager at Arkham who cut himself open and drew all sorts of designs with his blood. The staff used to call them 'cthulhuheads.'"

"Exactly. Oh, I've had to watch them when I actually deliver the merchandise." Minfit put down his cigarette and pulled back the sleeve on his right arm, displaying a long red scar. "I got that from some kind of ceremonial dagger, in Haiti, when I was trying to sell an original copy of *De Vermis Mysteris*." He grinned wolfishly. "Now, that boy didn't walk away from that; I later sold the knife to a man in Amsterdam."

Mark sighed, depressed. "Well," he said, "it might take me awhile to cure this guy. What are his symptoms?"

Minfit frowned. His glowing humor vanished as he slowly pulled the sleeve back down, and said, "He lost his mind.... right after we sent him into the buried temple."

4:

The day after Mark's arrival on the Plateau of Leng, he awoke with his muscles brutally sore; Minfit had insisted that he help unload the plane. Mark was jet-lagged, muddy, and tired. Sleeping hadn't helped. All night long he'd been harassed by nightmares about Arkham.

When he'd first done to work at Arkham, he'd sat down and read straight through

their notebook of excerpts from the old and forbidden books. That reading had given him nightmares for three or four days, and Mark guessed that this wasn't too different from those.

Lovely, he thought, of all the places in the world, I have to end up here. Not even the Cthulhuheads would come up here.

His sleep had been further ruined by anger that he could barely control. Mark knew he had to control it. The Colonel and the others were well-armed and did not seem motivated to withhold the use of their weapons, should he get into a fight with them. The only thing to do was accept the situation and wait until they were ready to go back to Katmandu.

In the meantime, he had the 'patient' to deal with; Mark hadn't met the man yet. He got out of bed, scratching under the clothes he'd worn to bed, and looked around. The other cot in the tent was empty, so evidently Adam was already up. Mark put on his boots and sloshed out through the mud to the main tent.

Tony and Adam were sitting by the fire, drinking coffee. "Hey, bo," Adam called, "you going to do something about Mr. Henreid today?"

"Who's that?"

Adam was wearing the same muddy camouflage he'd had on the day before, and his AK was slung over his shoulder. "The crazyman you got hired to cure. Ain't that right, Tony?"

Tony spat into the fire. He didn't look at Mark.

"Mr. Henreid is a friend of Tony's, here-"

Tony spat into the fire again. "He's no friend a mine. He was all of the time taking those pills-"

Mark interrupted, "What kinda pills?"

"Speed." Tony said. "White crosses, mostly."

Mark nodded at this, rubbing the soreness in his legs. "He might have taken too much speed. Where is he?"

"I'll show you." Adam threw the rest of his coffee into the fire, where it steamed. He led Mark away from the encampment, saying, "We had to tie him up for awhile, 'cause he kept trying to run away. The Colonel didn't want him runnin' off into the woods."

A tent had been pitched around one of the gigantic trees near the river. The roar of the water was as loud as the engines had been on the flight in. Mark patted the tent-flap. "Mr. Henreid? Can I talk to you?"

"Just go on in, son," Adam said, "he won't say anything to answer you."

Mark pulled the flap aside and ducked into the tent. Henreid was a pale white man, with short blonde hair. He was crouched down and his arms were handcuffed together around the trunk of the tree. The tent smelled like an outhouse; Henreid had soiled himself.

Mark knelt down and studied the crouched figure. "Hey." he snapped his fingers at Henreid; there was no response. Mark said to Adam, "Man, he's catatonic. What does Minfit think I can do with him anyway?"

Adam shrugged. "Well," he said philosophically, "we need him to tell us what was in the hole he went into. You understand, we sent in Mr. Henreid and he went nuts

down there; I'm not going down there unless I know what to expect."

"Well, yeah, but there probably isn't anything in the place where he broke down--he probably just came face to face with some childhood fear, or something. That Cthulhu stuff is scary; under the stress of the fear, he could have just hit a breaking point."

"Yeah," Adam said, "That's what the Colonel keeps telling us."

"But you won't go down in there, huh?"

A grimy smile split Adam's face. "No. And, neither will the Colonel."

"Huh." Mark pinched up a hunk of Henreid's skin and twisted it until it turned white; there was no reaction. Mark said, "Now I guess he wasn't like this when he came out, right? Or did somebody go down and get him?"

"No." There was no humor in Adam's voice or expression. "The Colonel sent him down early in the morning, once we'd gotten the access hole dug out, and he was gone all day. Around four o'clock in the afternoon when he crawled out of the tunnels."

"How did he look then?"

"Well, he was crying, and he'd burned up the whole clip in his AK. He couldn't recognize any of us, and for a long time he would just sit around and look at things like he'd never seen any of it before. He was like a baby."

"Then what?"

"Well, he cried a lot and wouldn't snap out of it no matter what we did. Finally, we just chained him up here. He's quieted down a lot, lately."

"Does he eat?"

"Naw, we have the chink feed him. You gotta feel sorry for the guy."

"Yeah," Mark said, "he's really lost it, huh?"

"No, I meant the chink--he doesn't even belong around here; the Colonel bought him over the border and put him to work around the camp. Mr. Henreid too, though."

Mark was staring at Henreid and wondering what the hell he was going to do; he looked up. "The Chinese guy is a slave?"

"Yeah."

Mark thought about that. He was thinking that his own position wasn't all that different.

"Go get some breakfast." Adam said, "Tony will be cooking by now. I got to go argue with the Colonel about how to brace the diggins."

Back at the tents, Tony was scrambling instant eggs. He didn't look up. Mark drank sweet, hot tea and thought about the place he had arrived.

When Tony dumped the eggs onto Mark's plate, he said, "You know all about this 'thooloo' stuff, right?"

"Yeah I guess." Mark stared at the runny eggs. He got a fork from the pile, and forced himself to eat.

Tony was staring at him. "Tell me about it."

Mark looked up. "Well, I guess I know a lot about it for somebody who doesn't believe in it. It's like a religion, but it's not what you would call organized...." He

frowned, trying to remember. "Okay, there's several different ideas behind it, and they contradict each other. Basically, it all goes back to before there were people on the Earth. The Cthulhuheads worship a god, or a bunch of gods, called the Old Ones. One of 'em's called 'Cthulhu.'"

Tony nodded. "What does Cthulhu look like?"

Mark gestured with his fork. He took a careful guess at Tony's IQ, and said: "No one knows that. These things have all been forgotten, except for hints and implications which date back to before people were around. Cthulhu and the others are old, a lot older than the human race. They were on the Earth before we were, and they wait now in dimensions that we can't see. Just seeing them will drive a human insane. Cthulhu's sleeping in a place called R'yleh.... When Cthulhu gets out of R'yleh, it means the end of the world."

Tony laughed sardonically.

"Back when Atlantis hadn't sunk yet, humans were using kinds of science that are now forgotten, and things were different than they are now. At some point, we reawakened the Old Ones, and they came out of the dark edge of the universe, and they destroyed that civilization so completely that we don't even remember it."

Tony said nothing.

"The Old Ones are known for their talents at.... biology. The humans that worship them in the right ways supposedly--that is, they can call the Old Ones out of the shadows. The Old Ones sometimes alter these people, so that they live for a very long time and began to see things in ways the rest of us can't. Their worshipers serve the Old Ones on Earth; that's who you'll be selling these artifacts to."

Tony nodded studiously.

Mark decided that Tony was accepting it all as true. "It's not good, man. Did the Colonel tell you I used to work at Arkham Asylum?"

"Yeah. What'd you do there?"

Mark refused to be diverted: "See, Arkham was in a place called the Miskatonic Valley. That is a place where the Old Ones were strong, once. It's a thin place. It's a place where the Old Ones can sometimes get through from the places where they wait, and watch.... What do you think the Plateau of Leng is? Who do you think built that temple, and dug those tunnels? We are in a thin place, Tony. This is a very thin place. I don't blame you a bit for not going down in those tunnels."

Tony looked ashamed, but recovered. He said, "Well, I'm the pilot. I can't be risked; nobody else can fly the plane."

"Then you stay the hell out of those tunnels, man. You know how Henreid is? You would be lucky if you ended up like that. We had people like Henreid at Arkham. Some of them thought that they knew what to expect, before they went down in the tunnels below the Miskatonic Valley...." Mark stared balefully at Tony.

"Really?"

Mark said sincerely, "Oh, yes. I remember when I was working admissions one night...."

"What?"

"Oh, the ambulance pulled up and they had this guy who had come out of the river in this place called Innsmouth, down on the coast. He was all covered with mud, man, and he was stark raving mad. He wouldn't go in the dark. We had to keep a

light on him at all times or he'd start screaming and trying to get away--and you know what else?"

Tony waited, openmouthed.

"His hair was as white as the straightjacket they put him in, and he was nineteen years old--"

"Bull."

"Not bull, Tony. He was a big guy, too. He was bigger than you or me. He was bigger than Adam. The old books say, 'as a foulness you shall know them'--if I were you, I'd fire up that plane and get the hell out of here. There's things we've forgotten--"

At this point, Minfit jumped out from behind the tents and screamed at Tony, who bolted up. Tony's plate of eggs fell at his feet, and then he looked ashamed and stalked away without looking at Mark or Minfit.

"Hippie," Colonel Minfit said, "for a pacifist you are certainly trying to pick a fight with me." Minfit was still grinning at Tony as the pilot walked away, but his voice was very serious. He shouted, "Tony! Come back!"

Sheepish and outraged, Tony turned around and walked back to the fireside. He glared at Mark.

"Okay," Colonel Minfit said to Mark, "tell the truth this time."

Mark sighed and gave up. "It's bullshit," he told Tony. "A lot of it has to do with things that are impossible, like finding a triangle with more than a hundred and eighty degrees. I mean, that's impossible. It's just an old religion that people get obsessed with. Your man Henreid probably had a claustrophobia attack or something, and lost his mind from the fear."

"And they will pay very well for what we find here." Minfit's eyes twinkled. "Thank you, Tony. That will be all." When they were alone, Minfit said sharply, "Try to scare my pilot again and I'll shoot you, Mark."

Mark finished the eggs, not taking his eyes from Minfit. The words, Oh? Will you, queerboy? were in him, but aloud he only said, "Okay. I'll fix Henreid if I can, and then we'll all go home."

"Exactly. That story you told...."

"What about it?"

"Was it true?"

Mark nodded. "That's what happened. Are you gonna go in those tunnels, Colonel?"

"If I have to."

"Well," Mark said, "have fun. For the record, though, it probably was latent claustrophobia in case of the kid at Arkham. You should have sent somebody experienced down there, not Henreid."

After a second or so, Minfit said, "I hired Mr. Henreid because of his experience. He served as a tunnel rat in Vietnam."

5:

"I don't know, man," Mark said to Henreid about an hour and a half later, "I don't know what you did to end up out here in the middle of nowhere. I sure feel sorry."

Henreid was still catatonic. He sat still, his head leaning against the trunk of the tree.

"You poor bastard." Mark lit one of his remaining cigarettes. "You should try talking

to me. I mean, I do understand. You're in pain. I can see you're in pain by just looking at you. Every one of us, each and every human being, is in pain. It's a terrible world. Knowing what I do about you, I think you must have had a rotten life. No offense, but I can tell. Listen, what happened to you could have happened to anybody. The Colonel said you were a tunnel rat in Nam, right? You were one of those guys that crawled into the Vietnamese's tunnels to root 'em out. Man, that's terrible. There must have been a lot of fear down there; I'd have been wetting myself to go down into one of those tunnels. Now, I know you had to suppress that fear when you were doing it. Maybe what happened to you was that when you went into these tunnels up here, all that old fear came out at once. No? Yes? Maybe?"

Henreid was motionless.

Colonel Minfit suddenly threw back the tent-flap, and leaned in. "Having any luck, hippie?"

Mark screamed, "I'm trying to establish transference here! Do you mind?"

Impressed, the Colonel ducked back out.

Mark leaned close to Henreid and whispered: "Your boss doesn't know the difference between a psychologist and a psychiatrist. That's good. If he knew any more about this, he'd know that I really don't have much hope for curing you. No offense.

"Let me talk to you," Mark went on, "I'll just sit here and talk to you, okay? I don't have anything better to do, and now that I'm here at Camp Muckenmire, I guess you deserve the best I can do. If I talk to you and treat you with respect, as a gentleman, I think that you might just decide to talk to me. Okay? I'll just treat you with respect, and you will give me the respect I deserve. That's all I ever want from anybody."

There was still no response.

Mark sighed. "You're a lot older than me," he said, "I can tell you've been around, man. I mean, Vietnam.... Hey, you're old enough to have seen Jimi Hendrix play. Did you ever see Hendrix?"

"Sometimes I kinda wish I could go back to those days. I know everybody that lived through them says they were terrible, but they have to have been better than today. Today is the pits." Mark sat down in the mud, beside Henreid. "People treat each other terribly. They'll hammer you for no reason at all, with no warning. That's how it is. Everybody says, 'Oh, he'll get his. It's karma.'

"That's another thing that makes me mad.... These hippie girls, I mean don't get me wrong I love 'em and I couldn't do without 'em, but they don't know what the hell is going on. In my dorm there was this girl named Gladys, who liked Jim Morrison a lot until she heard the last lines of The End where he's saying 'Kill.... kill.... kill....' over and over. Gladys said, 'Kill! That's against everything!' and then she wouldn't listen to it anymore.

"When I first got to school and I was hanging around with those people, I believed it. I thought that if you lived a good life and didn't hurt anybody, your karma would be good and you'd be happy. If you screwed people over, your karma would be bad and things would go wrong in your life.

"You know what?" Mark exploded, "It's bullshit! It really is! I have spent the past three years being as nice as I possibly could to people. I was even nice to those people that are locked up in Arkham Asylum. It's hard to be nice to people, sometimes, but I did it. You know what? It didn't do me any good. I mean, look at me. Here I am. I could die here, man."

Henreid said nothing.

Mark leaned in close to Henreid and whispered, "Cthulhu fat'gn."

There was no response.

Mark sat back. "I wish I had some pot. I mean, hell, man...."

6:

Mark was sitting by the fire. The temperature had dropped slightly, and he was huddled his gore-tex parka and wondering what he'd do when he ran out of cigarettes. Henreid had been unresponsive for three days, and that morning Mark had sent the Chinese guy to wash him.

"Wash him?" Colonel Minfit had exploded, "what in hell for? He can't even feed himself."

"Yeah," Mark had said, "but he'll walk around if you lead him, won't he?"

"Sometimes. What about it?"

"It's therapy, Colonel. If he gets used to acting like he's sane, he's got a better chance of recovery."

"Oh, really? And just what is this kind of therapy called, hippie?"

Mark had quickly improvised: "Well, it's called Interactive Therapy, Colonel. Once he gets cleaned up and dressed, I'm gonna walk him around the camp for awhile. I've been talking to him a lot. Sooner or later, he'll talk back."

Now, though, Mark was only waiting for the Chinese guy to get done. Maybe it was cruel to put the slave to that kind of work, but Mark figured that he was putting in enough time with Henreid, himself. There was a chance that the therapy might work; as far as Mark knew, it hadn't been tried before. In mental hospitals, people like Henreid usually wound up being warehoused.

Mark stood up, slowly, and went to get Henreid.

He was very tired. His nights had constantly been interrupted by nightmares. Usually he awoke paralyzed with fear, unable to remember what he'd been dreaming about. The night before, though, he'd dreamt that a shuggoth had been trying to get into his parent's house. Shuggoths was a servant of the Old Ones, shapeless and formless, and this one had been oozing through and between the angles in his room. They were also supposed to be invisible, but in the dream he'd been able to see it.... It had been invisible, he remembered, but somehow he'd been able to see it despite the invisibility.

None of it made sense. The day was getting colder, and it looked like it would rain again soon. That wasn't good; the surrounding mountains all drained into the swamp. The Plateau of Leng was overwhelmed with mud and thick, cold rivers.

If it rained and the excavations eroded, there was a good chance that the Colonel would put Mark to work digging them back out. He was strong, but the prospect of such unrewarding work made his anger run wild. He was sick of being a slave and he wasn't sure how much longer he could do it.

When he reached the tent, Henreid was standing up against a tree. His blonde hair was wet, and he was wearing fresh fatigues. His boots had been shined.

"Good morning, Mr. Henreid," Mark said, "I hope you're feeling better. I know I feel lousy, myself. Let's go for a walk." He took Henreid by the limp arm and pulled him away from the tree; Henreid slowly followed along.

"Yeah," Mark went on, "it looks like it's going to rain again. Does it ever do anything

here but rain? I guess the clouds all get trapped here in this depression."

Henreid staggered after Mark in a zombielike way. His boots made squelching noises in the mud.

Mark led him out of the camp, along the river. The ground was a frozen flow of mud, dried in high and low places where the waves had once been. Trees had grown up in it. "I never saw anything like this place," Mark continued, "it's a real mess, geologically. The mud must flow down from the mountains all of the time. Henreid, could I survive out here? If I took a rifle and some of the ammunition, how long would I last?"

There was no answer.

Mark sighed. "I guess I could camp out by one of the lakes, but I don't know how I would get home. If I tried walking out, I'd probably end up in China. I'm screwed.

"You're probably used to it, right? I mean, like the Colonel keeping that poor guy as a slave--everybody here takes it for granted. Even Adam, and you'd think he would have something to say, doesn't seem to care about that." Mark stopped walking. "I'm a slave."

Henreid bumped into his back, stumbling.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. You poor bastard. I wonder what would happen if I fed you some LSD? They used to think that was the wonder drug.... I wouldn't do that, anyway. People medicate too much as it is." Mark led Henreid off through the woods. You know, man, if this gets out--I mean, if was in the newspapers that I'd been caught with a paramilitary expedition to the Plateau of Leng--I'll be banned from psychology for life."

