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UNDER OLD EARTH
by
CORDWAINER SMITH

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WHERE THE CHANGED ONES GO by **ROBERT SILVERBERG**

And concluding

THE AGE OF THE PUSSYFOOT by **FREDERIK POHL**



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UNDER OLD EARTH

by CORDWAINER SMITH

*Down into Old Earth the Lord hastened
—to do one great last deed, and die!*

*I need a temporary dog
For a temporary job
On a temporary place
like Earth!*
—Song from The Merchant of Menace

I

There were the Douglas-Ouyang planets, which circled their sun in a single cluster, riding around and around the same orbit unlike any other planets known. There were the gentlemen-suicides back on Earth, who gambled their lives—even more horribly, gambled sometimes for things worse than their lives—against different kinds of geophysics which real men had never experienced. There were girls who fell in love with such men, however stark and dreadful their personal fates might be. There was the Instrumentality, with its unceasing labor to keep man man. And there were the citizens who walked in the boulevards before the Rediscovery of Man. The citizens were happy. They had to be happy. If they were found sad, they were calmed and drugged and changed until they were happy again.

This story concerns three of them: the gambler who took the name Sun-boy, who dared to go down to the Gebiet, who confronted himself before he died; the girl Santuna, who was fulfilled in a thousand ways before she died; and the Lord Sto Odin, a most ancient of days, who knew it all and never dreamed of preventing any of it.

Music runs through this story. The soft sweet music of the Earth Government and the Instrumentality, bland as honey and sickening in the end. The wild illegal pulsations of the Gebiet, where most men were forbidden to enter. Worst of all, the crazy fugues and improper melodies of the Bezirk, closed to men for fifty-seven centuries—opened by accident, found, trespassed in! And with it our story begins.

II

The Lady Ru had said, a few centuries before: "Scraps of knowledge have been found. In the ultimate beginning of man, even before there were aircraft, the wise man Laodz declared, 'Water does nothing but it

penetrates everything. Inaction finds the road.' Later an ancient lord said this: 'There is a music which underlies all things. We dance to the tunes all our lives, though our living ears never hear the music which guides us and moves us. Happiness can kill people as softly as shadows seen in dreams.' We must be people first and happy later, lest we live and die in vain."

The Lord Sto Odin was more direct. He declared the truth to a few private friends: "Our population is dropping on most worlds, including the earth. People have children, but they don't want them very much. I myself have been a three-father to twelve children, a two-father to four, and a one-father, I suppose, to many others. I have had zeal for work and I have mistaken it for zeal in living. They are not the same.

"Most people want happiness. Good: we have given them happiness.

"Dreary useless centuries of happiness, in which all the unhappy were corrected or adjusted or killed. Unbearable desolate happiness without the sting of grief, the wine of rage, the hot fumes of fear. How many of us have ever tasted the acid, icy taste of old resentment? That's what people really lived for in the Ancient Days, when they pretended to be happy and were actually alive with grief, rage, fury, hate, malice and hope! Those people bred like mad. They populated the stars while they dreamed of killing each other, secretly or openly. Their plays concerned murder or betrayal or illegal love. Now we have no murder. We cannot imagine any kind of love which is illegal. Can you imagine the Murkins with their highway net? Who can fly anywhere today without seeing that net of enormous highways? Those roads are ruined, but they're still here. You can see the abominable things quite clearly from the moon. Don't think about the roads. Think of the millions of vehicles that ran on those roads, the people filled with greed and rage and hate, rushing past each other with their engines on fire. They say that fifty thousand a year were killed on the roads alone. We would call that a war. What people they must have been, to rush day and night and to build things which would help other people to rush even more! They were different from us. They must have been wild, dirty, free. Lusting for life, perhaps, in a way that we do not. We can easily go a thousand times faster than they ever went, but who, nowadays, bothers to go? Why go? It's the same there as here, except for a few fighters or technicians." He smiled at his friends and added, "... and Lords of the Instrumentality, like ourselves. We go for the reasons of the Instrumentality. Not ordinary people reasons. Ordinary people don't have much reason to do anything. They work at the jobs which we think up for them, to keep them happy while the robots and the underpeople do the real work. They walk. They make love. But they are never unhappy.

"*They can't be!*"

The Lady Mmona disagreed, "Life can't be as bad as you say. We don't just think they are happy. We know they are happy. We look right into their brains with telepathy. We monitor their emotional patterns with robots and scanners. It's not as though we didn't have samples. People are always turning unhappy. We're correcting them all the time. And now and then there are bad accidents, which even we cannot correct. When people are very unhappy, they scream and weep. Sometimes they even stop talking and just die, despite everything we can do for them. You can't say that isn't real!"

"But I do," said the Lord Sto Odin.

"You do what?" cried Mmona.

"I do say this happiness is not real," he insisted.

"How can you," she shouted at him, "in the face of the evidence? *Our* evidence, which we of the Instrumentality decided on a long time ago. We collect it ourselves. Can we, the Instrumentality, be wrong?"

"Yes," said the Lord Sto Odin.

This time it was the entire circle who went silent.

Sto Odin pleaded with them. "Look at my evidence. People don't care whether they are one-fathers or one-mothers or not. They don't know which children are theirs, anyhow. Nobody dares to commit suicide. We keep them

too happy. But do we spend any time keeping the talking animals, the underpeople, as happy as men? And do underpeople commit suicide?"

"Certainly," said Mmona. "They are preconditioned to commit suicide if they are hurt too badly for easy repair or if they fail in their appointed work."

"I don't mean that. Do they ever commit suicide for *their* reasons, not ours?"

"No," said the Lord Nuru-or, a wise young Lord of the Instrumentality. "They are too desperately busy doing their jobs and staying alive."

"How long does an underperson live?" said Sto Odin, with deceptive mildness.

"Who knows?" said Nuru-or. "Half a year, a hundred years, maybe several hundred years."

"What happens if he does not work?" said the Lord Sto Odin, with a friendly-crafty smile.

"We kill him," said Mmona. "or our robot-police do."

"And does the animal know it?"

"Know he will be killed if he does not work?" said Mmona. "Of course. We tell all of them the same thing. Work or die. What's that got to do with people?"

The Lord Nuru-or had fallen silent and a wise, sad smile had begun to show on his face. He had begun to suspect the shrewd, dreadful conclusion toward which the Lord Sto Odin was driving.

But Mmona did not see it and she pressed the point. "My lord," said she, "you are insisting that people are happy. You admit they do not like to be unhappy. You seem to want to bring up a problem which has no solution. Why complain of happiness? Isn't it the best which the Instrumentality can do for mankind? That's our mission. Are you saying that we are failing in it?"

"Yes. We are failing." The Lord Sto Odin looked blindly at the room as though alone.

He was the oldest and wisest, so they waited for him to talk.

He breathed lightly and smiled at them again. "You know when I am going to die?"

"Of course," said Mmona, thinking for half a second. "Seventy-seven days from now. But you posted the time yourself. And it is not our custom, my Lord, as you well know, to bring intimate things into meetings of the Instrumentality."

"Sorry," said Sto Odin, "but I'm not violating a law. I'm making a point. We are sworn to uphold the dignity of man. Yet we are killing mankind with a bland hopeless happiness which has prohibited news, which has suppressed religion, which has made all history an official secret. I say that the evidence is that we are failing and that mankind, whom we've sworn to cherish, is failing too. Failing in vitality, strength, numbers, energy. I have a little while to live. I am going to try to find out."

The Lord Nuru-or asked with sorrowful wisdom, as though he guessed the answer: "And where will you go to find out?"

"I shall go," said the Lord Sto Odin, "down into the Gebiet."

"The Gebiet—oh, no!" cried several. And one voice added, "You're immune."

"I shall waive immunity and I shall go," said the Lord Sto Odin. "Who can do anything to a man who is already

almost a thousand years old and who has chosen only seventy-seven more days to live?"