Mark walked, looking at the fungus that was growing out of the trees around them. Some of the funguses were exactly the same color as Henreid's hair.

Mark said, "I got into an argument with your boss the other day. He doesn't really understand non-violence; he seems to think people choose nonviolence because they're afraid. It's not like that. Not being able to fight, is one of the scariest things in the world." He paused and then went on: "I'm not scared of your boss. He ought to meet my fuckin' father.

"I don't know what my grandad was like, but he must have been a real terror. My dad--his kid--changed his name. My dad was learning to lay brick, so he called himself Mason. Now, that's my name. I dunno.... See, I'm really worried that I'll end up like my dad. I guess, being a psych student, I'd have to say that my dad has got a lot of trouble with his emotions. It's a big deal with me."

Gradually, it began to rain.

"Once I was hanging out at the University, during Christmas break. I think I was seventeen. There was this guy there who had gone to my high school, and he'd graduated two years ahead of me, and now he was at UNC-Chapel Hill. He knew all about me and my dad; we were doing bong hits in his apartment, and he said to me, messin' with me you know, 'So, Marky, did you get lots of nice presents from Daddy?'. I said, 'What?'

"Man," Mark continued, "I had either what we call a psychotic fuge state, or what we call a plain old blackout. For a second everything was red, and the next thing I knew we were out on the fire escape behind his apartment, and I was slamming his head against the rails.

"So you see, I'm kinda afraid to be like my dad. That's why I got into nonviolence."

He sighed, depressed by the whole thing, but he felt better to have explained it. "Actually my dad has his good side, too--that Christmas he'd gotten me a lot of stuff.... That was the Christmas he got me the SKS carbine. If you were in Nam, then you know that SKS carbines are very much like the AK-47 that Adam carries around...."

The rain began to turn cold.

Mark's feet were freezing, and his throat was sore from three days of talking. The rainy environment heightened his emotions, and his voice was sad and not triumphant: "I'm afraid your boss may be messing with the wrong hippie."

7:

After another few days passed, Mark tried doing his laundry. He washed out his clothes as best as he could in the muddy river, strung a line over the fire, and hung the wet clothes on it. The weather was colder than ever, and it rained on most days. The sky was constantly overcast.

Despite the cold, the local plants thrived. The trees were so lush and green that they seemed unreal, as if they'd come from a science-fiction movie. Gargantuan, multicolored funguses sprouted amid the roots and where the trees had split. The smell of the funguses added to the muddy stench of the Plateau.

He built up the fire and sat under a tarp to watch it, hoping that the rain would hold off for awhile longer. Later, Minfit and the others came back from the diggings. Tony opened a can of K-rations and dumped the main course into an iron skillet, which he put on the fire; the others squatted down to warm themselves.

Mark was thinking about what on Earth he was supposed to do with Henreid. The man showed no sign of recovery at all; Mark thought that the secret of what Henreid had seen might well go into Henreid's grave. He was depressed enough by his lack of progress, without Colonel Minfit's death threat hanging over his head.

"Hippie," Minfit said suddenly, "you haven't seen our excavations, have you?"

"No." Mark sat up, tucking his hands under his parka for warmth. "I haven't had time."

"Well, you might get a chance to see 'em very well." Minfit grinned wickedly.

"You want me to do some digging, huh? I knew it was coming. I guess I'll dig, then, but it'll slow down my progress with Mr. Henreid.... Maybe I can get him to help dig, if I can get him to go near the place."

"Oh, that wasn't quite what I meant."

Mark sat still. He wasn't about to leave himself open to harassment by asking what Minfit had meant.

Tony stood up suddenly. He smiled sadistically at Mark, stretching his arms with a theatrically casual air. "Well," he said, "Somebody left an awfully nice Grateful Dead shirt out here in the woods. I think I'll just take it." He deliberately turned his back on Mark, and reached up to where the clothes were hanging.

Mark sat very still. He was looking at his own hands. The hands were trembling and very white, as his organism dredged blood away from the skin in preparation for battle.

"Ooops! Look! I'm dropping it in the fire!"

Mark looked up. The shirt was about two feet in front of his face, dangling over the fire. His palms were cold with evaporating sweat and his eyes were on the handle of

the cast-iron skillet.

The bottom of the shirt went brown and then caught; the bright colors darkened as the red climbed. Tony dropped the shirt into the fire; Minfit giggled; Adam said nothing. Mark stood up and walked out of the circle.

He walked out into the twilight, through the rain and down the path to the temple. His stomach was churning.

The rain slowed, and stabilized. It was clearly not a cloudburst but another all-night rain, a long drenching downpour.

Two years of nonviolence intact, he thought, Dr. Moser would be proud of me.... But, nonviolence isn't for me in the first place. It's not supposed to be. Pride and shame warred in him; on one hand he felt justified, but on the other he wished he'd snatched up the frying pan and used it to swat Tony in the head, crushing the fat pilot's skull and knocking him down to die in convulsions with blood and brains running through his hair.

Mark sloshed through the puddles, turning it over and over in his mind, and it wasn't until the trail widened that he realized that he was on some sort of sidewalk.

The pavement was about six feet wide, and made out of chiseled stones that had been laid centuries ago. It was eroded and a few plants had grown up between the stones, but it was a tribute to the skill of the craftsmen that had laid it in. Mark was impressed; he'd done a fair amount of bricklaying for his father's company, but he'd never seen such exacting work. A little wall, about three feet high, still ran down either side. At one point a pedestal was built on the wall, but the statue itself was gone. Mark supposed that someone like the Colonel had stolen it, probably thousands of years before.

The paving was rapidly covered with water, and the water ran down the surface of it in a wide stream. The stones were slick, and he was concentrating on his walking, so Mark didn't see the temple until he was actually in the temple's courtyard.

Most of the building was long gone, shaken down by the area's unstable ground and washed away by torrential rains. Only a few gargantuan pillars remained. These lay impotently on their sides, their carvings defaced and eroded by the millennial rains of the Plateau.

An empty place--the temple's basement, evidently--gaped open like a wound. It was the size of an olympic swimming pool, and about forty feet deep. The bottom was filled by mud, stones, and logs that had all washed in over the centuries.

Staring at the wreck, Mark remembered that Henreid had gone into some sort of tunnels beneath the temple. There was no sign of them, but streams were flowing into the opened basement, and they weren't filling it. He supposed that the place had tunnels running out from underneath of the rubble--probably caves that has been washed out in the soft land of the plateau. They sent their tunnel rat into there, Mark thought, and he came out insane.

He felt sorry for Henreid. As bad as Minfit was to have as a kidnapper, he was probably a lot worse to have as a boss. Mark kicked a pebble into the mud at the bottom of the basement; it sank tracelessly into the mud. He thought again, They sent their tunnel rat into there. There was nothing else to see.

Mark turned and splashed back to the campsite. In the main tent, he found Colonel Minfit playing with some artifacts.

"Are you back already?" Minfit asked. "Did you like our temple?"

"I can't believe you're getting anything out of that place," Mark said to Minfit, "it must have been worked over years ago. There's not a whole hell of a lot left."

Minfit nodded. "Not many people come up here."

"Doesn't anybody live here?"

"On the plateau? No. The Plateau of Leng is one of the most uninhabited areas on the Earth--only the Antarctic compares to it."

"The Cthulhuheads think there's a city here, or something."

Minfit nodded again. He was setting up the idols in a row, as though he were playing with dolls. "Not for several thousand years, if my estimations are correct. The early Chinese emperors sent people into the area about once a dynasty--typically, to destroy something that isn't recorded." He laughed. "I mentioned the Antarctic? The way I got started in this business, a fellow in California bankrolled me to do an expedition to a mountain range in Antarctica."

"Yeah. There's supposed to be a city there too. Did you find anything?"

Minfit laughed again. "Actually, I spent most of the time no farther south than Buenos Aires. I sent him a lot of photos of icy rocks, and he maintained me in style for a year. Now, the present temple--the one we're excavating--was built by some Tibetians prior to Buddhism. Their religion was called Bon, and the people who built the temple were of a heretical, suppressed Bon offshoot--kind of a Bonsai." Minfit grinned at his own wit.

Mark shook his head. He didn't think that Minfit was funny. He said, "Well, what have you got?"

Protectively or jealously, Minfit put his arms around the stone carvings. "I'd show them to you, but I think you may be seeing such things more closely, very soon."

Aw, shit. "How's that?"

Minfit pointed at him. "You can't cure Mr. Henreid!"

"Well it's gonna take time, Colonel--"

Minfit looked down at the carvings, not at Mark. "The two of you are eating too much to justify that experiment any more."

Mark stepped back, ready to duck out of the tent. "Now, wait a minute--"

"So you're going into the tunnels, tomorrow morning--and you can be the one to tell us if there's anything in them, or not."

8:

The night before Minfit sent him into the tunnels, Mark nightmared; in the dream, he awoke in the tent he shared with Adam, and he knew that everything the Cthulhians believed in was true. In the dream, he was also scheduled to go into the tunnels after breakfast, just like in reality.

When he really did wake up, Mark lay and listened to the rain hitting the soft slope of the canvas. It made a nasty kind of spattering, splattering noise. Mark had gone to bed mostly dressed and he only put on his boots and his parka before he walked to the campfire. Today, Adam was cooking breakfast; Tony was nowhere to be seen.

Minfit was sitting in his lawn chair, and he looked up at Mark amusedly. "Did you sleep well?"

Mark looked at his sodden laundry, which was still hanging over the fire. "I slept fine."

Adam paused in tending the fire. "Well, do you want breakfast?"

"Yeah, bring it on."

Minfit smiled at that. He said, "The condemned man ate a hearty meal.... But you're putting our cook to extra work; did you think of that?"

Mark glared at him. He no longer felt anything for Minfit, except for contempt. "I'll need my strength."

"Oh, yes, you will...."

Mark sat down on one of the logs that encircled the fire. He said nothing until Adam shoveled the eggs onto his plate, and then said, "Finally, I get a decent plate of eggs in this place."

Minfit was mockingly casual. "I like the way Tony makes eggs. It's too bad he can't cook today."

"Yeah." Mark was eating quickly and aggressively. He hadn't wanted to fight anyone so badly in years, and he was moving slowly and carefully so as to not lose control of himself. "Listen, have you thought that it might not be Henreid who needs mental help around here?"

"Hah, hah. Henreid's going to need more than mental help. He should have dropped the act."

"What act? He's nuts." Mark looked at Adam. "Right?"

Adam didn't say anything.

"He just lost his nerve, that's all." Minfit was rocking back in his lawn chair. "He chickened out."

"Did you used to watch that movie, Patton, a lot when you were a kid?"

Minfit smiled pleasantly. "You are expendable, hippie."

From the jungle came the ratcheting sound of an AK being fired. Mark looked up, frowning. He waited for a few more shots, and then a ghastly scream, but there was only silence.

Minfit was looking at Mark with a do-you-get-the-punchline expression. Behind him, Tony came out of the jungle.

Mark exhaled slowly.

Tony had a grin that just wouldn't quit; it wiggled all over his face and he had trouble saying, "Does our psychiatrist have time to do some burying before he goes down?"

Minfit sat back. "No," he said. "The slope can do it."

Mark stood up. Ice was in him and he looked Minfit in the eyes and said, "Well, I'm done with my eggs. Let's get moving."

Adam shook his head. The movements were slow and sympathetic. "Son," he said to Mark, "you're just making it easier for him. It's not doing you any good."

Minfit whirled around at Adam. "What was that?"

"Nothing."

"That's right, nothing." Minfit pointed down the trail. "Let's go, hippie."

Adam and Tony followed, their AKs unslung and ready in case Mark should run.

As they sloshed through the last night's rainfall, Mark looked up; it was the first time he'd seen the sun since leaving Nepal. "Well," he said, "it's gonna be a real nice day."

Minfit grumbled over that. He said finally, "Are you not afraid of what you'll find in the tunnels?"

"No, actually I'm not."

"Why not?"

"Because right now, my biggest problem is you."

Minfit giggled.

When they reached the remains of the temple, Mark saw that Minfit had already tied a rope around one of the larger rocks and thrown it into the sea of mud that filled the open basement. Mark took the flashlight Minfit offered and then said, "Wait."

"Not scared, are you, hippie?"

Mark paused at the edge of the pit. "...I want a gun."

Minfit laughed out loud. In the trees along the courtyard, a flock of birds took flight.

"I'm serious, man. I want a gun."

"What for?"

"Because," Mark said, "Mr. Henreid took one."

Minfit shook his head. "I thought you were a pacifist, hippie."

Mark was breathing heavily and opening and closing his hands. He said, "...if I don't have some kind of security blanket I don't think I can go down there, man. Please--"

"You could get shot, if you don't go into the tunnels."

"Well then who's going to go down there for you?"

"I could do it myself."

"Look, just give me something, okay? I don't know enough about guns to do anything with it; I just think it'll make me feel better."

This greatly amused Minfit. He smiled again. "Okay. I will give you one of them--after all, Mr. Henreid is not going to need his." He unholstered his pistol, staying well away from Mark. "Adam?"

Adam put his AK-47 on safety and started to hand it off to Mark.

"No!" Minfit snatched the rifle. "Get in the hole," he said to Mark. "Then I'll throw it to you."

Mark shrugged. He took hold of the rope, and swung over the edge into the basement.

The stones that had once been basement walls were muddy but fairly dry, and there were large gaps between them. The footing was easy to find, and Mark went down the rope in a way that would have pleased his ape ancestors. When he landed, his legs went knee-deep in the mud.

From this level the entrance to the tunnel was clearly visible. It was an irregular black hole that opened into the mud, under a pair of stones that leaned together, with no word of what might be inside. Thick streams of water flowed down, splashing. Mark got well away from the wall and yelled to Minfit, "The rifle!"

Minfit reholstered his pistol; he held out the AK and pantomimed throwing it twice

before he opened his hands.

The gun was dropping, dropping.... Mark had to wade through the mud to catch it. Once the AK was in his hands he threw off the safety twisted the strap around his forearm put the butt against his shoulder and sighted in. BRAWACK BRAWACK BRAWACK: Mark shot Tony three times in the center of the chest, and the pilot flew backwards. He didn't even have time to be surprised.

"HAH MOTHERFUCKER," Mark screamed uncontrollably, "EAT THAT!"

Minfit appeared, low to the ground, with his pistol held out. He fired.

Mark screamed and dodged back into the tunnel entrance. It was difficult to move through the mud, but he'd never had anyone actually try to kill him before.

He fell in. The tunnel was a throat torn into the Earth, lined with randomly placed stones that jutted out of the rocks. Mark hit a ledge and nearly fell, but only bounced bruisingly against the rocks. Even as he fell he was screaming a speech that didn't end until his throat grew sore: "MINFIT MINFIT YOU PUKE YOU'RE NEXT I'LL KILL YOU ALL, YOU PUKE, YOU FAG, YOU'RE A FUCKIN' FAG, TONY WAS A FUCKIN' FAG, COME DOWN HERE AND SEE ME, PUSSYBOY! PUSSYBOY!" Mark's throat locked up and he stopped and swallowed painfully. His body was alive with glee and delight and some part of his brain tried to warn that he was crazier than all of them, but it was only a compliment now.

Mark looked back up to the edge and shouted, "Adam?"

From above, Adam shouted, "Fuck you, hippie!" and threw something into the pit.

What now? Mark thought, Am I going to survive this? He didn't care. He was beyond thoughts of survival. What he really wanted to do was climb out of the temple-pit and tear them apart with his hands. The image filled his mind and red light clouded his vision.

There was a huge explosion to his right, and thick sheets of mud were splattered across the entrance to the tunnel. Mark jumped further inside. He realized belatedly that Adam had thrown a hand grenade, and began screaming with hysterical laughter. A second later he dodged further into the tunnel as another grenade came over the edge; it bounced off something and fell into the mud.

He realized that if they managed to lob one of the grenades into the tunnel's entrance, he would surely get killed. There was nothing to do about it; he hadn't known they had grenades.

"HIPPIE!" The voice was Minfit's, stressed and angry.

Mark said nothing. He was hoping that someone would look over the edge to see if he was still alive.

Four shots, badly aimed, struck the mud around the tunnel entrance. He caught a glimpse as Adam jumped away before Mark could fire, and began to unwind a little, but the wonderful spontaneous glee was still in him. It took an effort to realize that there was no point in cursing up to them.

For a little while, there were no more grenades; he thought that they were probably deciding what to do. He looked out again; above the pit and a few clouds, the blue sky loomed temptingly. Cool air tugged his hair back, and for the first time Mark looked down into the tunnel.

The shaft ran nearly straight down, but it twisted and turned in an anarchic way carried it out of sight. What Minfit and the others had found was not a cave; it was a narrow, cramped, stone-walled tunnel that had been rendered nearly impassable by

the years of waterflow. It ran straight down.

Mark realized, without any particular enthusiasm, that there had to be an exit somewhere at the other end of the tunnel. The circulation of air meant that he wouldn't suffocate--like a canary in a coal mine, as the song said--and it also meant that there had to be a place for the air to come out. He looked back out of the pit; there was no sign of Mifit or Adam.

They're waiting for me, he realized. They're going to sit up there until I show myself, or until I starve. At least I've got water.

At this point, another grenade sailed over the edge and bounced around in the rocks that were ten or fifteen yards to Mark's left. He stepped back into the tunnel as it went off, and shrapnel whined and howled into the pit. The shrapnel trailed little streamers of smoke, and it was burning hot when he reached out and touched a piece.

As he came down from the emotional rush, Mark realized that there just wasn't anything to do but to go down the tunnel. He was ending up doing exactly what he would have been doing, had he not shot Tony, and as it was he couldn't come back with an armload of Cuthulian carvings and get a flight to Katmandu.

I've lost ground, Mark thought, and even if I find my way out to the surface away from the camp, what do I do then?

It was the only alternative. He guessed that if he got out he might be able to survive long enough to find his way to whatever Chinese city was closest to the Plateau of Leng. The AK was loaded with two taped-together 30-round clips; he might have to hunt and fish and do a lot of walking....

Really, though, the tunnels appealed to him on two levels: he could be a hunter in the dark, and kill whoever came down after him--and he deserved no better than such a complete burial, after having committed a murder.

Another grenade came over the edge, but this one only sank deeply into the mud in front of the tunnel entrance. It hissed, but didn't go off. Mark stared at it, his mind too occupied with the conflict for any emotional reaction.

Mark put the AK on safety and slung it over his shoulder before he started down. The shaft was torturous and difficult to climb, and the rocks were slippery with mud--but gravity was with him. Going up would have been another task completely.

The light above him shrank to a shadowy dot and then vanished as he descended. Mark fumbled out Mifit's flashlight and kept going, often having to hold the light in his teeth.

Above, another grenade went off. Shrapnel scattered down the tunnel, hissing in the water.

9:

How long have I been climbing?

I might as well ask how high is up how deep is low how many stars in the sky you have been climbing for a very long time-

The shaft was cramped and clumsy, and Mark's arms were afire from lowering himself from rock to rock. It was slow going.

Other shafts--some wet, some dry, many as large as houses--had opened off the vertical drop he was following. Mark resolutely ignored these. He was going straight down, and deep. The walls were caked with mud from previous floods. It was cold

down here and he was far too deep, now, to find cobwebs or roots hanging from the walls.

He kept moving. It was kind of what he'd imagined as a kid, seeing moles crawl into their holes in the garden--what it would be like to crawl into a tunnel that went down under the Earth where no one could find you or get to you. He'd given up wondering what was at the bottom--he'd find out when he got there, and it was pointless to worry about it. He had to concentrate on climbing down. He was not even looking where he was going. The climb occupied him, distracting him from the guilt and ecstasy of having murdered. Depth was his only escape and often for hours at a time he thought of nothing but the tunnel and his own grasping movements.

10:

Dark, dark, dark down here.... Mark was sick of it. The continual sameness of the tunnel had begun to affect him. The darkness was so thick that he thought, I could cut it with a knife. I could drive a nail into it and hang my coat on the nail. I could quarry it and bring it home-

Other shafts had added new streams to his shaft, and he was now climbing down a straight waterfall. Below him a sound had grown in volume as he neared it: the roar of water pouring into water. He was nearly to the bottom of the shaft and his hands would have been numb if he hadn't used them so much. As it was, they were cramped with a hot pain that made no difference to Mark.

He reached the bottom of the waterfall and abruptly his legs sank knee-deep in the cold water. Mark halted the legs, taking a minute to collect himself, and then went back up a few rocks. The muscles in his legs screamed at the effort.

When he braced himself and looked down, he saw that the shaft was opening into some sort of room; streams had flooded this, and an underground lake had been formed. Mark continued down, moving carefully. The waterfall tugged at his cowboy boots and filled them with cold water. He could hear the roar of bigger waterfalls, farther down.

Mark stepped into the lake and shone the light around the surface of the water. The room was a wreck, though it had been built by human hands. Its stone walls were gapped and falling. A gigantic column lay in the water, the decorations on its sides having long since been washed away.

It was the sort of place that Mark would have expected to see on a National Geographic TV special, and he imagined an announcer's voice: 'Nobody today knows how the builders of this temple were even able to lift such huge stones, let alone take them so deeply into the Earth and fashion them into walls that have resisted centuries of erosion....'

The water pulled at him with a definite current. Off in the distance, beyond where the light could reach, was the thunder of a serious waterfall. The water itself was freezing cold. Though he was already soaked, Mark winced when the line of pain rose above his crotch, and he hesitated while stepping deeper into the lake. There was no telling how deep the lake was. If he wasn't able to walk it, he wasn't sure what he'd have to do.

Mark was thinking that it was a relief to be able to stand upright, even if he was nearly swimming, when he suddenly stumbled. He was knocked forward by his own momentum and his face splashed into the water, and he floundered about for a few minutes before he was able to back up.

Mark unslung the AK and held it over his head in his left hand, the flashlight in his right, as he cautiously stepped forward again. The flashlight shone through a few

feet of the clear water and he was able to see huge rocks on the stairs below himself. There was something else, too.

He wasn't sure what it was--just that it was faintly shiny. When he kicked it, the thing moved a little.

Mark grouped beneath the surface, but it was down near his feet. Finally he had to submerge the flashlight completely and lean under the water, holding the AK above his head so that it wouldn't get wet. The silvery thing was under a steamer trunk-sized rock; Mark pried at it desperately. He was holding his breath and the cold water was hurting his eyes, and it finally slid to the side and came out. Mud clouded the water as he raised it.

Dripping water, it was a folded sheet of discolored metal, and after a few minutes he realized that it had once been a chest protector. Someone had worn this across their chest to protect themselves against swords and arrows; it was armor.

He stared at it, fascinated, and guessed that it was the oldest thing he'd ever touched. When he got out it would be valuable-

No, he thought, no, it's time to stop thinking about that. It's time to start realizing the truth. He shone the light around the wrecked chamber and thought, Everything the Cuthulians said was true. It's all here. This place is huge and there is no way to know exactly what is down here with me. This is it. This is real. There is no telling what's down here.

The chestplate had been neatly compressed by an incredible force. He supposed that the owner might have been caught in the collapse of the temple upstairs and that the chestplate itself had been washed down the stairs by the rain.... The explanation, though, wasn't enough. He had an idea that something else had happened.

Mark slung the AK and looked at the chestplate, thinking, It looks like somebody grabbed the guy who was wearing this thing, picked him up, and crushed him.

Oh, lovely. No wonder Henreid went insane.... How deep did he get? What could he have met down here?

He tried to remember what kind of things the Cuthulians would have expected to find in a place like this, but except for the shuggoths, most of the things didn't have names. They were just things. They didn't even have any properties that could have been described in human words.

He didn't think he had much chance of sneaking back out the way he'd come, though. Minfit was just too thorough--and evidently not stupid enough to follow him down. I'll get killed if I go back, he thought, and if I keep going this way--what?

The draft was still with him. Mark supposed that there was a chance that he could evade the whatevers-

-if they are real, maybe they're not real, maybe Henreid just ran into his own fears--and not get drowned in some underground lake or killed in a cave-in, and find his way to the surface.

Absurdly, Mark wished he'd brought a boat.

For lack of anything better to do with it, Mark put the chestplate on over his parka. It was too small, but it wasn't especially heavy. The bent place rubbed annoyingly against his breadbasket.

He set off again, holding the AK well out of the water with one hand, and casting about with the flashlight with the other. The water was clear, and he was able to see

most of the obstructions before he would have tripped over them. The floor of the room was covered by huge stones and fallen columns.

He had to swim, finally, where the water got fast. There was no way to dogpaddle with the AK out of the water and the flashlight extended, so he had to wave his light out of the water every few thrusts. The cold water splashed over his face, shocking him. His long hair lay icy fingers down the back of his neck and he had no idea where he was going, but finally the current dropped off a little and he was able to find footing. The rocks under him were flat and even. There was no sound except for the roar of the water.

Here, the roof was nearly ten feet above the water. Ancient tiles were obscured by mud.

Mark thought, I'm lucky. If the water gets high enough to wet the roof, sometimes, then it probably was during the past week. Thank god it finally quit raining.... He shone the light around. The shaft he'd come down was lost behind him; he hadn't realized he'd swum so far.

The chamber itself was enormous, as wide as a city street, and the water was flowing off into it further than his light could reach. It seemed to Mark that most of the current was flowing through the center of the room. Either the water had washed out a stream bed in the floor, or the floor had fallen in and the water was washing through the rooms below.

Desperately shining the light about himself, he waded off in the direction that the water was flowing.

11:

Mark still had no idea what time it was. The water was choppy here, splashing over the big rocks that had fallen out of the walls, and much of the building had collapsed. Only the force of the water had prevented the complete filling of the shaft. The river had turned into a whitewater rapid, and he had to move with care.

The thunder of the waterfall was close now, and that probably had a lot to do with the speed of the river. Mark was hugging on one muddy wall as he waded, and the river still tugged at him rudely. The bottom was uneven; if there had been a floor it had been long since covered with fallen stones and things that had washed down from above.

So far he hadn't seen anything.

Ahead, the flashlight beam caught something leaping out of the water, and he froze. It was awhile before he realized that what he'd seen had been the splash of the waterfall. Bracing himself as well as he could, Mark slid towards it. The roar of the water was enormous; a human would have to shout to be heard over it.

Beyond the waterfall, beyond the hole that the water was running into, the walls leaned in chaotically. The chamber had structural damage, down there, but it seemed to be where the wind was blowing.

The falls were not organized; he was in an area where an earthquake--or something--had given the underground temple a hard shake. The river flowed into a place where the floor had collapsed.

He paused at the edge. The collapsed flooring was a mess of jumbled rocks, many as large as a man. Most had been washed out over the centuries, but the remainder were stable. On Mark's side, the floor was opened by a long gap. Water flowed into the chasm all across the chamber, but at the edges it was only about two feet deep, and it wasn't moving very quickly. Bracing hard now, Mark approached the gap.

Looking down into the chasm he saw, along the other side, shattered rooms that had been stripped down to their bare stone. Only two or three were visible, horribly tantalizing, in the flashlight's beam. On the other side of the gap the floor was dry.

He walked a little ways back from the chasm, to build up his speed, and ran towards it. The water slowed him down, dragging his feet back, and he nearly tried to stop.

It was too late to stop, though, and he flung himself out to catch the other edge. His feet struck the dry stones and he stumbled, off-balance, for a few paces. When Mark had pinwheeled to a stop, he stood still for a few minutes and felt the water drain out of his clothes. In the glare of the flashlight, he saw rivulets flowing away from him and cutting into the dust on the floor.

Interestingly, the water that was running off of his clothes was flowing away from the chasm. Mark frowned at it, and spat; the spittle fell at an angle to the floor.

The chamber was not merely a room; it was a hallway. The shattered corridor was running deeper into the Earth.

Oh, no. Mark sat down, exhausted, and contemplated going deeper.

What's down there? What's down there? What's down there?

He didn't know how long he had been wading and before long he didn't know how long he'd been sitting still. The roar of the waterfall was hypnotic. It was not soothing, but it was hypnotic, and it shut down the war between his rage and the learned pacifism.

Eventually, Mark lay down on his back and turned off the flashlight. The absolute darkness crushed his vision; little flickers seemed to appear before him as his eyes tried to focus on nothing.

12:

Waking up was not drifting out of sleep; it was as if his brain had been soaked with high-octane terror and then set afire. Mark awoke without moving even slightly, his muscles locked and rigid, and then his eyes popped open.

There was nothing to see, only the eternal darkness, and the flashlight was not readily available to his hand. Mark did not fumble around looking for it; he lay still and breathed slowly through his mouth. He was unable to do anything else.

Mark wondered if he'd awakened from some nightmare that he couldn't now remember--but this was not fear; this was a step from chronic nervous system shutdown; it was the silent sister of hysteria.

He was unable to remember dreaming and the sound of the waterfall had changed. It was no longer a foamy roar; the noise had broken into two stages.

Calm down, one of the saner portions of his mind advised, the water's gone down in level, and the falls have shifted. That's all.

The sound changed again, becoming harsher. It reminded him of the noise he'd heard a lot, on the surface and during the past week; it sounded like rain splattering on a tent.

Somewhere below, a rock shifted. There was a crash, and then a meaningless bump, and then the sound of a rockfall. The splattering continued.

A slide? Did something collapse down there? Isn't this place changing from the waterflow, all the time?

The roar abruptly was constricted, becoming a deeper, closer splash, and then roar

returned. Another rock fell.

The rocks are shifting the rocks are shifting the rocks are shifting-

The spattering was very close now; it sounded as if the bottom of the waterfall was being raised up. Mark thought, Something is climbing up the waterfall and then the roar of water gulped horribly and he was washed by an icy wave. He lay motionless as the water receded and there was a hard crack of stone hitting stone, on the other side of the chasm, and the water was fighting its way around some obstruction and he lay motionless as the roar changed pitch and amplitude and two more waves soaked him again. He did not feel the cold; he was sweating as if he'd worked all day. The AK was across his chest but he was too afraid to move to take it up and he was absolutely sure now that it would not do any good anyway....

The smell the smell omigod the smell of it-

-was like unto a foulness. If the river hadn't been washing it the smell alone would have been too much and he would have choked and vomited, and as it was he nearly convulsed. The muscles around his throat clenched. It was like nothing, not even rot or sewage; even a burning toxic waste dump wouldn't have smelled like it--the air that was flowing over him now had been contaminated with perverse and unearthly molecules that were breaking down as the laws of this place ruled against them.

The noise of the waterfall was louder than ever.

Abruptly, Mark turned his head to the left, straining to look into the darkness. He had half-expected to see something that glowed or that was so terrible as to drive him insane, but there was nothing to see, only darkness, and the noise of the falls was nearly back to normal now but the river itself was being sloshed back and forth whatever it was enormous and soft and the water was spattering off of it like rain on a tent, and it was splashing around in the river and wading through the rocks. The rocks, which had not been moved during the week of flooding that had gone on down here, were being tossed around like pebbles. They slid together in crashes that were clearly audible above the surface of the water, and Mark could sense great mass in their collisions.

Gradually, the splashing noises receded upriver towards the stairs. At one point Mark heard a new noise--a rumbling cracking, followed by a soft, drawn-out thudding. There was no way to know what it had been.

His right hand scuttled, spiderlike, across his chest, and found the AK's grip. The forefinger slid quickly and efficiently across the trigger. He didn't think about it, but his organism was flooded with fear-released adrenal hormones; though these sometimes leave us clumsy, they sometimes are exactly what the situation requires.

His left did the Spider across the thin mud on the floor; it located the flashlight and silently picked it up. He located the switch but was not stupid enough to turn it on.

His neck hurt, and he discovered that he was still straining to see through the darkness. In terror he had forgotten that his eyes were open.

More time went by as Mark rolled over and sat up without making the slightest amount of noise. The strap on the AK clinked once and he froze for perhaps twenty long breaths, not thinking, and then continued. When he was on all fours, Mark began to crawl away from the chasm and the noise of the waterfall. He crawled very slowly and he placed his hands and feet with deliberation, laying them down one inch at a time.

Behind him, the water sounded as if it were flowing normally again. He crawled out of the wet area that had been left by the waves that had soaked him, and gradually

swung to his right until he came to a wall. Under his hands, the stones of the wall were gapped and angled by ancient distortions.

The wind whistled down the shaft. It still smelled horrible, but it encouraged him, and he rose to his feet. The strap on the AK clinked again and he held still until he was sure that nothing had changed.

Mark started forward, laying down his cowboy boots carefully. He slid the flashlight into a pocket of his jeans, switched the AK to his left hand, and trailed his right along the wall. The thing he most feared was to see his own shadow thrown ahead of him as he walked, cast by some light behind him.

He did not count his steps or the blocks of stone that his right hand told him he was passing, but after awhile he began to be less afraid. His breathing returned more or less to normal; he closed his mouth, swallowed, and began to breathe through his nose. The place smelled dusty; it had no distinctive smell of rot or of anything worse.

After a lot of walking, his foot struck something that compressed and moved. Mark held still and then stopped. He was breathing through his mouth again and he touched it with his foot again, gently. The obstruction was still there, but it shifted at his prodding.

He was pointing the AK into the darkness with his left hand, balancing it on his knee, and he patted the floor ahead of him. He found dust, dust, and more dust.... His fingers encountered something flat and smooth. After a second, he recognized it as fabric.

His fingertips grazed the surface of the cloth, exploring and tracing. The cloth--it felt like dusty silk--lay more or less flat. Mark tugged at it and the mass slid emptily towards him. When he pulled harder, experimentally, he reeled in a couple of yards of dusty, rotten silk fabric. There wasn't anything else.

Mark dropped it, gripping the AK tightly; he took out the flashlight with a minimum of noise, pressed the lens against his thigh, and turned it on.

His eyes were dilated to full openness, and the red light that showed through the plastic was enough to see by. Mark could see the delicate pattern of the rotted silk. Mark let a little more light escape from the flashlight; on the floor, beneath the dust and silk, was a stain. In the red light, it looked black. There was no body. The shaft was empty, except for himself and the silk.

Mark turned the light back off. He put the flashlight away again and walked on, trailing his hand along the wall to his right.

13:

He was afraid, in the darkness, but he was even more afraid of what might see him if he turned on the light. After all, down here even a small source of light would be like a signal flare. When he tried to think about what might see the light, his mind locked up and all he could get were memories of Arkham Asylum.

The halls in Arkham had been wide and brightly lit. No obstructions would have been allowed in Arkham; if someone had left out a janitor's cart, someone else would have put it away. The Cuthulians had tended to keep to the walls in Arkham, while they walked or if they were sitting in the TV lounge. They had stayed near doors and in small groups, when they could.

He was walking almost casually when he ran into the wall. The force of his own speed slammed him painfully into the stones and he recoiled, rubbing his nose. The nose had been broken four years before, by his father, but that didn't mean it was insensitive.

Mark got out the flashlight--if the shaft was turning, he had to turn on the light, and then he found that he was in a completely different place.

The walls had come together until they were no more than six feet apart; the ceiling was much lower, and the stones had not been shaken. Behind him, the tunnel stretched out unchanged beyond the reach of his light.

He'd come to a fork in the road; the shaft formed a T, with the side-shafts running off and turning again after a short distance. He licked his forefinger and held it up; the draft was going to the right.

He followed it with the light on, and before long the shaft T-ed again. This time, the left-hand turn was a blind alley about thirty feet deep; Mark went right and almost at once reached a three-way intersection.

A labyrinth, he realized.