"But you can't!" said Mmona. "Some criminal might capture you and duplicate you, and then we would all of us be in peril."

"When did you last hear of a criminal among mankind?" said Sto Odin.

"There are plenty of them, here and there in the offworlds."

"But on Old Earth itself?" asked Sto Odin.

She stammered. "I don't know. There must have been a criminal once." She looked around the room. "Don't any of the rest of you know?"

There was silence.

The Lord Sto Odin stared at them all. In his eyes was the brightness and fierceness which had made whole generations of Lords plead with him to live just a few more years, so that he could help them with their work. He had agreed, but within the last quarter-year he had overridden them all and had picked his day of death. He had lost none of his powers in doing this. They shrank from his stare while they waited with respect for his decision.

The Lord Sto Odin looked at the Lord Nuru-or and said, "I think you have guessed what I am going to do in the Gebiet and why I have to go there."

"The Gebiet is a preserve where no rules apply and no punishments are inflicted. Ordinary people can do what *they* want down there, not what we think they should want. From all I hear, it is pretty nasty and pointless, the things that they find out. But you, perhaps, may sense the inwardness of these things. You may find a cure for the weary happiness of mankind."

"That is right," said Sto Odin. "And that is why I am going, after I make the appropriate official preparations."

III

Go he did. He used one of the most peculiar conveyances ever seen on Earth, since his own legs were too weak to carry him far. With only two-ninths of a year to live, he did not want to waste time getting his legs re-grafted.

He rode in an open sedan-chair carried by two Roman legionaries.

The legionaries were actually robots, without a trace of blood or living tissue in them. They were the most compact and difficult kind to create, since their brains had to be located in their chests—several million sheets of incredibly fine laminations, imprinted with the whole life experience of an important, useful and long-dead person. They were clothed as legionaries, down to cuirasses, swords, kilts, greaves, sandals and shields, merely because it was the whim of the Lord Sto Odin to go behind the rim of history for his companions. Their bodies, all-metal, were very strong. They could batter walls, jump chasms, crush any man or underperson with their mere fingers, or throw their swords with the accuracy of guided projectiles.

The forward legionary, Flavius, had been Head of Fourteen-B in the Instrumentality—an espionage division so secret that even among Lords, few knew exactly of its location or its function. He was (or had been, till he was imprinted on a robot-mind as he lay dying) the director of historical research for the whole human race. Now he was a dull, pleasant machine carrying two poles until his master chose to bring his powerful mind into bright, furious alert by speaking the simple Latin phrase, understood by no other person living, *Summa nulla est*.

The rear legionary, Livius, had been a psychiatrist who turned into a general. He had won many battles until he chose to die, somewhat before his time, because he perceived that battle itself was a struggle for the defeat of

himself.

Together, and added to the immense brainpower of the Lord Sto Odin himself, they represented an unsurpassable team.

"The Gebiet," commanded the Lord Sto Odin.

"The Gebiet," said both of them heavily, picking up the chair with its supporting poles.

"And then the Bezirk," he added.

"The Bezirk," they chimed in toneless voices.

Sto Odin felt his chair tilt back as Livius put his two ends of the poles carefully on the ground, came up beside Sto Odin and saluted with open palm.

"May I awaken?" said Livius in an even, mechanical voice.

"Summa nulla est," said the Lord Sto Odin.

Livius' face sprang into full animation. "You must not go there, my Lord! You would have to waive immunity and meet all dangers. There is nothing there yet. Not yet. Some day they will come pouring out of that underground Hades and give you men a real fight. Now, no. They are just miserable beings, cooking away in their weird unhappiness, making love in manners which you never thought of—"

"Never mind what you think I've thought. What's your objection in real terms?"

"It's pointless, my lord! You have only bits of a year to live. Do something noble and great for man before you die. They may turn us off. We would like to share your work before you go away."

"Is that all?" said Sto Odin.

"My Lord," said Flavius, "you have awakened me too. I say, go forward. History is being respun down there. Things are loose which you great ones of the Instrumentality have never even suspected. Go now and look, before you die. You may do nothing, but I disagree with my companion. It is as dangerous as space-three might be, if we ever were to find it, but it is *interesting*. And in this world, where all things have been done, where all thoughts have been thought, it is hard to find things which still prompt the human mind with raw curiosity. I'm dead, as you perfectly well know, but even I, inside this machine brain, feel the tug of adventure, the pull of danger, the magnetism of the unknown. For one thing, they are committing crimes down there. And you Lords are over-looking them."

"We chose to overlook them. We are not stupid. We wanted to see what might happen," said the Lord Sto Odin, "and we have to give those people time before we find out just how far they might go if they are cut off from controls."

"They are having babies!" said Flavius excitedly.

"I know that."

"They have hooked in two illegal instant-message machines," shouted Flavius.

Sto Odin was calm. "So that's why the Earth's credit structure has appeared to be leaking in its balance of trade."

"They have a piece of the congohelium!" shouted Flavius.

"The congohelium!" shouted the Lord Sto Odin. "Impossible! It's unstable. They could kill themselves. They

could hurt Earth! What are they doing with it?"

"Making music," said Flavius, more quietly.

"Making *what*?"

"Music. Songs. Nice noise to dance to."

The Lord Sto Odin sputtered, "Take me there right now. This is ridiculous. Having a piece of the congohelium down there is as bad as wiping out inhabited planets to play checkers."

"My Lord," said Livius.

"Yes," said Sto Odin.

"I withdraw my objections," said Livius.

Sto Odin said, very drily, "Thank you."

"They have something else down there. When I did not want you to go, I did not mention it. It might have aroused your curiosity. They have a god."

The Lord Sto Odin said, "If this is going to be a historical lecture, save it for another time. Go back to sleep and carry me down."

Livius did not move. "I mean what I said."

"A god? What do you call a god?"

"A person or an idea capable of starting wholly new cultural patterns in motion."

The Lord Sto Odin leaned forward. "You *know* this?"

"We both do," said Flavius and Livius.

"We saw him," said Livius. "You told us, a tenth-year ago, to walk around freely for thirty hours, so we put on ordinary robot bodies and happened to get into the Gebiet. When we sensed the congohelium operating, we had to go on down to find out what it was doing. Usually, it is employed to keep the stars in their place—"

"Don't tell me that. I know it. Was it a man?"

"A man," said Flavius, "who is re-living the life of Akhnaton."

"Who's that?" said the Lord Sto Odin, who knew history, but wanted to see how much his robots knew.

"A king, tall, long-faced, thick lipped, who ruled the human world of Egypt long-long before atomic power. Akhnaton invented the best of the early gods. This man is reenacting Akhnaton's life step by step. He has already made a religion out of the sun. He mocks at happiness. People listen to him. They joke about the Instrumentality."

Livius added, "We saw the girl who loves him. She herself was young, but beautiful. And I think she has powers which will make the Instrumentality promote her or destroy her some day in the future."

"They both made music," said Flavius, "with that piece of the congohelium. And this man or god—this new kind of Akhnaton, whatever you may want to call him, my Lord—he was dancing a strange kind of dance. It was like a corpse being tied with rope and dancing like a marionette. The effect on the people around him was as good as the best hypnotism you ever saw. I'm a robot now, but it bothered even me."

"Did the dance have a name?" said Sto Odin.

"I don't know the name," said Flavius, "but I memorized the song, since I have total recall. Do you wish to hear it?"

"Certainly," said the Lord Sto Odin.