Mark halted and leaned against the wall. His breathing had grown raspy, and it made a sound in the tunnel. Even the waterfall had distanced itself from him and then become silent.

He put both hands on the AK and waited for the terror to pass, but it did not pass. It remained with him, like the darkness and the stones. He supposed that he ought to be hungry by now, but food was not interesting.

There were at least no marks in the dust, so he hoped to think that nothing had walked this way in a very long time. If he had seen deep scrapings in the dust....

Ahead was a doorway; the door itself was long gone. He paused at the entrance to ready the AK, thinking that perhaps he should keep it pointed at his own body, and stepped through.

The room was empty. It was no larger than his dorm room at college, and there were only a few murals under the dust. Mark went to the wall and brushed the dust away; he found a painting in what looked like an ancient Chinese style. It was clearly not Tibetan--the Tibetans had a style that was closer to the Indian. Mark thought, The Bon temple dug into this, the Chinese, and the Chinese digs into.... what? How deep and old can this place get? He knew what the Cuthulians would say, though.

The painting was not good. It had a professional style, but the colors were too bright, and the brushstrokes were hurried and clumsy. The image itself was impossible to define, as though the artist had anticipated abstract art two thousand years early. The wall had been covered with a mass of streaks and lines that implied rather than depicted. Intermixed with it all were Chinese phrases that could barely be seen.

He checked the hall before he stepped into it, and then he walked on. The floor was still sloping downwards.

Mark desperately wished that he'd brought some way of keeping time. He had no way of telling how far he'd come, or how well he was traveling in the right direction.

Mark followed the draft as best he could.

14:

He found many wrong turns, and took some of them, but the draft brought him back on each occasion. It bothered him--if he had built a maze, he wouldn't have allowed anything to guide travelers so well. Worse.... What was pulling the air? The tunnel certainly couldn't have anything like a circulating fan; why should the draft exist at all? It made no sense, and he greatly hoped to find a windy ravine at the end of the shaft.

Abruptly, the labyrinth came to an end. The side-doorways and blind alleys ceased and the shaft itself ran out in front of him, as straight as a ruler but angled down.

Mark's legs were exhausted. He stopped and sat down again, now not daring to turn off the light, and began to wonder what the shaft was for. A temple would have made sense; it would have had rooms and offices and apartments; it would have been an end in itself. Even the labyrinth had made a kind of sense, but the shaft implied no end, yet.

It had to be leading somewhere. An escape tunnel?

Ohmigodlet's hope so-

A ghastly mix of fear and hope welled up inside him, and he curled up. The muscles around his stomach clenched, hard and painful, and he forced himself up and onwards.

The walls slid by, featureless, for miles. Mark remembered playing Dungeons and Dragons, in school. The games had been completely unlike this; there had been things to find in the dungeons, not this long straight shaft that was empty except for his own body, the bobbing flashlight beam, and the continual dust. The monsters in the games had been things that could be fought, not forces in the darkness that either missed you or wiped you out.

If the thing in the waterfall had come in his direction, he knew, he would already have been dead or....

Or what?

There was no answer. Only the most deluded of the Cuthulians would have dared to come to a place like this, he knew. Even the ones that desired to work for the ones from outside, would have gone to Minfit with open arms before they would have attempted these dark places. There was not even any suggestions in the old books as to what might wait in a place like this--only hints and implications of things that could not be written or communicated in any human language. The lit world had no words for what was down here or what had passed him in the water.

The light had begun to dim slightly. He stared at it, depressed beyond words. Had Minfit put in fresh batteries? How long had he been using it?

Suddenly, the tunnel felt warmer. He paused and touched his face; his skin had dried, but it had been dry for awhile. He sniffed, not understanding, and then licked his forefinger and held it up.

There was no sensation of cold along the back of his finger. There was no wind. The draft had stopped.

Mark was trying to deal with this when he heard the noise: it was a long slow shshshshshshshshshsh, very faint, and it came from far behind him.

The terror threw his mind into the back seat and jumped behind the wheel and he began to run, unmindful of the noise he was making. His bootheels snapped and cracked on the pavement and the noise echoed down the shaft. The AK bounced against the chestplate as he ran.

Behind him, the shshshshshshshshshsh was louder.

Mark sped up. He would not have thought he could have run any faster, but he was running flat-out now, taking long steps and making his own wind that streamed over his shoulders as he ran. His gasping filled his ears. The flashlight beam, brown now, bobbed down the corridor ahead of him as he ran.

His throat was parched and his lungs were on fire and the shshshshshshshshshsh was still loud behind him, louder now, catching up. The floor abruptly switched to a rising angle and he would have thought that it was taking him closer to the surface, but it was a new color here--dark and black and not dusty. His boots sounded different when they struck it; they made flat crackings that were not like the sounds they had made against stone. The rest of the passage was the same, and there was no end visible.

The upgrade increased and he was rising fast now, it was becoming steep, and then he was forcing himself up a hill. The black floor stretched out ahead of him. The light bobbed and the shshshshshshshshshsh was louder and louder.

His ears popped as the air grew denser, and Mark thought, Whatever it is is right on my butt is filling the tunnel is compressing the air up towards me and chasing me is right on my butt- and the upgrade was steeper than ever, now leveling out again, and becoming nearly flat. It still had a pronounced curve, though, and he thought I'm running on something! I'm running on something! I'm running on something! and the thing in the shaft behind him was close now was coming shshshshshshshshshsh up the shaft.

God, help me, Mark thought, and burst out of the end of the shaft.

It opened into a wide chamber that was cluttered with ancient corpses. Mark paid no attention to them; he was staring at the thing that the shaft had been built to reach. It was some kind of hole that lay on the floor like a stain. Once, stone stairs had stretched below, but these had been torn apart by enormous force and lay scattered around the chamber.

He could still hear the shshshshshshshshshsh following him and the chamber opened into a few small rooms, but he didn't think that there would be any shelter there--he didn't think, he didn't have time to think, he slung himself over the edge of the hole and caught onto one of the remaining stair supports. He fumbled for the flashlight, caught a glimpse of impossible protrusions all around him, and dropped the flashlight. It ricocheted off a shape that should not have been there, swinging its brown light across shapes that cast wrong shadows, and fell in.

For an instant there was nothing and then the flashlight receded into all directions at once at an infinitely increasing speed. Brown light, very diffuse, filled the place for an instant and Mark still clinging to the stair support looked around and saw-

Pla.

Plawhatfla? FlawhatwhereamI?

Something was rough and cold under his cheek and his muscles were sore and clenched and he was still clinging to the stair riser. He was hanging motionless in darkness and the shshshshshshshshshsh was very loud now, a harsh quick nasty frictiony sound like someone dragging a piece of leather-

How long have I been hanging here?

There was no answer. Above him, there was a sudden splashing flop and air began to whistle back up and out of the chamber, down the tunnel, now that the way was clear.

Mark began climbing blindly down the stair support. It was a huge piece of stone, nearly large enough to stand on, and he fumbled his way down it. In the chamber above was a sound like leather splashing. Something heavy--one of the corpses?--fell into the place that he was. It bounced, flopped, and broke.

He could descend with his eyes opened or closed, but it didn't make any difference.

When he closed his eyes his mind screamed Fool! What are you doing? Look! and when he opened them they bugged out painfully and wiggled around, looking into the darkness.

Something began to pour slowly into the place that he was.

The AK was still slung along his back, over the breastplate, but he didn't think it would do any good to fire it and if he fired it there would be the muzzle flash. A gun fired in the darkness, makes a great deal of light.

The stair support ended and his legs dangled hopelessly.

Behind him, something moved and fell onto something else. It was making a clumsy, searching noise. It sounded bad, it didn't sound like anything, it only sounded bad. He had never thought he'd find anything that so well defined bad. His mouth and eyes were wide open and he was hyperventilating, the breath shooting in and out of his lungs in shrieks that were not quite vocal.

Mark kicked out madly and his right foot struck something hard. The hard thing was above him; he couldn't find a top to jump onto. He jumped into the darkness, clutching, and bounced off what he'd kicked. He slid down something else and then he was falling and falling over things that didn't budge. He landed lying twisted in some tangle of shapes, and he ran his hands across one of them, and went shiny mad.

After a second, once he'd taken his hands away, he recovered. When he was done he tried it again and found a long, flat shape.... His hands did the spider along it and he twisted his arm, coming back where had had been. There had been an angle, but the angle had suddenly been wrong. There had been too many degrees for that angle. It wasn't right.

There was another noise, and Mark knew what was in the place with him: a shuggoth. There was no question in his mind. That was the sound it made and he knew, now, why shuggoths were called that: that was the sound they made when they moved. The term was merely descriptive.

It was fumbling and shuggothing and he was quite sure and glad that he had lost the flashlight. The draft was spilling through the place again now, rushing out of the tunnel above and through the chamber and through this place. It howled across the impossible shapes; it smelled like a chemistry lab.

He rolled over and sat up, striking his head.

Mark knew that what he'd struck could not have been there or he would have fallen onto it, maybe, then, or maybe not. He twisted as he rolled and tried to get out of the wrong angles. He couldn't do it until he tried moving in the wrong direction, and then he was lost in them. The sheer wrongness of them was terrible.

Probably the shuggoth would not be confused by the shapes.

He had expected to find a clear area, but there wasn't any. All there was were sheer planes that ran up and down and then sideways no matter which direction he crawled.

Mark crawled up one of the sides, found another angle, and crawled up the next side. The gravity was wrong too. It seemed to be prismatic, like light.

The shuggoth was still looking for him. He thought, It's not lost. If I wasn't lost, it would have already found me. Well, I'm as lost as I can get. If my life depended on it I couldn't get any more lost....

Does it? Can I get more lost?

He rolled over, going backwards and into some kind of new shape. Something struck the back of his head and his right foot simultaneously.

Mark kicked out, and struck himself in the back of the head. His legs, though, were straight--the right one went around the back of an angle and into clear space. He twisted and tugged at the boot above his head, grabbing his own foot.

Something happened: a black light seemed to bloom in his mind. The light was built in three very straight directions, each at right angles to the others. It was fighting for its life and then it was gone and Mark was left with a sharp headache that resided in the lower center of his brain. He gasped at the cutting, physical pain.

The shuggoth was in those directions now. It seemed to be closing in on him in several ways--up and down and sideways and sdrawkcaB and retfa. Mark twisted completely into the new angle, suddenly falling in a direction that he had previously thought of as up. The AK dangled to his thgir; he crawled to his tfel, thinking, I should be able to stand here, if this keeps working.

Mark stood, and suddenly understood the angles.

-4,221:

High octane terror and he was sitting up in bed. Moonlight washed across his sheets; outside, Woodside Estates was asleep. The Flanderson's backyard light gleamed greenly, and stars looped above the Earth.

Mark had dropped six inches, thirty pounds, and six years. He was fifteen. His nose was its original shape, and he had not yet known a woman's body. It was 1979.

Mark got out of bed carefully--if he woke his father the old man would beat the hell out of him and that would take valuable time. He did not stop to dress but moved quickly and silently through out into the hall, exactly as he dluow move in the tunnels beneath the Plateau of Leng. His organism's feet missed the creaky stairs and made only soft padding noises as he descended and he could

(sense)

the shuggoth trailing through time after him, right on his butt still, and it was nearly onto him. It was at least to 1982 and he could hear the sound it made as he crossed the kitchen and snuck out into his father's garage. He tripped over his father's rake that lay beside the door, and didn't bother to pick it up but struggled to his feet and ran around the car to the power tools.

There was a noise outside it was here here was it ti saw ereh ereh si ti edistuo esion a eb lliw erehT

Here.

Now. All of the dogs in the neighborhood began to bark at once.

Mark was fumbling through what his father kept, looking for the flat metal gas can, and the shuggoth WHAM had mussed its physical direction a little and was not right on top of him after all.

-of course the goddamn thing does fine with time, what do you expect, so it's not good with direction, it doesn't think like we do if it thinks at all, I never expected to die here I thought if I could get back here everything would be cool in the tunnels I wanted to be back here so badly-

WHAM again and someone in the subdivision screamed terribly. WHAM WHAM WHAM and bricks were falling out in a tumbling sound that Mark knew from working with his father. He found the gas can, snatched a book of matches from his

father's jar on the shelf, and slapped the garage door button by the stairs; a second went by, and then the machine CHUNKed and started rolling the garage doors up. Mark dodged under the doors as they rose.

WHAM bricks falling WHAM bricks falling WHAM bricks falling WHAM bricks falling from the house where the people had the Irish Wolfhound, what were their names? The dog was going mad now, barking insanely like all the other dogs for miles around.

It was too late for the people in the house; they were dead. The structure itself was a smeared heap of bricks and roofing materials, and as Mark watched, the rest of it collapsed into the basement. A thirty-foot pine tree snapped and fell, in the yard behind the place where the house had been.

It was still tracking him and it was at him and now him; the house had been in the way.

Mark fumbled at the top of the can and spun the nozzle off, sure that he was going to at least die, if not be taken front to 1984 and carried deeper into the tunnels where the other things would be. The shuggoth was leaving deep impressions on the yards across the street now, but the shuggoth itself was invisible.

He dashed into the street between the houses and ran around, pouring out the gas, the lightweight smell of it filling his sinuses. Mark was dumping it in a circle with two 90-degree angles and one 180-degree angle, hopelessly, not even knowing if the shuggoth would be affected by the fire, and doubting that it would be. He was still inside the shape he'd drawn, if it could have been said to have ins and outs, when one of the lines of gasoline rippled and the shuggothing noise was at him. It seemed to be extremely fast, like a car that was trying to run him down.

He struck a match and dropped into nearest puddle; there was a soft WHOOMP and fire slid neatly around the perimeter. Mark had the presence of mind to snatch up the empty can as he jumped across the fire-

-Jack Flash sat on a candlestick-

-and then he running down Popular Trail with the can swinging beside him, knocking against his legs, and the shuggoth made a noise.

He hadn't known that they had voices. For whatever it was worth, the sound was beyond inhuman; later, Mark decided that they probably could not imitate human speech. He was running hard and he reached Popular Circle--the cul-de-sac at the end of the street--before he looked back.

The fire had nearly burned itself out, and only fat black clouds remained. The shuggoth was gone and before, or maybe it was later. Mark hoped feverently that it was before; if it was later, he might encounter it in the future.

The smoke was being split by red and blue lights as police cars tore up the road to whatever had happened. In a few years, the police would shift to purely blue lights; the sight was at once familiar and nostalgic to Mark.

The residents of Woodside Estates were still in their houses. Carrying the can, he left the street and started navigating his way through the dark woods behind the subdivision. Branches and thorns tore at his legs, more painfully than they should have, and Mark realized he'd burned his legs jumping across the fire.

He was barefooted, and by the time he reached his parent's house, he was covered with scratches. He supposed that this was a good way to test the time-travel paradox; if he was caught in the woods, in his underwear, carrying a gas can on the night of what had just happened, then there was a pretty good chance that he might not get

to go to the Plateau of Leng six years later.

Of course, he already knew the angles and always had and always would, so removing the event of learning them six years in the future might not have any effect. Mark was trying to decide whether to go or not.

If I don't go, what happens? How will I get out of the tunnel? How won't I get out of the tunnel? If I don't go, I might stop knowing the angles; then, I'll end up going anyway because I won't know why not to.

It was late, though, and he was exhausted. Mark snuck through the back yard of his parent's house. Most of the lights were on, though not the one in his own bedroom. He hoped that his parents didn't check in there to see if he was okay, but there wasn't much chance of that.

In his later adolescence, Mark had developed a trick of sleeping in the basement bathroom. The basement was easier to get into, and in the morning he'd come out and claim that he'd gotten up early to take a shower. He stowed the gas can away behind the garage and snuck in through the basement's outside entrance.

The basement was cool and very dark, but compared to the tunnels it was like an operating theatre. Mark went into the bathroom and closed the door before he turned on the light. If his father noticed that Mark was bathing in the dark, there would be hell to pay.

-4,220:

Mark woke up when his father kicked in the door. He bolted up, startled, and realized what was happening.

Senior looked him up and down, taking in the burns and scratches that covered Mark's legs, and then his arm swung out.

Mark's head was slammed back, but he managed to stay upright, and he thought, That wasn't so bad, and his father hit him again and he saw the white light of unconsciousness.

-4,219:

Mark awoke with his neck hurting. He realized that the knockout must have given way to sleep; outside the bathroom, morning light was coming in through the basement windows.

He stood, slowly, and looked at himself in the mirror above the sink. His right cheekbone and left temple were swollen and bruised--the temple, pretty badly. There was a chance it would get him out of school. Of course, if he was out of school he'd be carrying bricks for Senior.

Hell, he thought, I ought to return to the tunnels. I'll have to eventually anyway.

Upstairs, his mother was cooking breakfast; Mark could hear the dishes rattling. He left the basement and went up to the kitchen. When he came through the door, his mother and his sister June looked up for a second, and then they found other things to look at.

Sorrowfully, Mark patted June on the head as he went up to his room. She was nearly twelve now and at least the old man didn't seem to expect anything from her. Mark knew that some people in his position would have been jealous of June, but he didn't, and he preserved that as a light of hope within himself.

In his room, Mark dressed in the clothes he'd worn at fifteen; they fit perfectly. He was lacing up his hiking boots when Senior leaned into his bedroom and said, "Mark,

are you coming to work with me today?"

Mark pointed at his father. "You know what? I oughta go get one of the shotguns and kill your ass right now."

His father blinked once and said calmly, "Well, if you think you can make it past me and get it loaded, Mark, you're welcome to try."

Mark waited, but his father didn't say anything else. Evidently Senior was in a pretty good mood. Mark said, "Uh, what was all that noise last night?"

"Don't tell me you didn't have something to do with all that, Mark. You still smell like gasoline."

"Uh."

"Do you want to tell me what it was?"

"No."

"Okay, then." Mark's father turned and left the room. There were certain things he did not tolerate: Bs on Mark's report card, backtalk, and weakness. Other things were acceptable to him, like pot and alcohol at fifteen, and apparently participating in the collapse of a neighbor's house was too.

Mark wondered what would happen if he did get one of the shotguns and kill his father; he was thinking about derailing his entire life in the middle of his adolescence.

No, he thought, I'll just put up with it for awhile. It was only four more years until he went to college, and anyway he could always slide through the timeline to the tunnels. He was also there, he knew, sitting hungrily on an alien shape, just as he was also being born and watching TV at eight and unloading his stuff from the car at the University at nineteen. The knowledge didn't help.

Mark sighed and sat down on the edge of his bed. A minute slipped by. His attention followed it into the future, down into the tunnels.

15:

Mark seized for an instant, but before he could fall it was over. The same place in his head still hurt. It was like a pulled tooth.

The tunnels--or whatever this place was--were cold, Mark noticed. He hadn't been thinking about it earlier, but the draft was coming down into this place. There was not going to be a windy ravine down here.

Another might come up the shaft, or there might be something else down in this place. He wondered what the place had been; none of the shapes had been constructed from any recognizable materials. Mark slid up a edisways thing and crossed to a more or less normal area.

Could I walk back out to the surface through the river and up the stairs? Maybe it wouldn't be worth it....

He would have to find his way, after all, in the darkness. That meant reaching the river, crossing the chasm, going upstream through the rocks, and finding the stairs. For that matter, the thing that had come out of the waterfall might be anywhere; it had not been anything as definable as a shuggoth.

The draft was still circulating through the place, and Mark followed it as best he could. He'd come a long ways into the place, far from the hole he'd jumped into. It was noisy, here. The wind whistled and piped across the wrong shapes and

openings. Low moaning sounds were made in the overangled geometry.

In places, the draft was a strong current. Mark went with it. His long hair flopped in it.

He now knew how to pass through time, for what it was worth, and he could see all of the events in his life with total clarity. What would have been remembering, only a few hours before, was now experiencing.

He could experience back to his birth, and prior to that.... Prior to that, things became fuzzy. He knew that there had been some trauma, and some strong sense of cold. What else?

We were loading all day the rifles had to be handled gently, the brass shone even though they were all old and weathered like played-out hoes....

He nearly blacked out, his vision exploding with light that had faded out prior to his birth, and when his brain managed to realign itself he thought, Hell, reincarnation.... Why? What's the purpose of it?

The shapes were wronger and wronger and his body didn't fit to some of them. Compared to this place, the Earth was remarkably.... Flat? No, not just flat; the Earth was laughably three-dimensional.

Four-dimensional, he amended, the Earth is four-dimensional: up/down, back/forth, left/right--and before/after. That's four. How am I able to get through this stuff? These shapes....

He could not yet understand their purpose, but he would.

16:

Mark's organism stood upright in a place that was more or less like a hallway--flat and wide; the shapes on either side of him were falling away in directions that lacked names.

He raised the AK, took the safety off, and fired straight up. The muzzle flash nearly blinded him and the noise of the shot echoed with no rhyme or reason across the place he was in; there was nothing to see. He fired again. This time, the bullet was a tracer. Mark watched as the slug vanished into the air above him, not hitting anything at all, and then arced back down. As it passed away to his right, it shifted in color, becoming red and then dark red and then off into the infrared side of the spectrum.

Mark thought, There's miles down here. It goes on for forever.

He wished he'd brought a flare gun, or something, but that wouldn't have done any good anyway. The light probably would have only shown a lot of empty space.... and, the shapes.

He began walking again, navigating well in the darkness. It was a question of feel. The place was tactile. He knew that if he hadn't dropped the flashlight, the sight of the shapes would have made him crazy. As it was, he was pretty sure that touching them and trying to understand them had burned out part of his mind. The headache he'd gotten when the shuggoth was chasing him, still remained, but he only noticed it when he tried to think in three dimensions--and it felt like it had been there his entire life.

Thinking about that was like tonguing the place from which a tooth had been pulled. His three-dimensional body was sore from wrapping around and bending through the shapes that had more than four dimensions.

Mark put the AK back on safety and began moving with the draft again. The draft was a wide breeze now. The area was so open, here, that the draft didn't have so much pressure behind it. The hideous pipings and howlings had dropped off.

CLICK.

Mark froze.

CLICK/CLICK. CLICK/CLICK.

It was the sound of the surfaces, down here, being struck by something enormous.

CLICK/CLICK. CLICK/CLICK. CLICK/CLICK.

The noises were in motion; he could trace them as they moved through the shapes. Their distance could not have been expressed; they were not in what could be called an Earthly direction.

CLICK/CLICK. CLICK/CLICK.

Footsteps. Whatever it was, was not amorphous. It was very large and it was moving very deliberately. It moved with assurance and familiarity.

CLICK/CLICK. CLICK/CLICK.

Light, he thought, where the hell did my flashlight go to?

CLICK/CLICK. CLICK/CLICK.

Mark began walking again. He stepped as quietly as he could, guessing where the obstructions would be. He had the AK slung.

NOCLICK/NOCLICK. NOCLICK/NOCLICK.

Mark thought, Come on man we're down here together we're just going about our business we're not gonna bother each other-

-and a human voice said, "C'mon fallah m' fallah cthulhu fat'gn?"

Mark halted unslung the AK threw the safety off and fired four harsh times into the darkness. In the muzzle flash he caught a glimpse of a human form, but too large and bad and wrong and then he saw the shapes and got distracted.

He fired again, trying not to look at the shapes. Some of the bullets were striking nothing; others were knocking against the planes and angles that could be called walls. His eyes were ready this time and in the muzzle flash he caught sight of something in a yellow robe, the face hidden, and he shot it.

CLICK/NOCLICK.

Three for Tony two for the ceiling that wasn't there isn't there now four here and now and just then four more: thirteen.

Off in the distance, farther away than anything else he'd heard, was a crash. It sounded like someone bringing down a sledgehammer the size of a boxcar.

That leaves me seventeen in this clip and thirty in the other-

Silence but for echoes like ricochets.

-that I can't do anything with.

Mark tried running in a halting, stooped way, feeling ahead of himself as he ran. The blackness pressed in on him and then the wind rose up, sweeping across the shapes in a gale. It moaned and howled and piped in shrieking gusts. The noises echoed across the distorted, unearthly shapes that had made them and reverberated back.

He was away from the shapes now, or there weren't any he'd tripped over yet, and the howling was all around him and he was running through the darkness on a blank and slightly curving plain that wrapped around him backwardsly and curved in on itself first as a tube and then as a sphere and then less-

Light, blinding-

17:

Mark was receding was leaving was traveling in all directions at once and at all times in an infinitely increasing velocity and it went on for forever-

1:

-and was conceding and going back along all directions at once and now, here, and slowing down.

Light, blinding-

2:

When Mark had eyes again he closed them and when he had lungs again he gasped, gulping at the air, and then fell down. His hands scraped through something granular; the stuff smelled acidic and sick, and it was about six inches deep wherever his hands went.

The AK flopped down beside him and he automatically threw it back onto his shoulder. Mark was gasping and panting, trying to realign his mind from what had been to what was now, and his organism seized in the powder.

A little later, Mark became aware that the pipings and howlings had changed greatly. Whatever was down here was making new noises--ghastly whipporwillings and harsh, birdlike caws. The voices were all around him, and they had urgency.

He opened his eyes; brilliant white light clawed into his mind. He closed them and tried it again, this time a little more slowly. His pupils shrank to accommodate. The light was sunlight. He was in a high place, surrounded by birds.

Most of the birds were dead, but a few had gone insane and were flying around him in with no direction or pattern. They were calling to each other in high-pitched panic. Birdshit had formed a crust over the stones. A long breeze pulled at his hair, chilling him, and he felt a sun on the back of his neck.

Mark sat up. The sky was an enormous, cloudless bluegreen bowl. It looked more or less like the skies he knew, but it had a definite dark green tint. Below the edge of the building, an ancient and decrepit city stretched out to the sea. Some of the land had fallen and that part of the city ran into the waves, but the buildings had not been eroded, though the surf boiled around them.

He walked around on the roof a little, still blinking. The birds--which must have nested there for thousands of bird's generations--were fluttering around him as if they didn't know what he was. Mark poked at one of the survivors with the barrel of the AK and the bird stepped aside, looking at the barrel curiously. Mark poked it again, and this time it bit the bayonet lug in an indignant way. The bird was a fat brown-and-white animal that looked like a cross between a pigeon and a gull.

He was at least a half-mile into the sky. Below him, mist was drifting in from the seashore; the time seemed to be late afternoon or early evening. The sun, which was far too large and the wrong color, was sinking in the mountains that framed the other

side of the city.

Mark realized, I'm on another planet. He blinked at the sundogs that were in his dark-adapted eyes.

Amazed, he turned and looked around the rooftop. It was a sheer drop on all sides except for the one behind him, which was framed by a stone wall. The birds had nested in deep carvings that ran across the wall. The hieroglyphics had not been eroded by millennia of sun and rain. What he saw, was unrecognizable.

The hieroglyphics were over a door, though, and he went to this and looked inside to find a flight of normally-shaped stairs curved down into the building.

Stumbling, Mark started down the stairs.

3:

Hours later, Mark staggered out of the building and into a guano-covered street. When he looked back up, Mark saw that the tower was no larger in diameter than the stairway had been. There had been no rooms branching off the stairway; the tower was like a needle with a pie-plate balanced on top.

The tower, the other buildings, and the street itself, were all made of a strange black stone. There were no joints or cracks in the stone; it seemed to have been extruded all at once to form the entire city. The stone was far harder than granite or anything else Mark knew.

The buildings were in ruins, though the walls were as stable as when they'd been laid. It appeared that once the super-structure was up, the inhabitants had built the roofs and doors from other materials. These had been washed away.

The doorways were sized for human beings. Mark stepped into a house--he assumed it was a house--across the street from the tower. It was two stories tall, proportioned more or less like a row house on Earth. The inside had been washed clean. There was nothing to be found but piles of dust and rusted metal, which had once been furniture and cabinets, perhaps.

He wandered about the place, the AK in both hands. The structure was horribly unfamiliar and he stared at the empty rooms dazedly. When he saw the bones, he gently nudged one with his boot; the rib slid across the floor and broke against the far wall, under a place where a window had been. Mark knelt and fished through the skeleton; he found a few recognizably human bones--more ribs, a femur, a skull. When he picked up the skull, it crumbled in his hands.

The ones from outside had won here.

Mark left and wandered through the streets with the AK slung across his shoulder. There was no sign of any animals other than the birds and a few lizards. Guano had left white deposits on the walls of the houses, near the nests, and in places where there was no stone, trees had grown up. The city was about as heavily forested as it was going to get, and it smelled like guano and autumn straw.

The city was silent except for the cries of the birds. Some of them whippoorwilled, but most made gull-like cries of plain hunger or rage. Once, the calls changed and increased; a second later the birds vanished to their nests. Soon, a predator-bird with a six-foot wingspan cruised overhead. It was very high up and it was not moving its wings; it looked serene and relaxed in the bluegreen sky, only cruising and keeping an eye open for unwary little birds. Mark readied the AK and looked for a doorway, but the predator-bird passed him over.

It was getting dark; the twilight colors were changing to shades he'd never seen on Earth. The sunset was a riot of greens and reds. Along the far horizon, something that looked like a burned-out star was rising into the sky.

4:

It was dawn on the second day. Mark had been up for hours; the night had been much longer than an Earth night, perhaps sixteen hours long, and he'd spent most of it sitting still and watching the darkness. At times, he was sure, he'd slept; short periods had interspersed in his memory. At the end of each he'd snatched his head up, looked around, and then dozed off again. There had been no dreams and the darkness had been frighteningly empty.

He'd found a river flowing through the center of the city, where there were no houses. The streets in this area had not been washed away. Instead, they had been washed under, and remained as bridges. The river itself was about sixty feet wide, and it had washed huge rocks down from the mountains.

Mark trapped a fair-size fish in one of the waterfalls. He was surprised at how easy it was, but evidently the birds and fishes had forgotten about people and their ways of hunting. He wrestled the fish up onto a flat rock and looked at it; it was about a foot long, wide-bodied, and brown, but it didn't look like the fish he'd seen on the Earth.

The fish flopped once, dying. The protuberant eyes looked at him fuzzily. Mark got out his pocketknife and gutted it, throwing the intestines and whatnot into the river for the other fish.

After messing with the AK for about ten minutes, he got a fire started by prying open one of the cartridges and firing the primer to light the gunpowder. There was plenty of driftwood, and he cut a new stick from a live tree to make a spit. He was worried about getting a poisonous spit, so he used a tree that looked a lot like an ordinary oak.

While the fish roasted, he undressed and washed in the river. It was a good time to do laundry, too, and he washed his clothes and left them on a rock to dry while he ate. The pleasure of being alive, and outside, was fine.... But, he didn't have to wonder what had become of the city's inhabitants. There would have been no answer, and it was much better that there should not have been.

He had survived. He continued to survive, sitting on this rock in the city's river, but it was meaningless. He was in a city that had been lost to the Old Ones and then lost in human memory, becoming a forgotten place on a forgotten planet.

The river sloshed pleasantly. It was low, unlike the rain-choked rivers in the Plains of Leng. Mark liked it for that.

He sat by the fire, watching his clothes dry in the fat, misshapen sun. If this city was as old as the Plateau of Leng, it would have more tunnels beneath it.... Tunnels, filled with things that did not love the sun. They would have had time here, time to grow and be strong. The things would know magics.

The Old Ones could do.... many things. Whether it had been them or ancient humans who had cut the Ways between places, was immaterial. Only the Ways would lead back to Earth.

There was no other way out. There had to be a Way of some kind that would run back through the universe to Earth. The trip in had been bad enough, and it had been to an intact Entrance. The exits and entrances on Earth were all in places like the Plateau of Leng, often hidden in tremendous subsurface caverns. Probably, there was

an Way somewhere under the Miskatonic Valley, where Arkham had been situated. Over the ages, things had fumbled through from other places, and they were in the caves and tunnels under Arkham, too.

He was trying to remember about the places that the Cuthulians had cited. The Miskatonic Valley, which was home to Arkham Asylum, was one. The Plateau of Leng was another; there was one in Antarctica, and one in a lost city in the Middle East. Other than that, he wasn't sure. What the Cuthulians did not say, was often as important to them as what they did say.

The fish was nearly done. Mark crossed his legs, took a deep breath, and began backpedaling through the years.

-1,483

Mark paused, about to put a quarter into the Coke machine. He quit worrying about the drink and left the staff lounge, going out into the well-lit corridor, as the coin clinked down inside the machine.

Arkham Asylum was quiet. The midmorning sun shone in through the barred windows. A man from the Mental Retardation program--Sammy, his name was--slopped soapy water around on the tiles as he mopped. Far away, a door banged. It was 1984.

Arkham had no elevators, and all of the stairs were well-locked. Mark had a half-dozen keys that would a quarter of the doors in the building; he undid the lock on the main stairwell and went upstairs to the Blue Ward. The Blue Ward was known to Arkham's residents as the cthulhuhead floor.

After all this, Mark thought, more stairs.

The stairway door to Blue could not be unlocked with his keys; Mark pressed the doorbell and waved at the guard. A second later, the lock mechanism buzzed and the bolt withdrew. Inside, Mark signed in at the desk and gave the guard his keys.

"Mason, Mark, Intern," the guard read aloud from the clipboard. "Aren't you taking lunch like everybody else?"

Mark coughed and said, "I want to talk to Ulrich."

The guard was amused. "Why? What the hell for?"

"Well, he's one of my favorite guys around here, you know."

"Yeah, right."

Mark left the desk and went into the Blue Ward proper. The hall branched; to his right was the 'easy' ward, which held adolescents that had taken Satanism a step too far.

Behind him, the guard shouted, "Hey, Mark--if you want to eat lunch, we've got some extra trays."

"Hell, no."

"Aw, the jello was good today...."

Mark turned to his left. This part of the ward was like a prison, and with good reason. It too was very well-lit.

Steven Ulrich was thirty-two and looked sixty-four. When he saw Ulrich, Mark often thought of the Beatles tune called 'When I'm sixty-four.' Ulrich had been in Arkham for eight years. Ulrich was tall and vague and gaunt with insanity. Nothing loved Ulrich. The guards who didn't need him, fed him jello laced with heavy tranquilizers,

and did not stay to listen to his words. On the 'easy' ward, the adolescents often quit talking when he was led through; the adolescents looked at Ulrich and then looked away and whispered to each other, making peculiar signs with their fingers.

Like a lot of the serious Cuthulians, Ulrich came from further up in the Miskatonic Valley. Mark's internship advisor had once stopped talking in the middle of a lecture debunking the Cuthulians. The doctor had frowned across his desk, suddenly, and then said: "You know, light doesn't reach up there, at that end of the Valley."

Ulrich had a private room with two doors. The inner door was made of steel bars that were thick with industrial paint, and it was closed and locked. Ulrich, himself, was out of view to the right side of the doorway.

Mark remembered that about a year later, a girl would tell him that it was cruel to keep people locked up. He coughed; Ulrich stayed where he was. There was nothing to knock on that wouldn't hurt his knuckles, so Mark coughed again and then said, "Excuse me."

Ulrich moaned softly.

Mark tried again, whispering: "cthulhu fa'tgn."

Another moan, then: "Going away." There was a sound of nails being run gently down the cinderblock wall.

Mark said, "I need to talk to you."

"No.... What do you want? Ain't it enough now? You ain't one of Them.... How much does it cost? Are you okay? I'm okay...."

"Look, uh, my name's Mark Mason. I don't know the names for these things but I got into tunnels-"

Another moan.