Flavius stood on one leg, improbable angles and began to sing in a high, insulting tenor voice which was both fascinating and repugnant:

Jump, dear people, and I'll howl for you.
Jump and howl and I'll weep for you.
I weep because I'm a weeping man.
I'm a weeping man because I weep.
I weep because the day is done,
Sun is gone,
Home is lost.
Time killed dad.
I killed time.
World is round.
Day is run,
Clouds are shot.
Stars are out.
Mountain's fire.
Rain is hot.
Hot is blue.
I am done.
So are you.
Jump, dear people, for the howling man.
Leap, dear people, for the weeping man.
I'm a weeping man because I weep for you!

"Enough," said the Lord Sto Odin.

Flavius saluted. His face went back to amiable stolidity. Just before he took the front ends of the shaft he glanced back and brought forth one last comment:

"The verse is skeltonic."

"Tell me nothing more of your history. Take me there."

The robots obeyed. Soon the chair was jogging comfortably down the ramps of the ancient left-over city which sprawled beneath Earthport, that miraculous tower which seemed to touch the stratocumulus clouds in the blue clear nothingness above mankind. Sto Odin went to sleep in his strange vehicle and did not notice that the human passers-by often stared at him.

The Lord Sto Odin woke fitfully in strange places as the legionaries carried him further and further into the depths below the city, where sweet pressures and warm, sick smells made the air itself feel dirty to his nose.

"Stop!" whispered the Lord Sto Odin, and the robots stopped.

"Who am I?" he said to them.

"You have announced your will to die, my Lord," said Flavius, "seventy-seven days from now, but so far your name is still the Lord Sto Odin."

"I am alive?" the Lord asked.

"Yes," said both the robots.

"You are dead?"

"We are not dead. We are machines, printed with the minds of men who once lived. Do you wish to turn back, my lord?"

"No. No. Now I remember. You are the robots. Livius, the psychiatrist and general. Flavius, the secret historian. You have the minds of men, and are not men?"

"That is right, my Lord," said Flavius.

"Then how can *I* be alive—I, Sto Odin?"

"You should feel it yourself, sir," said Livius, "though the mind of the old is sometimes very strange."

"How can I be alive?" asked Sto Odin, staring around the city. "How can I be alive when the people who knew me are dead? They have whipped through the corridors like wraiths of smoke, like traces of cloud; they were here, and they loved me, and they knew me, and now they are dead. Take my wife, Eileen. She was a pretty thing, a brown-eyed child who came out of her learning chamber all perfect and all young. Time touched her and she danced to the cadence of time. Her body grew full, grew old. We repaired it. But at last she cramped in death and she went to that place to which I am going. If you are dead, you ought to be able to tell me what death is like, where the bodies and minds and voices and music of men and women whip past these enormous corridors, these hardy pavements, and are then gone. How can passing ghosts like me and my kind, each with just a few dozen or a few hundred years to go before the great blind winds of time whip us away—how can phantoms like me have built this solid city, these wonderful engines, these brilliant lights which never go dim? How did we do it, when we pass so swiftly, each of us, all of us? Do you know?"

The robots did not answer. Pity had not been programmed into their systems. The Lord Sto Odin harangued them, none the less:

"You are taking me to a wild place, a free place, an evil place, perhaps. They are dying there too, as all men die, as I shall die, so soon, so brightly and simply. I should have died a long time ago. I was the people who knew me, I was the brothers and comrades who trusted me, I was the women who comforted me, I was the children whom I loved so bitterly and so sweetly many ages ago. Now they are gone. Time touched them, and they were not. I can see everyone that I ever knew racing through these corridors, see them young as toddlers, see them proud and wise and full with business and maturity, see them old and contorted as time reached out for them and they passed hastily away. Why did they do it? How can I live on? When I am dead, will I know that I once lived? I know that some of my friends have cheated and lie in the icy sleep, hoping for something which they do not know. I've had life, and I know it. What is life? A bit of play, a bit of learning, some words well-chosen, some love, a trace of pain, more work, memories, and then dirt rushing up to meet sunlight. That's all we've made of it—we, who have conquered the stars! Where are my friends? Where is my me that I once was so sure of, when the people who knew *me* were time-swept like storm-driven rags toward darkness and oblivion? You tell me. You ought to know! You are machines and you were given the minds of men. You ought to know what we amount to, from the outside in."

"We were built," said Livius, "by men and we have whatever men put into us, nothing more. How can we answer talk like yours? It is rejected by our minds, good though our minds may be. We have no grief, no fear, no fury. We know the names of these feelings but not the feelings themselves. We hear your words but we do not know what you are talking about. Are you trying to tell us what life feels like? If so, we already know. Not much. Nothing special. Birds have life too, and so do fishes. It is you people who can talk and who can knot life into spasms and

puzzles. You muss things up. Screaming never made the truth truthful, at least, not to us."

"Take me down," said Sto Odin. "Take me down to the Gebiet, where no well-mannered man has gone in many years. I am going to judge that place before I die."

They lifted the sedan-chair and resumed their gentle dogtrot down the immense ramps down toward the warm steaming secrets of the Earth itself. The human pedestrians became more scarce, but undermen—most often of gorilla or ape origin—passed them, toiling their way upward while dragging shrouded treasures which they had filched the uncatalogued storehouses of Man's most ancient past. At other times there was a wild whirr of metal wheels on stone roadway; the undermen, having offloaded their treasures at some intermediate point high above, sat on their wagons and rolled back downhill, like grotesque enlargements of the ancient human children who were once reported to have played with wagons in this way.

A command, scarcely a whisper, stopped the two legionaries again. Flavius turned. Sto Odin was indeed calling both of them. They stepped out of the shafts and came around to him, one on each side.

"I may be dying right now," he whispered, "and that would be most inconvenient at this time. Get out my manikin mee!"

"My Lord," said Flavius, "it is strictly forbidden for us robots to touch any human manikin, and if we do touch one, we are commanded to destroy ourselves immediately thereafter? Do you wish us to try, nevertheless? If so, which one of us? You have the command, my Lord."

IV

He waited so long that even the robots began to wonder if he died amid the thick wet air and the nearby stench of steam and oil.

The Lord Sto Odin finally roused himself and said:

"I need no help. Just put the bag with my manikin mee on my lap."

"This one?" asked Flavius, lifting a small brown suitcase and handling it with a very gingerly touch indeed.

The Lord Sto Odin gave a barely perceptible nod and whispered, "Open it carefully for me. But do not touch the manikin, if those are your orders."

Flavius twisted at the catch of the bag. It was hard to manage. Robots did not feel fear, but they were intellectually attuned to the avoidance of danger; Flavius found his mind racing with wild choices as he tried to get the bag open. Sto Odin tried to help him, but the ancient hand, palsied and weak, could not even reach the top of the case. Flavius labored on, thinking that the Gebiet and Bezirk had their dangers, but that this meddling with manikins was the riskiest thing which he had ever encountered while in robot form, though in his human life he had handled many of them, including his own. They were "Manikin, Electro-encephalographic and endocrine" in model form, and they showed in miniaturized replica the entire diagnostic position of the patient for whom they were fashioned.

Sto Odin whispered to them. "There's no helping it. Turn me up. If I die, take my body back and tell the people that I misjudged my time."

Just as he spoke, the case sprang open. Inside it there lay a little naked human man, a direct copy of Sto Odin himself.

"We have it, my Lord," cried Livius, from the other side. "Let me guide your hand to it, so that you can see what to do."

Though it was forbidden for robots to touch manikins mee, it was legal for them to touch a human person with the person's consent. Livius's strong cupro-plastic fingers, with a reserve of many tons of gripping power in their human-like design, pulled the hands of the Lord Sto Odin forward until they rested on the manikin mee. Flavius, quick, smooth, agile, held the Lord's head upright on his weary old neck, so that the ancient Lord could see what the hands were doing.

"Is any part dead?" said the old Lord to the manikin, his voice clearer for the moment.

The manikin shimmered and two spots of solid black showed along the outside upper right thigh and the right buttock.