"Do you know anything about an empty city made out of black stone? There's a moon, Mr. Ulrich, and it's not our moon. I'm somewhere else, I'm lost and I can't get home."

"I'm retired."

It was the last thing Mark had expected, and he hesitated.

"....not one of Them I'm not afraid of you what are you? You don't smell like Them."

Mark thought about it; he looked around carefully. "I got into the tunnels by accident."

"And you live?"

"Yeah."

"By accident." Ulrich giggled nastily. "You live by accident. Wanna hear something funny?"

"Sure."

Another batch of giggles writhed through the bars. "Live by accident. Die by accident.... Worse things, on purpose."

"Was that supposed to be funny? I need to get home."

"I love you. No, really. Okay." Ulrich's voice became serious: "You're here now. Does the time seem wrong?"

"The time's fine, Ulrich."

"Time now?"

"Uh, summer of '85."

"No no! Can't be done! Stars aren't being right!" There was more sounds of nails being run down the cinderblock wall. "Stars are never completely right all the way. Nobody know when they're right. Do it homebrew, no knowing ending up."

"It wasn't homebrew. I need to get back--not to Leng; to Miskatonic. Will the stars make a difference?"

There was an unidentifiable noise. "Mark Mason. Leng--Plateau of Leng?"

"That's right."

"Crazyboy. Nobody know Leng. Nobody know old places, not time now. Boy you come to now?"

"Yeah."

"Crazyboy. Nobody do that." Rapidly, his voice filled with stress, Ulrich said: "Ever-never-when-ever-all-ever-is-was-will-not-be."

"Mr. Ulrich? What's happening right now?"

"...Right now tunneling altering seeing waiting, downstairs. Caves basements singers. God, I'm sorry...." He sighed. "Okay. Now. Safe? Alive? Okay?"

"Yeah."

"Die. Kill self.... But you do not. Sorry. Can you see?"

"No."

"Smell?"

"I try not to."

Ulrich giggled. Then, in an authoritative voice, he asked: "Can you hear?"

"No. I touch."

"Yes."

"I touched the things in the caves--"

"Yes.... Touch, be touched--'Tetched,' the old people call it. I see not everywhere, not everynow. By the way.... Hurt?"

Mark was a little confused; Ulrich made perfect sense. He didn't like to refer to time, that was all. "Yeah. It hurts."

"Seeing, hurts more. Seeing kills, most everynow. Hurt like making strong--cut off arm, arm strong. Meat holds us back."

"What?"

"What what?"

"The meat holds us back?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why did you say that?"

"Oh. Oh, my. Mark?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I call you Mark?"

"Yes."

Ulrich took a deep breath. As if he was reciting something from an old memory, he said: "How do you think we got to be in these monkeys?"

5:

Mark slid past his departure time by twenty minutes or so, and slammed into his organism. The gone place in his mind ached numbly at the force, but this time he didn't seizure.

The fish was done.

He picked it up by the spit and let it fall onto a clean place on the rock. He stared at the fish, thinking. He was in his own future, or something was, by twenty minutes. What had happened during that time?

His clothes had dried. The fish had cooked. The sun had risen a little higher into the heavens, and a lot of water had rolled down to the sea. What had his body been doing in that time? He no longer remembered things; he re-experienced them.... but he hadn't been here.

He tried remembering, and came up with a horribly clinical image of the river, recorded through eyes that did not move or judge.

My body was here. My brain was here.

Mark stared at the fish.

(BodyI--MeI.....)

(BodyI----MeI....)

(BodyI-----MeI...)

(BodyI-

It broke.

-MeI...)

The MeIMark wiggles in blank not, exultant. The air is motionless. The sun does not move in the sky. Ants pause as they approached the fish. The river could be made from fused glass. Photons hesitate. The MeIMark reenters the BodyIMark.

This time the brain did seizure, and Mark fell back onto the rock.

If it had gone on long, he would have fallen in the river and drowned, or beaten his own skull in against the rock, or swallowed his tongue--but he was learning, and it wasn't long before he looked back out through the eyes and thought: Who did this to me?

He knew, though: The Old Ones--the....

He strained, and a web of neurons in the speech centers of the BodyIMark died. The apparatus was not reroutable; aloud the BodyIMark said: "The Fi'dti'lu'dit'lu..."

It was a wrong approximation; most of the sounds would not transmit through a four-dimensional atmosphere. Mark stared down at the manacles that were called, in English, hands, and clenched them. Rage swept through the organism, and he screamed at the cloudless sky until the throat was sore.

Mark threw himself off the boulder and went staggering through the shallows of the river. He was moving clumsily and carelessly; the reintegration was not

complete. The sun beat down and the birds wheeled and stayed away.

How long? How long? How long?

Eventually he came to a crashing halt, near the edge of the water. He fell in amongst the boulders there, and noticed pain. The reintegration would have to be better; if the BodyIMark died, the MeIMark would be reincarnated--and that could not be allowed to happen.

6:

When Mark reawakened, he had a splitting headache and his legs were sore from scraping on the rocks. He stood back up and waded back across the river to the boulder, where a line of ants had begun excavating his fish. Mark rebuilt the fire and brushed off the ants before he ate the fish. The organism was famished and didn't like ants--a purely societal attitude, he realized, learned and remembered by the neural structures in the monkeybrain.

Still, there it was, and there wasn't much getting away from it. The implantations must have been done eons ago, before even the black stone city had been built.

Mark glared at the basaltlike towers as he ate, thinking, They thought this would get rid of us!

Well, he amended, it did pretty much get rid of us. We're not a match for Them in these biologicals....

The monkeys had adapted and crossed the spaces between places to build this city, and others, and They had put a end to such experiments. The monkeys had been a great handicap--often, a crippling handicap. The MeI-s no longer understood what it might mean to lose their flesh.

When he was done he dropped the fish, dressed, and slung the AK over his shoulder. There wasn't anything to do with the chestplate, so he left it on the rock and went jumping nimbly across the boulders to the south bank, carrying a burning stick from the fire.

This part of the city was a little different from the north side of the river, and he stopped, unsure of what he was looking for. There had to be a way back to Earth... Whether or not he could make it through was another matter. If the stars were right in three dimensions; if the Old Ones didn't catch him trying to cross through the gaps between; if he could get the organism through the correct Way and not end up in someplace worse than this; if he could get through the tunnels that led to the surface--alive--then he supposed he'd be back on Earth. Hopefully he could find the Way to Miskatonic, rather than Leng.

It was harder to say what he'd do once he was out.

Southside buildings were larger and not as clearly intended for residences. They didn't seem to be big enough for warehouses; perhaps they had been offices, or perhaps they had some other, long-forgotten purpose. Mark wandered through the empty streets, shooing curious birds away. His long hair rustled on the back of the parka. The sun was warm and he took off the parka and tied it around his waist.

In one of the buildings he found another skeleton; this one was nearly intact, and it seemed to have been purely human. Mark ground corroded bones in his fingers; the gray dust darkened his calluses. Vengefully, he crushed the rest of the skeleton under his boots. It was nearly noon.

Southside was heavily forested, and the buildings were shrouded in ivy and kudzu.

Kudzu was the bane of the American south, and Mark recognized it, but this kudzu was different; it flowered. Bright white-and-blue blooms ran up and down the emerald vines. On the black basalt, the effect was eerily pretty.

He trekked at random through the city, pausing sometimes to look in the buildings. Sometimes he found things--skeletons, hieroglyphics, and peculiar coins mixed with the wreckage of furniture. The coins were about the size of a silver dollar and made of solid gold. Their borders were covered with interlocking geometry; the centers were blank or written with hieroglyphics. He accumulated a pocket of them and left behind coins he'd brought--Neapalese paisas, American pennies, Indian rupees.

He also found and took artifacts--idols mostly, all small enough to hold in one human hand. These gods were animistic and roughly human; the monkeys had fashioned their own gods, in crude replicas of themselves. One was a pregnant woman holding a sheath of wheat. Another was an old man with a seven-pointed star on his chest. The old man was always made of the black stone; the woman was always fired clay.

Mark reached a place where the buildings opened up, into a flat black stone courtyard. The square had once been dominated by a granite obelisk thirty feet high, but this now lay flat. The shattered, weathered stones were granite. Beyond the obelisk, on the other side of the square, was a gigantic and windowless building. Kudzu wreathed the only door.

The opening was big enough to drive a semitrailer through. Mark paused at the entrance, looking in. The interior was as large as the courtyard outside. It was lit by a skylight in the center; the edges of the spot of sunlight were ragged with the shadows of vines that had grown around it.

There were a few skeletons here, and fifteen-foot black stone idol. This god was a naked man with a wolf's head, carrying a mace at port arms, and his penis jutted out towards the door. Behind him, carved on the wall, were more hieroglyphics. Like all the words, these were completely unintelligible.

Mark wondered what the city's citizens had been like, if they'd worshipped this. The skeletons lay more or less where they had fallen. Some were mixed with shafts of rust that might once have been edged weapons.

Doors led off to the sides; Mark found more wood outside, and lit it with the fire he carried. He crossed the big room and began exploring with a corridor that ran straight into the back of the building. The makeshift torch wasn't good for much light; it flickered and barely showed him where he was going. There was no draft.

The halls were thick with dust. Occasionally there were more bones, or piles of woodrot that had once been furniture. Mark followed the main hall down for a city block before he reached the stairs.

These stairs were large, and proportioned for humans. He stared into the blackness of the downflight, wondering what he would find, and then followed the stairs into the basement.

The stairs wound down only a single flight before they ran into water. It was flat, like a lake on a still summer day, and reached off beyond where his light could show. There was no sign of life--no algae, no foam, no bubbles.

Drainage, he decided, it's flowed down from the roof to here, through the skylights.

Either the basement was watertight, or the water was also flowing in from elsewhere. He waded in to waist-depth--the water wasn't very cold--and looked around. The chamber was in much better condition than the one beneath the Plateau of Leng.

Pillars still held up the ceiling, and the hieroglyphics on them had remained visible. The floor was flat and only a little muddy under his boots.

Mark splashed around in the placid lake, finding nothing. When he could no longer see the stairs, he went back and searched them out.

Outside, frustrated, Mark switched the remaining fire to a handful of twigs; it was important that he keep it burning and not waste a shell from the AK to start another one. It was still only a little after noon; the planet was turning slowly.

After awhile, he took the fire and went back into the city proper.

7:

The nights were terribly long. At seemingly random intervals, the dead star would rise and throw a metallic gray light across the city. In this light, all colors were shades of black. Without it there was only darkness, not even stars, and he instinctively knew to leave his fire and retreat into the city.

When it was very dark, the birds retreated to their nests and fell silent. The silence was like deafness, though sometimes winds would sweep across the city and howl in the empty windows. Otherwise the dark was only broken by the sound of his own footsteps.

Mark had become clever in darkness. Often, he missed tripfalls without seeing them until he had passed. He would hike through the city, carrying the things he'd found; he never left anything behind except for the chestplate.

He slept in the gray times, crouching in buildings with the AK across his lap. He knew that he no longer feared anything the AK could kill, but his words to Minfit had come to prophecy: the gun had become a security blanket.

In the darkneses he would stoop down and listen to basements and drain tunnels. On the third day, it rained, and he sat and concentrated on the sound of rushing water as it filtered under the city. He knew he'd have to go down there sooner or later and it bothered him greatly not to hear anything moving in the tunnels.

On the tenth day, he found a library. It was a boxy building that stood out like a sore thumb on the tree-lined residential street, and its walls gaped with holes that had been huge windows. By the front door, strangled with kudzu, was a statue of the old man with the seven-pointed star.

Inside, the books were stacked in what seemed to be random heaps. There were no shelves or tables; the library might as well have been a warehouse. The books themselves were oversized and heavy, with metallic covers. When Mark picked one up at random and opened it, he was surprised to find that it wasn't rotten; the sheets were thick and made of an unfamiliar material.

It was written with more hieroglyphics. Mark flipped through it at random, finding no illustrations and nothing familiar. The hieroglyphics were letters that seemed to have evolved from pictographs; they were crude, primitive-looking things, but the printing was clear. He counted sixty-three different symbols--it was a huge alphabet, and he wondered if it was phonetic.

The whole thing was incredibly frustrating. Perhaps Mr. Spock from Star Trek could have puzzled it out, but Mark had no clue how to begin. He was lost in a long-forgotten suicide city, with only words in an alien language to show him the Way out.

When he got back to the fire, he knew that someone else had been there.

A stick was missing. It was as simple as that; in the time he'd been gone, that stick would not have burned down. Mark stared at it, interested, and then put down the book.

He broke the MeIMark halfway out of the monkey, and rotated into the erofeb.

Vision was a sphere all around him, and beyond him into shapes that weren't spheres. The MeIMark bore down, limiting itself to things that would not kill the BodyIMark: light between the ultraviolet and infrared spectrums, three dimensions, and a small physical area. The MeIMark routed the visions into the BodyIMark directly through the optic nerves, bypassing telepathy inhibitors in the monkeybrain.

The river halted and began to flow up to the mountains. Smoke was sucked out of the sky and turned into wood. The sun sank down again, slowly but with increasing speed.

A figure fumbled across the rocks, backwards. It carried a burning stick and when it reached the fire it placed the stick into the smoke-sucking fire. Fearfully, it scooted backwards to examine the chestplate.

The MeIMark looked carefully. He saw a ragged man, long-haired, with a practically no chin under a white-shot beard. The ragged man slid down into the river and began sneaking away, backwards.

(MeI--BodyI)

Mark fell. His head was filled with a white light that was made out of pain. The organism didn't pass out, but it was terribly afraid, and he crawled into a hollow between the rocks for awhile.

This time, he'd given himself a nosebleed. The blood was dark and hot. As he washed it off in the river, the migraine shrank to a centerpoint behind his eyes. When he closed his eyes, the pain slowed and dulled.

Squinting, Mark took the AK and set out after his visitor.

The trail was rough--scrapes in the guano that were not quite footprints, broken twigs, and a charred place where the fire had been dropped. The visitor had been clumsy in movement.

In the distance, a column of smoke rose, and Mark headed for it. Emotionlessly, he unslung the AK and moving the safety lever to full automatic. As his arms moved, Mark thought,I was a pacifist, once...

What the BodyIMark's brain thought was no longer quite relevant.

The city and the trail ended at the same time: beyond a small edging of basalt fence, smoke rose from below. Trees--cedars and pines, for the most part--fought here for light and they grew up from below the city's edge, compressed against the basalt. The smoke filtered through them.

He climbed up on the fence and looked carefully through the pines. Below, erosion had cut away the land below the city; the forest floor was twenty feet down from him. A small stream ran enthusiastically through the pines and under the city, into a cave.

Smoke was wafting out of the top of the cave.

Mark reslung the AK and began climbing through down the pines.

I'm like Santa Claus, Mark thought, coming down the chimney....

Behind him, the sunny entrance was a tiny hole in watery velvet. The basalt ceiling had receded above him as the creek flowed deeper under the city; the creek itself was cold and rocky.

The place smelled reassuringly of woodsmoke, but he knew he was too far into the planet to find anything right. There was no reason for anyone to come down here, and many reasons not to....

He walked on. The entrance light grew smaller, and then faded out. There were sounds, down here: the splashing of water as other creeks fed into this one, and of rocks sliding together in a way that sounded as if the planet was chuckling. Mark remembered the idols in the city: What kind of god do you ask for help, down here--besides yourself?

He followed the woodsmoke, moving slowly. His eyes were doing the bug-out act again, and he closed them. This time, his lids merely flopped down and stayed that way, and the BodyIMark's brain didn't have anything to say about it.

The monkey was wearing out. It probably was healthy enough, he supposed, and it might last another fifty years--but much of the brain tissue had been killed. Down here the brain became confused and lost in emotional fear. To compensate, he had to keep his connection loose, and it made him clumsy. The organism's legs tripped and bent at the wrong times as he fumbled his way into the caves.

There was no way out of it. If the monkey died, or if the MeIMark left it forever, the soul would wind up in a womb somewhere. If that happened, it might be any number of reincarnations before he managed to damage a brain like this.

Besides, when he was in the BodyIMark, he liked being Mark. Being a MeI-who-knows-what would not be as good--especially if it was something female or animal or otherwise low in status.

A tremendous howling came up the tunnel with the smoke.

I'm getting close now, Mark thought, and the corners of his lips pulled back. The mannerism would have been instantly recognizable to any great ape.

The howling came again, now clearly from human vocal chords, and he remembered to open his eyes. The fire was a dim red glow in the distance, and Mark's eyes began watering from the smoke. Mixed with the smell of the woodsmoke was a mixture of greasy, normal odors: human shit, burned feathers, and rot.

He entered the chamber in a lurching squat, the AK out, and looked around. Here, the water had carved out a large room around a poorly formed place in the basalt. It was a clumsy place, strewn with the corpses of birds, and suited to its inhabitant.... The ragged man was lying against one basalt wall, watching the fire. He howled without lifting his head.

The creek was flowing down, through a deep place next to the wall of the chamber; Mark splashed out of the water and blocked that way out. He waited.

After awhile, the ragged man looked up. His eyes did not focus well and he showed no fear.

Mark had the AK unslung, the butt against his right shoulder, and his finger on the trigger. He kept it pointed at the stream and said, "Who are you?"

There was no response, then: "...Fa'yta f'tagn? cthulhu f'tagn?"

Mark said, "No. Who are you?"

The old man squinted at him. "No?"

Mark shifted deeper into the monkey, accepting that it was filled with an adrenaline-fueled mixture of terror, rage, and loathing. It was especially terrified to have its back turned to the deeper exit. If anything came out of that way, though, the MeIMark would have a lot more problems than the BodyIMark. He remembered a thing the Christians liked to say: 'Your soul is in mortal peril.'

This was an immortal peril. The giddy sensation made it difficult to use his half-ruined mind, and Mark found himself returning the fearful stare.

The old man repeated: "cthulhu f'tagn?"