"Organic reserve?" said the Lord to his own manikin mee, and again the machine responded to his command. The whole miniature body shimmered to a violent purple and then subsided to an even pink.

"I still have some all-around strength left in this body, prosthetips and all," said Sto Odin to the two robots. "Set me up, I tell you! Set me up."

"Are you sure, my Lord," said Livius, "that we should do a thing like that here where the three of us are alone in a deep tunnel? In less than half an hour we could take you to a real hospital, where actual doctors could examine you."

"I said," repeated the Lord Sto Odin, "set me up. I'll watch the manikin while you do it."

"Your control is in the usual place, my Lord?" asked Livius.

"How much of a turn?" asked Flavius.

"Nape of my neck, of course. The skin over it is artificial and self-sealing. One twelfth of a turn will be enough. Do you have a knife with you?"

Flavius nodded. He took a small sharp knife from his belt, probed gently around the old Lord's neck and then brought the knife down with a quick, sure turn.

"That did it!" said Sto Odin, in a voice so hearty that both of them stepped back a little. Flavius put the knife back in his belt. Sto Odin, who had almost been comatose a moment before, now held the manikin mee in his unaided hands. "See, gentlemen!" he cried. "You may be robots, but you can still see the truth and report it."

They both looked at the manikin mee, which Sto Odin now held in front of himself, his thumb and fingertip in the armpits of the medical doll.

"Watch what it reads," he said to them with a clear, ringing voice.

"Prosthetics!" he shouted at the manikin.

The tiny body changed from its pink color to a mixture. Both legs turned the color of a deep bruised blue. The legs, the left arm, one eye, one ear and the skull-cap stayed blue, showing the prostheses in place.

"Felt pain!" shouted Sto Odin at the manikin. The little doll returned to its light pink color. All the details were there, even to genitals, toenails and eyelashes. There was no trace of the black color of pain in any part of the little body.

"Potential pain!" shouted Sto Odin. The doll shimmered. Most of it settled to the color of dark walnut wood, with some areas of intense brown showing more clearly than the rest.

"Potential breakdown—one day!" shouted Sto Odin. The little body went back to its normal color of pink.

Small lightnings showed at the base of the brain, but nowhere else.

"I'm all right," said Sto Odin. "I can continue as I have done for the last several hundred years. Leave me set up on this high life-output. I can stand it for a few hours, and if I cannot, there's little lost." He put the manikin back in its bag, hung the bag on the door-handle of the sedan-chair and commanded the legionaries, "Proceed!"

The legionaries stared at him as if they could not see him.

He followed the lines of glance and saw that they were gazing rigidly at his manikin mee. It had turned black.

"Are you dead?" asked Livius, speaking as hoarsely as a robot could.

"Not dead at all!" cried Sto Odin. "I have been death in fractions of a moment, but for the time I am still life. That was just the pain-sum of my living body which showed on the manikin mee. The fire of life still burns within me. Watch as I put the manikin away..." The doll flared into a swirl of pastel orange as the Lord Sto Odin pulled the cover down.

They looked away as though they had seen an evil or an explosion.

"Down, men, down," he cried, calling them wrong names as they stepped back between their carrying shafts to take him deeper under the vitals of the earth.

V

He dreamed brown dreams while they trotted down endless ramps. He woke a little to see the yellow walls passing. He looked at his dry old hand and it seemed to him that in this atmosphere, he had himself become more reptilian than human.

"I am caught by the dry, drab enturtlement of old, old age," he murmured, but the voice was weak and the robots did not hear him. They were running downward on a long meaningless concrete ramp which had become filmed by a leak of ancient oil, and they were taking care that they did not stumble and drop their precious master.

At a deep, hidden point the downward ramp divided, the left into a broad arena of steps which could have seated thousands of spectators for some never-to-occur event, and right into a narrow ramp which bore upward and then curved, yellow lights and all.

"Stop!" called Sto Odin. "Do you see her? Do you hear it?"

"Hear what?" said Flavius.

"The beat and the cadence of the congohelium, rising out of the Gebiet. The whirl and the skirl of impossible music coming at us through miles of solid rock? That girl whom I can already see, waiting at a door which should never have been opened? The sound of the star-borne music, not designed for the proper human ear?" He shouted, "Can't you hear it? That cadence. The unlawful metal of congohelium so terribly far underground? Dah, dah. Dah, dah. Dah. Music which nobody has ever understood before?"

Said Flavius, "I hear nothing, saving the pulse of air in this corridor, and your own heartbeat, my Lord. And something else, a little like machinery, very far away."

"There, that!" cried Sto Odin, "which you call 'a little like machinery,' does it come in a beat of five separate sounds, each one distinct?"

"No. No, sir. Not five."

"And you, Livius, when you were a man, you were very telepathic? Is there any of that left in the robot which is you?"

"No, my Lord, nothing. I have good senses, and I am also cut into the subsurface radio of the Instrumentality. Nothing unusual."

"No five beat? Each note separate, short of prolonged, given meaning and shape by the terrible music of the congohelium, imprisoned with us inside this much-too-solid rock? You hear nothing?"

The two robots, shaped like Roman legionaries shook their heads.

"But I can see her, through this stone. She has breasts like ripe pears and dark brown eyes that are like the stones of fresh-cut peaches. And I can hear what they are singing, their weird silly words of a pentapaul, made into something majestic by the awful music of the congohelium. Listen to the words. When I repeat them, they sound just silly, because the dread-inspiring music does not come with them. Her name is Santuna and she stares at him. No wonder she stares. He is much more tall than most men, yet he makes this foolish song into something frightening and strange.

Slim Jim.
Dim him.
Grim.

And his name is Yebayee, but now he is Sun-boy. He has the long face and the thick lips of the first man to talk about one god and one only. Akhnaton."

"Akhnaton the pharaoh," said Flavius. "That name was known in my office when I was a man. It was a secret. One of the first and greatest of the more-than-ancient kings. You see him, my Lord?"

"Through this rock I see him. Through this rock I hear the delirium engendered by the congohelium. I go to him." The Lord Sto Odin stepped out of the sedan chair and beat softly and weakly against the solid stone wall of the corridor. The yellow lamps gleamed. The legionaries were helpless. Here was something which their sharp swords could not pierce. Their once-human personalities, engraved on their micro-miniaturized brains, could not make sense out of the all-too-human situation of an old, old man dreaming wild dreams in a remote tunnel.

Sto Odin leaned against the wall, breathing heavily, and said to them with a sibilant rasp:

"These are no whispers which can be missed. Can't you hear the five-beat of the congohelium, making its crazy music again? Listen to the words of this one. It's another pentapaul. Silly bony words given flesh and blood and entrails by the music which carries them. Here, listen.

Try. Vie.
Cry. Die.
Bye.

This one you did not hear either?"

"May I use my radio to ask the surface of Earth for advice?" said one of the robots.

"Advice! Advice! What advice do we need? This is the Gebiet and one more hour of running and you will be in the heart of the Bezirk."

He climbed back into the sedan chair and commanded, "Run, men, run! It can't be more than three or four kilometers somewhere in this warren of stone. I will guide you. If I stop guiding you, you may take my body back to the surface, so that I can be given a wonderful funeral and be shot with a rocket-coffin into space with an orbit of no return. You have nothing to worry about. You are machines, nothing more, are you not? Are you not?" His voice

shrilled at the end.

Said Flavius, "Nothing more."

Said Livius, "Nothing more. And yet—"

"And yet what?" demanded the Lord Sto Odin.

"And yet," said Livius, "I know I am a machine, and I know that I have known feelings only when I was once a living man. I sometimes wonder if you people might go too far. Too far, with us robots. Too far, perhaps, with the underpeople too. Things were once simple, when everything that talked was a human being and everything which did not talk was not. You may be coming to an ending of the ways."

"If you had said that on the surface," said the Lord Sto Odin grimly, "your head might have been burned off by its automatic magnesium flare. You know that there you are monitored against having illegal thoughts."

"Too well do I know it," said Livius, "and I know that I must have died once as a man, if I exist here in robot form. Dying didn't seem to hurt me then and it probably won't hurt next time. But nothing really matters much when we get down this far into the earth. When we get this far down, everything changes. I never really understood that the inside of the world was this big and this sick."

"It's not how far down we are," said the Lord crossly, "it's where we are. This is the Gebiet, where all laws have been lifted, and down below and over yonder is the Bezirk, where laws have never been. Carry me rapidly now. I want to look on this strange musician with the face of Akhnaton and I want to talk to the girl who worships him, Santuna. Run carefully now. Up a little, to the left a little. If I sleep, do not worry. Keep going. I will waken myself when we come anywhere near that music of the congohelium. If I can hear it now, so far away, think of what it will be like when you yourselves approach it!"

He leaned back in his seat. They picked up the shafts of the sedan-chair and ran in the direction which they had been told.

VI

They had run for more than an hour, with occasional delays when they had tricky footwork over leaking pipes or damaged walkways, when the light became so bright that they had to reach in their pouches and put on sunglasses, which looked very odd indeed underneath the Roman helmets of two fully-armed legionaries. (It was even more odd, of course, that the eyes were not eyes at all; robot eyes were like white marbles swimming in little bowls of glittering ink, producing a grimly milky stare.) They looked at their master and he had not yet stirred, so they took a corner of his robe and twisted it firmly into a bandage to protect his eyes against the bright light.

The new light made the yellow bulbs of the corridor fade out of notice. The light was like a whole aurora borealis compressed and projected through the basement corridor of a hotel left over from long ago. Neither of the robots knew the nature of the light, but it pulsed in beats of five.

The music and the lights became obtrusive even to the two robots as they walked or trotted downward toward the center of the world. The air-forcing system must have been very strong, because the inner heat of the earth had not reached them, even at this great depth. Flavius had no idea of how many kilometers below the surface they had come. He knew that it was not much in planetary distance, but it was very far indeed for an ordinary walk.

The Lord Sto Odin sat up in the litter quite suddenly. When the two robots slowed, he said crossly at them:

"Keep going. Keep going. I am going to set myself up. I'm strong enough to do it."

He took out his manikin mee and studied it in the light of the minor aurora borealis which repeated itself in the

corridor. The manikin ran through its changes of diagnoses and colors. The Lord was satisfied. With firm old fingers he put the knifetip to the back of his neck and set his output of vital energies at an even higher level.

The robots did what they had been told.

The lights had been bewildering. Sometimes they made walking itself difficult. It was hard to believe that dozens or hundreds, perhaps thousands, of human beings had found their way through these uncharted corridors in order to discover the inmost precincts of Bezirk, where all things were allowed. Yet the robots had to believe it. They themselves had been here before and they scarcely remembered how they had found their way the other time.

And the music! It beat at them harder than ever before. It came in beats of five, ringing out the tones of the pentapaul, the five-word verse which the mad cat-minstrel C'paul had developed while playing his c'lute some centuries before. The form itself confirmed and reinforced the poignancy of cats combined with the heartbreaking intelligence of the human being. No wonder people had found their way down here.

In all the history of man, there was no act which could not be produced by any one of the three bitterest forces in the human spirit—religious faith, vengeful vainglory or sheer vice. Here, for the sake of vice, men had found the undiscoverable deep and had put it to wild, filthy uses. The music called them on.

This was very special music. It came at Sto Odin and his legionaries in two utterly different ways by now, reverberating at them through solid rock and echoing, re-echoing through the maze of corridors, carried by the dark heavy air. The corridor lights were still yellow, but the electromagnetic illuminations, which kept time to the music, made the ordinary lighting seem wan. The music controlled all things, paced all time, called all life to itself. It was song of a kind which the two robots had not noticed with such intensity on their previous visit.

Even the Lord Sto Odin, for all his travels and experiences, had never heard it before.

It was all of this:

The beat and the heat and the neat repeat of the notes which poured from the congohelium—metal never made for music, matter and anti-matter locked in a fine magnetic grid to ward off the outermost perils of space. Now a piece of it was deep in the body of old Earth, counting out strange cadences. The churn and the burn and the hot return of music riding the living rock, accompanying itself in an air-carried echo. The surge and the urge of an erotic dirge which moaned, groaned through the heavy stone.

Sto Odin woke and stared sharply forward, seeing nothing but experiencing everything.

"Soon we shall see the gate and the girl," said he.

"You know this, man? You who have never been here before?" Livius had spoken.

"I know it," said the Lord Sto Odin, "because I know it."

"You wear the feathers of immunity."

"I wear the feathers of immunity."

"Does that mean that we, your robots, are free too, down in this Bezirk?"

"Free as you like," said the Lord Sto Odin, "provided that you do my wishes. Otherwise I shall kill you."

"If we keep going," said Flavius, "may we sing the underpeople song? It might keep some of that terrible music out of our brains. The music has all feelings and we have none. Nevertheless, it disturbs us. I do not know why."

"My radio contact with the surface has lapsed," said Livius irrelevantly. "I need to sing too."

"Go ahead, both of you," said the Lord Sto Odin. "But keep on going, or you die."

The robots lifted their voice in song:

I eat my rage.
I swallow my grief.
There's no relief
From pain or age.
Our time comes.

I work my life.
I breathe my breath.
I face my death
Without a wife.
Our time comes.

We undermen
Shove, crush and crash.
There'll be a clash
And thunder when
Our time comes.

Though the song had the barbarous ancient thrill of bagpipes in it, the melody could not counter or cancel the sane wild rhythm of the congohelium beating at them, now, from all directions at once.

"Nice piece of sedition, that," said the Lord Sto Odin drily, "but I like it better as music than I do this noise which is tearing its way through the depths of the world. Keep going. Keep going. I must meet this mystery before I die."

"We find it hard to endure that music coming at us through the rock," said Livius.

"It seems to us that it is much stronger than it was when we came here some months ago. Could it have changed?" asked Flavius.

"That is the mystery. We let them have the Gebiet, beyond our own jurisdiction. We gave them the Bezirk, to do with as they please. But these ordinary people have created or encountered some extraordinary power. They have brought new things into the Earth. It may be necessary for all three of us to die before we settle the matter."

"We can't die the way you do," said Livius. "We're already robots, and the people from whom we were imprinted have been dead a long time. Do you mean you would turn us off?"

"I would, perhaps, or else some other force. Would you mind?"

"Mind? You mean, have emotions about it? I don't know," said Flavius. "I used to think that I had real, full experience when you used the phrase *summa nulla est* and brought us up to full capacity, but that music which we have been hearing has the effect of a thousand passwords all said at once. I am beginning to care about my life and I think that I am becoming what your reference explained by the word 'afraid'."

"I too feel it," said Livius. "This is not a power which we knew to exist on Earth before. When I was a strategist someone told me about the really indescribable dangers connected with the Douglas-Ouyang planets, and it seems to me now that a danger of that kind is already with us, here inside the tunnel. Something which Earth never made. Something which man never developed. Something which no robot could out-compute. Something wild and very strong brought into being by the use of the congohelium. Look around us."

He did not need to say that. The corridor itself had become a living, pulsing rainbow.

They turned one last loop in the corridor and they were there—

The very last limit of the realm of distress.

The source of evil music.

The end of the Bezirk.

They knew it because the music blinded them, the lights deafened them, their senses ran into one another and became confused. This was the immediate presence of the congohelium.

There was a door, immensely large, carved with elaborate Gothic ornament. It was much too big for any human man to have had need of it. In the door a single figure stood, her breasts accented into vivid brights and darks by the brilliant light which poured from one side of the door only, the right.