"No! L'folo f'tagn. cthulhu R'yleh."

The ragged man's eyes wiggled in confusion; he clearly had no idea what the garbled syllables meant.

Mark wasn't sure either. When he tried to think about it, the vision headache was complimented by a pain that was nearer to his ears. He said, "Get up."

The ragged man stood, swallowing hopelessly.

He had given up caring what the man's name was, but knew better than to let a cthulhuhead get by with anything. He'd learned that at Arkham. "Tell me your name."

The voice, in English, was unpracticed and clumsy, as if the vocal chords were being run by remote control. "L... Whately." He waited expectantly, as if for any reaction from a bullet to obeisance. As Mark lost control, the Whately lurched towards the pool.

Mark swung the AK's stock down, slamming it into the back of the Whately's head. The Whately's brain wasn't running much anyway, and he fell at once.

Mark hit him again and then yanked him back up by the rotted shirt; it tore. Beneath the shirt, the old man's back was lumpy with superfluous organs. Mark kicked the old man brutally back down and knelt on him, up to his waist in the water now. The Whately spluttered and shook.

Mark was trembling and gnashing his teeth, his rage in the driver's seat, and the old man's lungs nearly filled before Mark calmed down enough to yank him back out.

Mark shouldered the AK. With all of his force, he shook the Whately until the old man coughed and puked cold water onto the sand. Mark began dragging him up and out of the caves.

11:

It was nearly dark. Mark caught and killed a bird--he was sick of fish--and rebuilt the fire. The Whately was sitting uncomfortably on a boulder, tied to a tree trunk with the strap from the AK. His legs had been damaged by the drag back; the flesh was red and torn where it wasn't lilly-white from being out of the sun.

Mark looked at the river while the bird cooked. He was a little more in control, and he didn't speak.

The Whately was looking hungrily at the remains of the bird; Mark set it aside and then hesitated. What was it about him that felt remorse? Was it the BodyIMark or the MeIMark? Eventually they both freed one of the Whately's hands and allowed him to eat.

Mark said, "You're from Dunwich, Massachusetts, in the upper Miskatonic Valley. Am I right?"

The Whately gobbled as he ate, looking at Mark. "You're not right," he said finally. "Not right with Them. They'll eat you. This ain't the place for your kind to be." He seemed happy about it.

"We had some Whatelys at Arkham. When you were on Earth, did you know a man named Bruce Whately?"

The Whately giggled.

"What is your first name?"

"Tommy."

Mark looked back at the river and sighed. "Tommy Whately, huh? How long have you been here, man?"

This drew a blank look.

"What year was it when you left?"

Tommy giggled again.

"Tell me, what do you usually eat?"

"I catch birds."

"But you don't cook 'em? How come you never tried starting a fire?"

The Whately looked at him in an arrogant way. It was the look an officer would give to a private from the opposing army.

Mark looked to the east, where the sun was sinking into some clouds that had come in from the sea. "Shit," he said. "How come you never planted yourself a vegetable garden? Naw, you had to go and live in a cave and eat raw birds.... Typical Whately mentality. I know all about your people. I know that somebody named Whately tried to open the Ways, didn't he? He tried to let Them in--back in the thirties. Was that you?"

Tommy giggled with real amusement. He said, "Go down into the tunnels."

Mark understood this to be a Whately version of 'go to hell.' He said, "You know, all I have to do is kick that log you're tied to in the water and watch you drown."

This bore no response.

Shit, Mark thought, he's no more afraid of death.... Or, maybe, he can breathe water. "How about if I whipped out my knife and started digging out those lumps on your back?"

Tommy paled but still said nothing.

Senior would be proud. The thought depressed Mark greatly. "You don't know what the hell is going on, do you Tommy? Do you even know what They grew those things in you for?"

Tommy said, "I can...."

"Yes? What?"

"So I can.... Never mind."

"You don't know, do you?"

Tommy began to cry.

Filled with anger now, Mark said rapidly: "What the hell do Whatelys do at family reunions? What do you do when you're not betraying the Earth, when you're not sneaking around in the caves hiding from Them and stealing scraps from their tables? Do you sit in your pitiful mountain cabins and smoke food-stamp cigarettes with the lights out? You cthulhuheads give me a pain-" and he was striking the old man, knocking him back.

Mark managed to stop after hitting him three times in the face, and he climbed down off the rock. He took the AK and went down the river a little ways before he stopped.

The basalt city had gone gray in the light from the dead star. Mark tossed pebbles into the water, wondering how the hell he'd come so far.

12:

In the morning Mark came back from the south side of the river and rebuilt the fire. He'd passed the night, mostly, sitting on the far bank and watching the Whately.

When it became clear that Mark wasn't going to say anything, Tommy said, "You shouldn't stay here."

"Why not?"

"They will come for you."

"Thanks," Mark said, "but you've been here awhile, right? They never came for you."

Tommy looked down.

"They never came for you, did they? They left you out here in this place, didn't they? You shithead." Mark's voice was flat and harsh. "Did you think you'd cut a deal? Did you think you were going to get any respect from the other side?" He stopped, looking down at the Whately, and recognized what he was doing. He thought again, Senior would be proud.

Mark left the rock and walked across the river into the city. He knew that if he stayed, he'd wind up hitting Tommy again. He thought about it: Is this a BodyIMark thing? How can I get away from this?

He returned to the library--it was a solid hour's walk--and sat on the front steps trying to puzzle out the language. The ancient text writhed before his eyes, though; he couldn't concentrate and he didn't know how to figure it out.

The birds clustered around him like an audience. Their attentive curiosity was a relief; they aroused no rage in him, as Tommy did.

Mark went back inside and fumbled through more of the books. He found only one illustration--again, the old man with the seven-pointed star on his chest. The alphabet was always the same. It was mysterious, tantalizing, hinting at a simple meaning that was locked away under the passage of centuries.

He sat on the floor, looking at the leaves that had blown in through the windows. He put the AK across his lap, and dropped before into time.

-4,082

It was 1979. He was in the station wagon, riding while his mother drove. They had been to a little 'quick-care' clinic on the other side of the city, where his mother had given a false name. A wide bandage covered Mark's nose and his voice had a pained quality from the damage: "Do you think it'll heal so that my nose is a different shape?"

His mother was paying close attention to the light afternoon traffic. "I don't know, dear. You should have asked the doctor."

"He wasn't a doctor," Mark said. "He was a physician's assistant." It didn't matter; he knew the answer. His nose would heal into a bent, broken shape. It would still be that way when Minfit hired him in Katmandu.

"Well, what cares is the quality of the care you've received."

"Yeah?"

His mother looked at him suddenly. She was a pretty brunette, still thin: a suburban queen with unruly subjects.

"What about the quality of the care I receive at home?"

His mother opened her mouth, looked back to the traffic, and closed her mouth again.

"He knocks the hell out of me 'bout once a week," Mark said in his painfully nasal voice. "Why the hell don't you ever say anything?"

"He's a fine father."

"He's not a fine father. Where the hell did you get that idea? He's a lousy father."

"Mark," his mother said sternly, "please do not attempt to use profanity around me."

"Look," Mark turned and stared at her eyes, which stayed on the road, "I'm not going to accept your dissembling-"

"Where did you learn a word like that?"

He learned it in college, four years in the future, and the meaning had been instantly understood to him: it was what she did when she was confronted. "He never hits you. How come?"

"Mark," his mother said softly. "He's trying to teach you to be strong."

"Mom, all he's doing is teaching me to be like him. I don't want to be like him. I don't want to beat the hell out of my kids; I want to have a decent relationship with my family. That's not very much to ask."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"What I am talking about is the statistical phenomenon of abusive parents coming from abusive homes. I'm talking about learned states of rage and the daisy chain of cruelty."

"I can see you've done some research."

Mark screamed, "Fuck you! Fuck you! You fucking bitch, you're no good to me at all! What the hell are you trying to do to me?"

Abruptly, Mark's mother stopped the car. The brakes squealed and she bent over the steering wheel, her eyes closed, sobbing helplessly.

The sight plummeted him. Mark said uncertainly, "...there you see I go doing it again...."

She said nothing.

Behind them a horn blared, and Mark turned and aimed his middle finger at the car.

"I can't leave him..." His mother had gotten herself under control. "I can't."

"Mom, I don't know what I want you to do, but I'm tired of getting hit."

She began to cry again.

"Never mind. Whatever." Mark looked at the car behind them; he wondered if the driver would come out to fight. If that happened....

His mother rubbed her eyes, hard, and sat up. "Mark, I'm sorry...."

"No, forget it. I forgive you."

"Do you?" Her voice was as nasal as his, now. "Do you really?"

Mark stared at the traffic. "Yeah, really. I forgive you. Let's go home."

She knew that he didn't; she obviously knew what he really thought of her, but no force on Earth could have moved her to confront it. This could be seen merely by looking at her. She put the station wagon into gear and put her foot on the gas.

-4,081:

It was twilight. The air was cool and a breezy with potential summer storms; Mark passed through the kitchen, where his mother and sister were doing the dishes, and went out onto the deck. Senior was out there in one of the reclining lawn chairs, drinking iced tea.

Mark couldn't guess what his father was thinking. He sat down in one of the other chairs and stared at the playground set that Senior had built for his sister.

Nothing happened.

Abruptly, Mark reached up and tore the bandages off of his nose. It hurt, but he balled them up and put them into the pocket of his jeans.

Senior squinted at him. "If you don't keep that nose set right, it'll heal looking like shit, Mark."

Mark sighed. "It would have anyway."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Okay then."

Mark said, "What was granddad like?"

His father was silent at first, then looked at Mark. "Do you think I'm a monster, Mark? Is that what you think?"

I hope he doesn't go for the nose this time. "No," Mark said aloud, "I respect you. Really."

Warily: "How's that?"

"You don't take shit off your father."

Senior mulled it over, looking around the backyard. Finally, he chuckled. "I wish I'd told him that."

It was safe. Mark got out his cigarettes and lit one, carefully. Practically no one cared for his smoking, except for his father.

"You know, Mark, there are a lot of worse things in this world than getting hit by your father."

Mark nodded, thinking of the shuggoth. "You know that burned place out in the road?"

His father drank some tea, not looking at him. "I don't want to hear about that,

Mark."

"You know-"

"Yes?"

Mark sighed. He and his father sat back again, like mirror images; their fists relaxed. "Dad, one day we're going to kill each other. Did you ever think of that?"

Senior said nothing.

"I don't want to fight you any more."

Senior snorted. "It'll be a long time before you can kick my ass, Mark."

"Yeah, I know. But I'm getting bigger."

His father looked at him.

"I mean, I am, right? I don't mean to pick a fight. You're the only father I've got, and I'm the only son you have, right?"

His father seemed dubious.

"Look, really. I can't stand this crap any more, dad."

Senior was contemptuous. "So what's your fucking point, Mark?"

Mark said softly, "Can we have a truce? Because I know how this ends, you know? It doesn't have a happy ending. There's no conflict resolution. I'll wind up knocking my own kids around, and probably my wife too-"

"A man who would hit a woman," Mark's father said sternly, "Is no better than an animal."

Mark began to finish, '-and you will die alone in a nursing home,' but then the words locked up in his throat. Rage pushed them up, towards his mouth.

Mark looked away. With a tremendous effort, he used calm to push the rage and the words down to his stomach. "You get my point. Whatever point you've been trying to make, I've gotten it."

Senior nodded reflectively. "Yes," he said, "You probably have."

"What was it?"

"The world's a cesspool, Mark."

He looked out at the backyard. A halogen light, behind the Sturmann's house, flickered slightly. Mark said, "Yes, it is."

"Can you straighten up your life, boy?"

"What do you want me to do?"

Senior only stared at him.

Mark realized that his father had no idea what he wanted. "Yeah, I'll straighten up my life."

"Okay, then." Senior sat up, as if he'd suddenly thought of something.

"-and I'll stay out of your way." Mark put his cigarette into the sand-filled can his father used. He stood up and said one of the dangerous things: "I'm not going to work with you anymore."

His father nodded absently, still thinking.

Mark waited.

"You know, Mark," Senior finally said, "It isn't easy for me, either."

Mark's rage vanished utterly, replaced by a sorrow that would last beyond Leng and to the day of his death. He said, "I know," and went into the house.

13:

The MeIMark slid after, to the basalt city, and slowed to what a human would have called 'realtime.' The BodyIMark was still sitting in the library; the MeIMark flew above the city at a height of about a mile. It looked in all directions at once.

In the tunnels beneath the city, things awoke, noticing. The MeIMark turned its attention east.

Of the coast, dolphins cavorted. The MeIMark homed in on them and heard a band of hydrosonic calls and telepathy that had been mostly limited by the dolphin-brains. He was not alone, after all....

The MeIMark called to them, and two of the dolphins seized at the force of it. Preventional neurons killed them in seconds, before his call could burn out the prisonminds. The souls that had been in the dolphins expanded at an infinitely increasing rate and disappeared to some new incarnation....

To some new incarceration.

The dolphins would be useless. The MeIMark shifted its attention to the mountain range behind the city, dismissed it, and expanded to cover the entire continent. It found two more cities along the northern seacoast; these were dismissed also.

Above the planet, the dead star followed its looping course. Beyond that, dimensional barriers covered the solar system in all directions and all times. Mark inspected these; they still held. The incursion had been incomplete. The system had not fallen completely to the Old Ones during the last war, and these old defenses would prevent him from simply flying out through the vacuum of space.... Probably, the humans had killed themselves when their queer sciences could no longer hold the Old Ones at bay--and then the Old Ones had had no more use for the place.

Ever since, this one-star universe had waited for help to arrive. Through the barriers the MeIMark could sense a four-dimensional place, with Time flattened into a slow forwards progression: free space, other stars with planets, a nebula.

The slow progression along Time in this flattened four-dimensional universe made it into a perfect site for the monkey-prisons. It was also frustrating, even without the BodyIMark to feel frustration as an emotion.

It was good to be free again. That was the thing he'd kept forgetting when he returned to the BodyIMark.

It didn't matter. Either he returned to the BodyIMark or, eventually, the Old Ones would come hunting him through the Ways--and this planet was not as isolated as Earth. They could enter the area without difficulty.

He had already alerted something that had been waiting beneath the basalt city, with his inspections.

It was only a matter of Time.

14:

Mark coughed, uncontrollably. He realized that he was awake, and he rolled over

onto his back. Stalactites of congealed dust hung down, pointing at him, from the library's roof. This reintegration had done further damage to his brain; the right side of his body was shivering cold, and perfectly accurate scenes were being activated from his memory. He knew the contents of his bookbag on December 4, 1972; he knew the taste of dinner at the Kellman's on May 26, 1975; he knew the tablature to "Shakedown Street." The right side of his head hurt terribly.

It took time for the damaged brain to reroute through intact lines of neural tissue. Outside, the day rolled on.

Eventually the headache subsided and he was able to sit up. Whatever had been done to the right side--no, left side, he corrected, the halves are reversed and the left side of the brain runs the right side of the body--had been unfixable. Mark ran his hand across the floor and felt roughness as varying levels of cold. It was ghastly.

He stood, shaking, and scooped up the AK. The laminated wooden stock was almost warm in his right hand; it was merely smooth to his left. Walking was like jabbing his right leg through a hole in an icy pond, and the cold side seemed heavy.

He staggered outside. A bird jabbered at him and landed on his shoulder; he brushed it away.

Nothing remained of the purely MeIMark's visions except for a dumb certainty that he had to escape through the tunnels of this place. Mark limped up the street, clutching the AK. It was getting hot, but he didn't stop to take off the parka.

When he reached the river, he found that Tommy had escaped. Mark stared at the strap from the AK, which was still wound around the log. It was as if Tommy had simply melted out of bondage, which was not impossible. The Old Ones were great biologists, and Mark had never bothered to learn what Tommy's extra organs were for.

The cold on his right was an agony of not-quite-pain. Mark untangled the AK's strap from the log and put it back onto the rifle. Then he began retracing his steps to Tommy's cave.

It took hours. Every other footstep was a blast of exhausting cold; he thought that the damage might eventually be corrected, and the symptoms would pass. He hoped so, anyway. If not, he'd have to learn to live with it.... but if he went somewhere for treatment, and the doctors put him on a CAT scan, they would see a brain that had become clearly abnormal.

It was the least of his worries.

Mark clumsily shimmied down the pine trees in front of the cave. When he set foot in the stream, white light flooded his sight. The cold in the water was a whine of feedback.

He forced himself through it, staggering into the cave. The darkness was a relief and he closed his eyes at once, depending on feel to sort his way through the rocks. Feeling was easy; it was, after all, only three dimensions.

The air hinted of woodsmoke, but not very much. Tommy's fire was long gone.... Under the other smells was the nasty chemical odor of >4D molecules breaking down.

When he reached Tommy's cave he stopped and opened his eyes. The fire was out but in the darkness a weird phosphorescence hung on the walls of the cave and from the basalt roof, like the dusty stalactites on the ceiling of the library.

I should have brought one of the books....

No. He'd have enough trouble getting through the tunnels alive without carrying a book. The right side of his body still weighed him down and felt freezingly wrong.

If I don't make it to Earth....

He might make it somewhere else--possibly a place that would kill the BodyIMark with insanity, or do it outright.

Or, possibly, he could end up on some third planet. Someplace where They still dwelled; human places had been preempted in lost battles, and he'd been lucky that none of the worst of Them had been in the basalt city.

What was below the city might be another matter.

The pool was deep and the surface only rippled a little as the stream flowed down, into deeper chambers. He waded in and hesitated. Mark hyperventilated for a few minutes, flooding his system with oxygen. The pain in his head subsided a little, and he wrapped the AK's strap around his arm before he ducked beneath the surface.