They could see through the door, into an immense hall wherein the floor was covered by hundreds of limp bundles of ragged clothing. These were the people, unconscious. Above them and between them there danced the high figure of a male, holding a glittering something in his hands. He prowled and leaped and twisted and turned to the pulsation of the music which he himself produced.

"Summa nulla est," said the Lord Sto Odin. "I want you two robots to be keyed to maximum. Are you now to top alert?"

"We are, sir," chorused Livius and Flavius.

"You have your weapons?"

"We cannot use them," said Livius, "since it is contrary to our programming, but you can use them, sir."

"I'm not sure," said Flavius. "I'm not at all sure. We are equipped with surface weapons. This music, these hypnotics, these lights—who knows what they may have done to us and to our weapons, which were never designed to operate this far underground?"

"No fear," said Sto Odin, "I'll take care of all of it."

He took out a small knife.

When the knife gleamed under the dancing lights, the girl in the doorway finally took notice of the Lord Sto Odin and his strange companions.

She spoke to him, and her voice rode through the heavy air with the accents of clarity and death.

VII

"Who are you," she said, "that you should bring weapons to the last uttermost limits of the Bezirk?"

"This is just a small knife, lady," said the Lord Sto Odin, "and with this I can do no harm to anyone. I am an old man and I am setting my own vitality button higher."

She watched incuriously as he brought the point of the knife to the nape of his own neck and then gave it three full, deliberate turns.

Then she stared and said, "You are strange, my Lord. Perhaps you are dangerous to my friends and me."

"I am dangerous to no one." The robots looked at him, surprised, because of the fullness and the richness of his voice. He had set his vitality very high indeed, giving himself, at that rate, perhaps no more than an hour or two of

life, but he had regained the physical power and the emotional force of his own prime years. They looked at the girl. She had taken Sto Odin's statement at full face value, almost as though it were an incontrovertible canon of faith.

"I wear," Sto Odin went on, "these feathers. Do you know what they signify?"

"I can see," she said, "that you are a Lord of the Instrumentality, but I do not know what the feathers mean..."

"Waiver of immunity. Anyone who can manage it is allowed to kill me or to hurt me without danger of punishment." He smiled, a little grimly. "Of course, I have the right to fight back, and I do know how to fight. My name is the Lord Sto Odin. Why are you here, girl?"

"I love that man in there—if he is a man any more."

She stopped and pursed her lips in bewilderment. It was strange to see those girlish lips compressed in a momentary stammer of the soul. She stood there, more nude than a new-born infant, her face covered with provocative, off-beat cosmetics. She lived for a mission of love in the depths of the nothing and nowhere: yet she remained a girl, a person, a human being capable, as she was now, of an immediate relationship to another human being.

"He was a man, my Lord, even when he came back from the surface with that piece of congohelium. Only a few weeks ago, those people were dancing too. Now they just lie on the ground. They do not even die. I myself held the congohelium too, and I made music with it. Now the power of the music is eating him up and he dances without resting. He won't come out to me and I do not dare go into that place with him. Perhaps I too would end up as one more heap on the floor."

A crescendo of the intolerable music made speech intolerable for her. She waited for it to pass while the room beyond blazed a pulsing violet at them.

When the music of the congohelium subsided a little, Sto Odin spoke: "How long has it been that he has danced alone with this strange power coursing through him?"

"One year. Two years. Who can tell? I came down here and lost time when I arrived. You Lords don't even let us have clocks and calendars up on the surface."

"We ourselves saw you dancing just a tenth-year ago," said Livius, interrupting.

She glanced at them, quickly, incuriously. "Are you the same two robots who were here a while back? You look very different now. You look like ancient soldiers. I can't imagine why... All right, maybe it was a week, maybe it was a year."

"What were you doing down here?" asked Sto Odin gently.

"What do you think?" she said. "Why do all the other people come down here? I was running away from the timeless time, the lifeless life, the hopeless hope that you Lords apply to all mankind on the surface. You let the robots and the underpeople work, but you freeze the real people in a happiness which has no hope and no escape."

"I'm right," cried Sto Odin, "I'm right, though I die for it!"

"I don't understand you," said the girl. "Do you mean that you too, a Lord, have come down here to escape from the useless hope that wraps up all of us?"

"No, no, no," he said, as the shifting lights of the congohelium music made improbable traceries across his features. "I just meant that I told the other Lords that something like this was happening to you ordinary people on the surface. Now you are telling me exactly what I told them. Who were you, anyhow?"

The girl glanced down at her unclothed body as though she were aware, for the first time, of her nakedness. Sto Odin could see the blush pour from her face down across her neck and chest. She said, very quietly:

"Don't you know? We never answer that question down here."

"You have rules?" he said. "You people have rules, even here in the Bezirk?"

She brightened up when she realized that he had not meant the indecent question as an impropriety. Eagerly she explained, "There aren't any rules. They are just understandings. Somebody told me when I left the ordinary world and crossed the line of the Gebiet. I suppose they did not tell you because you were a Lord, or because they hid from your strange war-robots."

"I met no one, coming down."

"Then they were hiding from you, my Lord."

Sto Odin looked around at his legionaries to see if they would confirm that statement but neither Flavius nor Livius said anything at all.

He turned back to the girl. "I didn't mean to pry. Can you tell me what kind of person you are? I don't need the particulars."

"When I was alive, I was a once-born," she said. "I did not live long enough to be renewed. The robots and a Subcommissioner of the Instrumentality took a look at me to see if I could be trained for the Instrumentality. More than enough brains, they said, but no character at all. I thought about that a long time. 'No character at all.' I knew I couldn't kill my self, and I didn't want to live, so I looked happy every time I thought a monitor might be scanning me and I found my way to the Gebiet. It wasn't death, and it wasn't life, but it was an escape from endless fun. I hadn't been down here long—" she pointed at the Gebiet above them—"before I met him. We loved each other very soon and he said that the Gebiet was not much improvement on the surface. He said he had already been down here, in the Bezirk looking for a fun-death."

"A what?" said Sto Odin, as if he could not believe the words.

"A fun-death. Those were his words and his idea. I followed him around and we loved each other. I waited for him when he went to the surface to get the congohelium. I thought that his love for me would put the fun-death out of his mind."

"Are you telling me the whole truth?" said Sto Odin. "Or is this just your part of the story?"

She stammered protests but he did not ask again.

The Lord Sto Odin said nothing but he looked heavily at her.

She winced, bit her lip, and finally said, through all the music and the lights, very clearly indeed, "Stop it. You are hurting me."

The Lord Sto Odin stared at her, said innocently, "I am doing nothing," and stared on. There was much to stare at. She was a girl the color of honey. Even through these lights and shadows he could see that she had no clothing at all. Nor did she have a single hair left on her body—no head of hair, no eyebrows, probably no eyelashes, though he could not tell at that distance. She had traced golden eyebrows far up on her forehead, giving her the look of endless mocking inquiry. She had painted her mouth gold, so that when she spoke, her words cascaded from a golden source. She had painted her upper eyelids golden too, but the lower were black as carbon itself. The total effect was alien to all the previous experiences of mankind: it was lascivious grief to the thousandth power, dry wantonness perpetually unfulfilled, femaleness in the service of remote purposes, humanity enraptured by strange planets.

He stood and stared. If she were still human at all, this would sooner or later force her to take the initiative. It did.

She spoke again, "Who are you? You are living too fast, too fiercely. Why don't you go in and dance, like all the others?" She gestured past the open door, where the ragged unconscious shapes of all the people lay strewn about the floor.

"You call that dancing?" said the Lord Sto Odin. "I do not. There is one man who dances. Those others lie on the floor. Let me ask you the same question. Why don't you dance yourself?"

"I want *him*, not the dance. I am Santuna and he seized me once in human, mortal, ordinary love. But he becomes Sun-boy, more so every day, and he dances with those people who lie on the floor—"

"You call that dancing?" snapped the Lord Sto Odin. He shook his head and added grimly, "I see no dance."

"You don't see it? You really don't see it?" she cried.

He shook his head obstinately and grimly.

She turned so that she looked into the room beyond her and she brought her high, clear penetrating wail which even cut through the five-beat pulse of the congohelium. She cried:

"Sun-boy, Sun-boy, hear me!"

There was no break in the quick escape of the feet which pattered in the figure eight, no slowing down the fingers which beat against the shimmering non-focus of the metal which was carried in the dancer's arms.

"My lover, my beloved, my man!" she cried again, her voice even more shrill and demanding than before.

There was a break in the cadence of the music and the dance. The dancer sheered toward them with a perceptible slowing down of his cadence. The lights of the inner room, the great door and the outer hall all became more steady. Sto Odin could see the girl more clearly; she really didn't have a single hair on her body. He could see the dancer too; the young man was tall, thin beyond the ordinary suffering of man, and the metal which he carried shimmered like water reflecting a thousand lights. The dancer spoke, quickly and angrily:

"You called me. You have called me thousands of times. Come on in, if you wish. But don't call me."

As he spoke, the music faded out completely, the bundles on the floor began to stir and to groan and to awaken.

Santuna stammered hastily, "This time it wasn't me. It was these people. One of them is very strong. He cannot see the dancers."

The Sun-boy turned to the Lord Sto Odin, "Come in and dance then, if you wish. You are already here. You might as well. Those machines of yours—" he nodded at the robot-legionaries—"they couldn't dance anyhow. Turn them off." The dancer started to turn away.

"I shall not dance, but I would like to see it," said Sto Odin, with enforced mildness. He did not like this young man at all—not the phosphorescence of his skin, the dangerous metal cradled in his arm, the suicidal recklessness of his prancing walk. Anyhow, there was too much light this far underground and too few explanations of what was being done.

"Man, you're a peeper. That's real nasty, for an old man like you. Or do you just want to be a *man*?"

The Lord Sto Odin felt his temper flare up. "Who are you, man, that you should call man *man* in such a tone? Aren't you still human, yourself?"

"Who knows? Who cares? I have tapped the music of the universe. I have piped all imaginable happiness into this room. I am generous. I share it with these friends of mine." Sun-boy gestured at the ragged heaps on the floor,

who had begun to squirm in their misery without the music. As Sto Odin saw into the room more clearly, he could see that the bundles on the floor were young people, mostly young men, though there were a few girls among them. They all of them looked sick and weak and pale.

Sto Odin retorted. "I don't like the looks of this. I have half a mind to seize you and to take that metal."

The dancer spun on the ball of his right foot, as though to leap away in a wild prance.

The Lord Sto Odin stepped into the room after Sun-boy.

Sun-boy turned full circle, so that he faced Sto Odin once again. He pushed the Lord out of the door, marching him firmly but irresistably three steps backward.

"Flavius, seize the metal. Livius, take the man," spat Sto Odin.

Neither robot moved.

Sto Odin, his senses and his strength set high by the severe twist upward which he had given his vitality button, stepped forward to seize the congohelium himself. Made one step and no more: he froze in the doorway, immobile.

He had not felt like that since the last time the doctors put him in a surgery machine, when they found that part of his skull had developed bone-cancer from old, old radiation in space and from the subsequent effects of sheer age. They had given him a prosthetic half-skull and for the time of the operation he had been immobilized by straps and drugs. This time there were no straps, no drugs, but the forces which Sun-boy had invoked were equally strong.

The dancer danced in an enormous figure-8 among the clothed bodies lying on the floor. He had been singing the song which the robot Flavius had repeated far up above, on the surface of the Earth—the song about the weeping man.

But Sun-boy did not weep.

His ascetic, thin face was twisted in a broad grin of mockery. When he sang about sorrow it was not sorrow which he really expressed, but derision, laughter, contempt for ordinary human sorrow. The congohelium shimmered and the aurora borealis almost blinded Sto Odin. There were two other drums in the middle of the room, one with high notes and the other with even higher ones.

The congohelium resonated: *boom—boom—doom—doom—room!*

The large ordinary drum rattled out, when Sun-boy passed at and reached out his fingers: *ritiplin, ritiplin, rataplan, ritiplin!*

The small, strange drum emitted only two notes, and it almost croaked them: *kid-nork, kid-nork, kid-nork!*

As Sun-boy danced back the Lord Sto Odin thought that he could hear the voice of the girl Santuna, calling to Sun-boy, but he could not turn his head to see if she were speaking.

Sun-boy stood in front of Sto Odin, his feet still weaving as he danced, his thumbs and his palms torturing hypnotic dissonances from the gleaming congohelium.

"Old man, you tried to trick me. You failed."

The Lord Sto Odin tried to speak, but the muscles of his mouth and throat would not respond. He wondered what force this was, which could stop all unusual effort but still leave his heart free to beat, his lungs to breathe, his brain (both natural and prosthetic) to think.

The boy danced on. He danced away a few steps, turned and danced back to Sto Odin.

"You wear the feathers of immunity. I am free to kill you. If I did the Lady Mmona and the Lord Nuru-or and your other friends would never know what happened."

If Sto Odin could have moved his eyelids that much, he would have opened his eyes in astonishment at the discovery that a superstitious dancer, far under ground, knew the secret business of the Instrumentality.

"You can't believe what you are looking at, even though you see it plainly," said Sun-boy more seriously. "You think that a lunatic has found a way to work wonders with a piece of the congohelium taken far underground. Foolish old man! No ordinary lunatic would have carried this metal down here with out blowing up the fragment and himself with it. No man could have done what I have done. You are thinking. If the gambler who took the name Sun-boy is not a man, what is he? What brings the power and music of the sun so far down under ground? Who makes the wretched ones of the world dream in a crazy, happy sleep while their life spills and leaks into a thousand kinds of times, a thousand kinds of worlds? Who does it, if it is not mere me? You don't have to ask. I can tell perfectly well what you are thinking. I'll dance it for you. I am a very kind man, even though you do not like me."

The dancer's feet had been moving in the same place while he spoke.

Suddenly he whirled away, leaping and vaulting over the wretched human figures on the floor.

He passed the big drum and touched it: *ritiplin, rataplan!*

Left hand brushed the little drum: *kid-nork, kid-nork!*

Both hands seized the congohelium, as though the strong wrists were going to tear it apart.

The whole room blazed with music, gleamed with thunder as the human senses interpenetrated each other. The Lord Sto Odin felt the air pass his skin like cool wet oil. Sun-boy the dancer became transparent and through him the Lord Sto Odin could see a landscape which was not earth and never would be.

"Fluorescent, luminescent, incandescent, fluorescent," sang the dancer. "Those are the worlds of the Douglas-Ouyang planets, seven planets in a close group, all travelling together around a single sun. Worlds of wild magnetism and perpetual dustfall, where the surfaces of the planets are changed by the forever-shifting magnetism of their erratic orbits! Strange worlds, where stars dance dances wilder than any dance ever conceived by man— Planets which have a consciousness in common, but perhaps not intelligence—planets which called across all space and all time for companionship until *I*, me the gambler, came down to this cavern and found them. Where you had left them, my Lord Sto Odin, when you said to a robot:

"I do not like the looks of those planets,' said you, Sto Odin, speaking to a robot a long time ago. 'People might get sick or crazy, just looking at them,' said you, Sto Odin, long, long ago. 'Hide the knowledge in some out of the way computer,' you commanded, Sto Odin, before I was born. But the computer was that one, that one in the corner behind you, which you cannot turn to see. I came down to this room, looking for a fun-suicide, something really unusual which would bang the noddies when they found I had gotten away. I danced here in the darkness, almost the way I am dancing now, and I had taken about twelve different kinds of drugs, so that I was wild and free and very very receptive. That computer spoke to me, Sto Odin. *Your* computer, not mine. It spoke to me, and you know what it said?