15:

Without oxygen, the pain came back to him. It turned the blackness a dull red and the fear was there too, lightening the pain with adrenaline. He was being flushed deep under the city, the water slamming him into the rocks that he clutched at to slow his progress. The AK thrashed against his chest and once he struck his head hard enough to put white streaks into the red.

It went on for forever.

There was no thought, only the constant struggle not to be helpless, and his chest was hitching in and out until it too was a sheet of pain. There was no up, no down, no space of air above the water, only the sucking at his legs that pulled him. His right side was numb with cold.

The flow turned and he wiped out against the wall, his fingers grabbing futilely at a sheet of basalt, and tumbled twice. He wound up going headfirst and when he put out his hands they hit the rock and stopped him for a second, and then the water at his feet tumbled him again. He struck a rock hard enough to knock bubbles from his lips, and for a second he thought that something had bitten him.

It was only a cracked rib. Mark went back to grabbing at the rocks. He began to wonder if he would live.

Tommy had tried to go down here, had perhaps even come up it, once; how much had the Old Ones changed his body?

Suddenly the water changed to a vortex, a storm with no space between the raindrops, and then he was falling through it and the water stilled. He was deep. His chest had quit hitching and was merely hard and inert, like a stone of pain that had been forced into his torso, and the cracked rib was an arc of sharper pain.

Mark tried to swim. Sometime later, his mind recognized that he no longer knew which way was up. He stopped and let himself rise, and then swam in that direction. His wet clothes and the AK dragged him back and he was newly exhausted when he broke the surface.

His arms flailed and he gasped once, and then he was back under the water, puking. The dry heaves seized him and he bobbed up and down, struggling in and out of the poisonous air. It was not stale; it only smelled completely wrong. His body was trying to survive the alien chemicals that had contaminated the place.

Eventually he was able to lie on his face in the water. The skin in his back crawled and itched at the air above him. The stone of pain had returned and he tried breathing again. This time he only gagged.

The water was still moving him along, but much more slowly. There was no light at all, here. Mark began swimming to the left of the current.

Far away was a hollow booming noise. The boom was not repeated.

He had no clue how far away the edge was and he was surprised when his fingers hit the rock. Mark dragged at it as he was pulled along the wall--and this wall was not basalt; it felt like uneven rough stones to his left hand, and ice to his right. He caught to a place between stones and the water nearly yanked his fingers off as he stopped himself. The current slung him against the wall and he gripped the stones with his feet and tried to climb.

He had forgotten how much he weighed. The water had buoyed him up in his exhaustion; now he sagged against the wall and tried to rest.

Breathing was like being force-fed something bitter.

After awhile he dragged himself further up, his hands moving like spiders to find handholds or a ledge, but there was no ledge. The wall was made of rocks that had been roughly piled or jammed into the side of the chamber, and they dug into his stomach. The AK caught on the protruding rocks and he swung it back over his shoulder.

He dragged himself up the face, the surface curving so that it became easier, and the rock under his left foot gave way. Mark had time to think If I fall I die and then, under him, was the roar of a miniature landslide. He felt the face grow soft and then there was a gap in front of his feet. Mark did a pull-up on the rocks he clutched with his hands, kicking to find places to put his feet.

The noise of the river had grown quiet below him. Mark thought that he might be twenty or thirty feet above the surface of the water; when he dislodged rocks, they took a long time to fall and splash. His chest and legs were scraped and torn by the edges.

He had to test each rock before he hung his weight on it. They seemed to be getting looser as he rose and the face continued to fall back and he was able to take some of the weight off of his fingers and lean, resting.

There has to be a top, has there to be a top? What if there isn't any top?

The rocks fell back further and he fumbled his way up, gasping at the fetid air, and lay on a forty-five degree angle of smaller stones. They slid and trickled around on the larger ones and fell off the edge to his right and left.

Mark picked up a stone that felt like an ice cube to his right hand, and threw it into the darkness ahead of him. From that direction, he heard a small clicking sound of stone on stone. Eventually he was able to push himself up and actually crawl--it was a tremendous relief--up the incline. The surface was loose stone rubble, and it constantly slid under him.

It did not level out; it merely switched angles and went back down at another forty-five degree slope. Mark managed to hang himself across the apex and rest.

Up ahead things would be waiting for him, indifferent to time.

The up-ahead things could wait a little longer, Mark decided. He lay still and breathed. His jeans had been lacerated by the climb; through the holes, the rock surface was freezing cold to his right side.

Eventually he unslung the AK and sat up. A goddamned fifteen-pound rifle, he thought, And I haven't wanted it for anything since I shot Tony.

Oddly, he did not feel either remorse or glee at having shot Tony. He had felt both... once? In some edisways time, to the erofeb of when he'd come to the truce with his father, the reactions had warred in him. In that then, he'd beaten the hell out of Tommy for no reason. That was not the past, tneserply.

Mark shook his head. The monkey-brain really couldn't understand it.

Was it just the destruction in his mind, or was there light up ahead? He strained to see, catching a glimpse of some wrong phosphorescence in the tunnel ahead.

Having no reason to wander around the tunnels, the things would probably be massed around the oldest caves. That meant the phosphorescence. He began to crawl along the apex of the levee, towards the faint silvery light. He wondered if the MeIMark could be killed; apparently not, if They had gone to the trouble of stuffing all the human souls into the monkeys. It was a terrible thing.

Mark began to hate again, as he crawled, and the rocks slid about noisily. If they could hear, they would hear him coming, but for the time being he was alone.

It was a long ways, perhaps the better part of a mile, to the silvery and indistinct light. As he approached, he began to see a little; the rocks were gray shapes under his hands. The light was harmful to the mechanics of his brain and it hurt his head to look in that direction.

There was a new sound in the current of the river.

The noise was a rough sloshing, like a deep swimmer. Bubbles broke the surface, and new smells filled the air. Mark gagged and began breathing through his mouth.

The taste of the air was ghastly. The taste was like poison and the BodyIMark reacted by salivating to get rid of it; he crawled along, drooling.

Behind him, much of the levee collapsed into the river. It made a groaning sound as it went, and then this was lost in the sound of churning water. The surface under him softened, and a godless and inhuman voice echoed against the ceiling. It was distorted by the water, but the noise of it threw his skin into sensitive goosebumps that were painful to his right side.

The voice came again, now garbled. "-you dumbass," Mark said aloud, his mouth twisting at the tastes in the air, "Come down here to play with the monkeys, don't know our customs don't speak our language, don't know the spaces-" He laughed, crawling faster. The thing had pulled the levee down on top of itself.

The rocks were glowing and sticky under his hands. When he lifted them, his hands glowed too. The glow shone through the flesh.

It was sloshing around again, trying to free itself from the rockslide. Mark rose and began to run, bowlegged, through the loose rocks. The phosphorescence stuck to his legs. He reached the end of the levee.

It petered out into a confused mess of rocks that were tumbled into the river. Beyond it was a bigger chamber alight with phosphorescence; the river fell away into darkness on the right. Mark descended through the rocks and waded; the water was unable to wash off the sticky, glowing stuff.

The cave was perfectly circular. Sometime in the past it had been bored out to meet the river, and he tried not to think about what had done the cutting. The cave was large enough to park a car in. In the mud and other on the floor were bare human footprints that led deeper.

He entered, stooping and getting muddy silvery stuff in his hair. The light was completely wrong; it was colder than a fluorescent bulb, and oddly unhealthy-seeming. It illuminated colors with the wrong shades; red was purple, blue was black, and his flesh had gone translucent. In the light, he could see indigo veins crawling through his forearms. His hair was white.

The thing behind him was closing in and trying to get through the rocks outside the cave; a crack of breaking boulders echoed down the shaft. Mark walked deeper into the shaft, not daring to run in the junk that had been smeared on the muddy floor.

The cave shrank as he got further in, and soon he was on his knees; it was no larger than a drainage tunnel here. He began squirming through the stuff, on his stomach now, and the AK was scraping it from the roof. The shaft began to slope down below him, not tightening or opening up, and he thought, It's like a throat.

The shaft was nearly vertical now. It would have been easier to climb backwards, but there was no room to turn around--and that would have meant facing whatever was behind him.

Either it was too large for the shaft, or it was not trying to reach him. He doubted, as large as it undoubtedly was, that it could not have squirmed into the tunnel to get him.

If the tunnel had been any wider, his body would have slid uncontrollably; as it was, he had to paw his way deeper into the cave, grasping at the slimy, stickily glowing mud. The AK kept hanging up on the roof and he slid it off of his shoulder, looking behind himself as he did. The hunter was still behind him, and in the light from the stuff on the walls it was visible. The thing looked like a sea anemone that someone was forcing into the tube: a mass of dead-white feelers that probed the stale air ahead of itself and sometimes merged with the slime on the walls, tasting. The actual body, if there was such a thing, was invisible under the mass of smooth tentacles that probed blindly about in the stale air.

The shaft was very tight, and he was crawling as quickly as he could, but the shuggoth--if that was what it was--wasn't trying to catch him. Either something else was waiting up ahead.... Or, the shaft would come to a dead end. He hoped greatly that it did not come to a dead end.

It did neither. Suddenly, there was blackness in the tube ahead: the tunnel was filled with water that did not reflect the light. It was like an end to everything and it filled the tube entirely; Mark crawled into it at once. His mouth went completely numb at the taste. The stuff was thick and stagnant, like blood or brine.

He couldn't see and something flickered across his right wrist, then vanished when he tried to grab at it. He forced his way down the tube after it and it came again.

The water was being pushed down the tube now, as the maybe-shuggoth took up space behind him. His lungs felt as though they would burst. The hard painful stone had returned to his chest, as his bruised diaphragm hung on to the air in his lungs. When his hand was touched again, Mark pulled back--and then lunged forward, grasping. He caught a tentacle that was like wet dough; it oozed back out of his hand and he tightened down, twisting at it. He had to catch it in both hands and twist it around his forearm, but then the thing began to drag deeper. It jerked at him spastically as it pulled, trying to get loose perhaps.

Abruptly the sides of the tunnel fell away and he was back in open water; Mark untangled himself and swam upwards, kicking. Something was in the water with him and then he broke the black surface, gasping and trying to move around randomly to avoid the grasper.

The new chamber was large and smelled worse; if his taste buds hadn't been overloaded by the water, he would have been overcome. About twenty feet above the water, phosphorescent shapes wafted about in the stale air. In the silvery light, Mark saw a low island crowned by a stone structure that looked like a temple. The Whately loomed at the doorway. It was no longer human--the body had become taller and thinner, distorted to pass through the water. Gills had opened on the side of the neck, and the eyes protruded unblinkingly.

Mark waded up the beach, unslung the AK and shaking it to get the water out.

The Whately shook its head bobblingly. Through the gills came a sound like laughter and then, "-dowbln herebl? Theybl bl'are dowbln here...." It laughed again.

Mark shot it three times, the AK making a terrible noise in the cavern. The light from the muzzle flash overcame the hollow silvery light cast by the phosphorescence, and something in the water screamed at the light.

The Whately was not shaken. Black fluid bubbled out of the holes in its chest, fizzing and carbonated. It said, "Bl'welcomebl."

Mark said, "Get out of the way."

"Ohbl, youbl don't wa-bl-ant to gobl in therebl-"

Mark put the AK against his shoulder and aimed to fire this time; he placed a shot into the center of the Whately's forehead. Brains splattered against the stones of the temple and the Whately staggered away, perhaps dying.

Mark entered the temple. There was no light here. The place was small, with only one room, and there was a hole in the floor. Mark kicked mud into the hole; outside of the temple, something splashed onto the beach.

The shaft was no larger than a person's head. He leaned over the hole and fired three more times, illuminating the sides of the shaft with fire. From the bottom was a sound of air moving.... It sounded as though the air was rushing out of a leather bag.

It spoke. The words were in English, but they were each spoken as a whole sentence, as if the language had been learned from a book or stolen from a mind during sleep, and they did not come from a human throat: "Hello. Markmason. Welcome."

Mark spat into the shaft.

It croaked, "Do. You. Desire. To. Live. Forever."

Mark said, "Call me by my real name."

The air hissed again. It was as if the thing had been told once that the English word for surprise is this: 'Ahhh.' Then: "What. Is. Your. Realname."

"L'folal'folal-" Mark gagged, trying to finish it. The name was older than the human vocal chords he was using.

"L'folal'folal-gk'gk," it repeated, "Hello."

"What's your name?"

"Legion."

Nearly hysterical, Mark screamed, "Don't you try to put that Satanic shit on my head! I know the difference!"

"Why. Have. You. Come. Here."

"I'm on my way home. Not to Leng: Miskatonic. Do you know how to get there?"

"M'SC'T'N'C. Yes."

"How?"

It made a ratcheting imitation of human laughter. "Nohomego."

"Can you stop me, thing?"

In the same dry croak: "Yes."

The monkey's lips pulled back in the same way that it would have challenged another male, on the savannas of Africa two hundred thousand years before. "Can you? Can you catch me in every way, in every time, before I shed this skin?"

There was no answer.

Mark said, "I'm down here with you. How long have you been here and how long will you be here? That's how long you will have to run to get away from me. I will tear these tunnels apart. If you try to run through space, that's fine too, we'll fight out in the vacuum. Do you want to play with me, boy?"

No answer.

"My people play long games. We don't even mind losing. I swear this to you, though: you are going to have a hell of a time-" The BodyIMark crumpled, dropping the AK. The pulse was gone before it hit the floor of the temple, and its eyes glazed over a few seconds later.

The temple blew apart with white light that killed the shuggoths where they waited and forced the stagnant water back into the tunnels as the MeIMark broke apart the island to get beneath it, still moving in realtime, and then it all went past nouns and became verbs.

The MeITommy expanded at an infinitely increasing rate, passed the dimensional barriers at the edge of the universe, and coalesced into the womb of a woman in Kenya. Other souls followed it--souls that had been in the surviving dolphins--as the black city shook once and then shattered to release heat that boiled the sea down to a desert landscape. The eastern coast of the continent evaporated. A plume of decomposing subatomic particles was thrown into the vacuum, where it cooled and began to settle to the surface as pure radioactivity.

Twenty seconds had passed since the death of the BodyIMark.

On the western side of the continent, the sounds had still not reached the coastline. A lone seabird, hunting over the beaches and estuaries at the mouth of a nameless river, flapped at a sudden eastern breeze. The breeze grew and the bird glanced down to see ripples in the water.

The ripples grew into wavelets and then increased, as the water began to run uphill. On the beach, waves suddenly went out of curl and exploded, washing over the dunes, and the sea flowed towards the place where the city had been, three thousand miles away. The bird fell east too, with a single plaintive cry of madness.

Now forty-three seconds.

The surface of the planet cracked as a black hole was formed. Magma was sucked down and out of the core, and clouds of evaporated rock--once, the basalt city--precipitated and fell. The continent broke into pieces, but it did not have time to blend with the remaining seas before all was sucked away.

Seventy-seven seconds.

The dead star began to shift in her orbit. She was caught in a slow tug-of-war between the black hole and the sun, but the ending would be inevitable; the sun was being pulled too.

Three Earth years:

The last of the material that had been a solar system now whirlpooled around the black hole. The defensive barriers around the solar system still held, but the Way that led to and from human places had now been destroyed. The space within the barriers, less than a half a light-year in diameter, hung stable with the black hole at the center of the sphere. It remained so, like a poisoned citadel, until the end of Time.

15.00000962:

Fifty-nine seconds had elapsed since the BodyIMark had died.

Abruptly, the black hole ceased to implode. It went white as the gap blinked, and the barriers around the solar system went on maximum. The barriers were seven thousand years old, but they had lost none of their stamina. They held--but they kept in, now, instead of out. The fortress became a prison for the attacker that had seized her, seven thousand years before.

The words were in English, though there was no air to transmit the sounds or throat to croak them: The. Portal. Is. (+Now-) Gone.

The MeIMark said, BEFORE EROFEB PORTAL-

-and it is fifty-two seconds after the death and the planet churns as light and matter and energy explode from the white hole-

-and it is twenty-five seconds, now, and the basalt city is a burned-clean place that not all the nuclear weapons on Earth could make-

-and five seconds soil and clay churns below the basalt city-

-and it is minus one-half second; realtime-

"-time squishing me back into a shuggoth or a dolphin or a monkey, or whatever you have to work with on this planet-" Mark halted. The cold vanished from his right side; pins and needles ran through his skin as the nerve cells came back on line.

Outside, the flesh that had held the entity of Tommy Whately now lay dead. The shuggoths were collapsing and dissolving into the water. The chamber was silent; not even water flowed. Only Time flowed, and it did so silently.

The chamber swayed a little and Mark heard a groan as rocks gave way, deep below. He leaned over the shaft and shouted: "What the hell are you doing?"

"Doing. Excavations."

"Why?"

"The. Portal. Is. Buried."

Mark stepped out of the temple and found that the poisonous water was sinking fast. In a few seconds the surface area began to shrink, disclosing a muddy floor covered with bones. The bones were human, and some of the skulls washed into the opening.

The bones glowed horribly in the phosphorescent light. Mark kicked the detritus aside as he walked through the mud, and looked down the new shaft; it was still muddy, but the water had washed away the dirt that had covered ancient stairs. He shouted: "Is there light down there?"

"If. You. Want."

"No, leave the lights out." Mark started down the stairs, moving carefully on the slick basalt. Soon the phosphorescence was lost above him.

He didn't think that the thing would say any more, and it didn't. He had followed the stairs down for no more than a minute when a draft appeared, as violent-smelling air was sucked down in the same direction as he traveled.

He stopped twice to rest before the shaft leveled out. Mark's exhausted legs bowed when he hit the unexpected passageway, and he followed the draft down it on a level plane. Already there was no longer any ceiling above him--the walls had curved in to form a four-dimensioned tube that did not include Time, and then they curved in again and the floor went out from e draft flowed with him; it was clean-smelling now, or at least it only smelled like mud.

All was up.

The portal had waited for seven thousand years, to open for a human.