"You might as well know, Sto Odin, because you are dying. You set your vitality high in order to fight me. I have made you stand still. Could I do that if I were a mere man? Look. I will turn solid again."

With a rainbow-like scream of chords and sounds, Sun-boy twisted the congohelium again until both the inner chamber and the outer bloomed with lights of a thousand colors and the deep underground air became drenched with music which seemed psychotic, because no human mind had ever invented it. The Lord Sto Odin, imprisoned in his own body with his two legionary-robots frozen half a pace behind him, wondered if he really were dying in vain and

tried to guess whether he would be blinded and deafened by this dancer before he died. The congohelium twisted and shone before him.

Sun-boy danced backward over the bodies on the floor, danced backward with an odd cadenced run which looked as though he were plunging forward in a wild, competitive foot-race when the music and his own footsteps carried him back, toward the center of the inner room. The figure jumped in an odd stance, face looking so far downward that Sun-boy might have been studying his own steps on the floor, the congohelium held above and behind his neck, legs lifting high in the cruel high-kneed prance.

The Lord Sto Odin thought he could hear the girl calling again, but he could not distinguish words.

The drums spoke again: *ritiplin, ritiplin, rataplan!* and then *kid-nork, kid-nork, kid-nork!*

The dancer spoke as the pandemonium subsided. He spoke, as his voice was high, strange, like a bad recording played on the wrong machine:

"The something is talking to you. You can talk."

The Lord Sto Odin found that his throat and lips moved. Quietly, secretly, like an old soldier, he tried his feet and fingers: these did not move. Only his voice could be used. He spoke, and he said the obvious:

"Who are you, something?"

Sun-boy looked across at Sto Odin. He stood erect and calm. Only his feet moved, and they did a wild, agile little jig which did not affect the rest of his body. Apparently some kind of dance was necessary to keep the connection going between the unexplained reach of the Douglas-Ouyang planets, the piece of the congohelium, the more than human dancer and the tortured blissful figures on the floor. The face, the face itself was quite composed and almost sad.

"I have been told," said Sun-boy, "to show you who I am."

He danced around the drums *rataplan, rataplan! kid-nork-nork, kid-nork, kid-nork-nork!*

He held the congohelium high and wrenched it so that a great moan came out. Sto Odin felt sure that a sound as wild and forlorn as that would be sure to reach the surface of the earth many kilometers above, but his prudent judgment assured him that this was a fanciful thought, gestated by his personal situation, and that any real sound strong enough to reach all the way to the surface would also be strong enough to bring the bruised and shattered rock of the ceiling pouring down upon their heads.

The congohelium ran down the colors of the spectrum until it stopped at a dark, wet liver-red, very close to black.

The Lord Sto Odin, in that momentary near silence, found that the entire story had been thrust into his mind without being strung out and articulated with words. The true history of this chamber had entered his memory sidewise, as it were. In one moment he knew nothing of it; in the next instance it was as if he had remembered the whole narrative for most of his life.

He also felt himself set free.

He stumbled backward three or four steps.

To his immense relief, his robots turned around, themselves free, and accompanied him. He let them put their hands in his armpits.

His face was suddenly covered with kisses.

His plastic cheek felt, thinly and dimly, the imprint, real and living, of female human lips. It was the odd girl—beautiful, bald, naked and golden-lipped—who had waited and shouted from the door.

Despite physical fatigue and the sudden shock of intruded knowledge, the Lord Sto Odin knew what he had to say.

"Girl, you shouted for me."

"Yes, my Lord."

"You have had the strength to watch the congohelium and not to give in to it?"

She nodded but said nothing.

"You have been strong-willed enough not to go into that room?"

"Not strong-willed, my Lord. I just love him, my man in there."

"You have waited, girl, for many months?"

"Not all the time. I go up the corridor when I have to eat or drink or sleep or do my personals. I even have mirrors and combs and tweezers and paint there, to make myself beautiful, the way that Sun-boy might want me."

The Lord Sto Odin looked over his shoulder. The music was low and keening with some emotions other than grief. The dancer was doing a long, slow dance, full of creeping and reaches, as he passed the congohelium from one hand to the other. "Do you hear me, dancer?" called the Lord Sto Odin, the Instrumentality once more coursing through his veins.

The dancer did not speak nor seem to change his course. But *kid-nork, kid-nork* said the little drum, quite unexpectedly.

"He, and the face behind him—they will let the girl leave if she really forgets him and this place in the act of leaving. Won't you?" said Sto Odin to the dancer.

Ritiplin, rataplan said the big drum, which had not sounded since Sto Odin was let free.

"But I don't want to go," said the girl.

"I know you don't want to go. You will go to please me. You can come back as soon as I have done my work." She stood mute so he continued.

"One of my robots, Livius, the one imprinted by a psychiatrist general, will run with you, but I command him to forget this place and all things connected with it. Summa nulla est. Have you heard me, Livius? You will run with this girl and you will forget. You will run and forget. You too will run and forget, Santuna my dear, but two Earthnychtherons from now you will remember just enough to come back here, should you wish to, should you need to. Otherwise you will go to the Lady Mmona and learn from her what you should do for the rest of your life."

"You are promising, my Lord, that in two days and nights I can come back if I even feel like it."

"Now run, my girl, run. Run to the surface. Livius, carry her if you must. But run! run! run! More than she depends upon it."

Santuna looked at him very earnestly. Her nakedness was innocence. The gold upper eyelids met the black lower eyelids as she blinked and then brushed away wet tears.

"Kiss me," she said, "and I will run."

He leaned down and kissed her.

She turned, looked back one last time at her dancer-lover, and then ran long-legged into the corridor. Livius ran after her, gracefully, untiringly. In twenty minutes they would be reaching the upper limits of the Gebiet.

"You know what I am doing?" said Sto Odin to the dancer.

This time the dancer and the force behind him did not deign to answer.

Said Sto Odin, "Water. There is water in a jug in my litter. Take me there, Flavius."

The robot-legionary took the aged and trembling Sto Odin to the litter.

VIII

The Lord Sto Odin then performed the trick which changed human history for many centuries to come and, in so doing, exploded an enormous cavern in the vitals of the earth.

He used one of the most secret ruses of the Instrumentality.

He triple-thought.

Only a few very adept persons could triple-think, when they were given every possible chance of training. Fortunately for mankind, the Lord Sto Odin had been one of the successful ones.

He set three systems of thought into action. At the top level he behaved rationally as he explored the old room; at a lower level of his mind he planned a wild surprise for the dancer with the congohelium. But at the third, lowest level, he decided what he must do in the time of a single blink and trusted his autonomic nervous system to carry out the rest.

These are the commands he gave:

Flavius should be set on the wild-alert and readied for attack.

The computer should be reached and told to record the whole episode, everything which Sto Odin had learned, and should be shown how to take countermeasures while Sto Odin gave the matter no further conscious thought. The gestalt of action—the general frame of retaliation—was clear for thousandths of a second in Sto Odin's mind and then it dropped from sight.

The music rose to a roar.

White light covered Sto Odin.

"You meant me harm!" called Sun-boy from beyond the Gothic door.

"I meant you harm," Sto Odin acknowledged, "but it was a passing thought. I did nothing. You are watching me."

"I am watching you," said the dancer grimly. *Kid-nork, kid-nork* went the little drum. "Do not go out of my sight. When you are ready to come through my door, call me or just think of it. I will meet you and help you in."

"Good enough," said the Lord Sto Odin.

Flavius still held him. Sto Odin concentrated on the melody which Sun-boy was creating, a wild new song never before suspected in the history of the world. He wondered if he could surprise the dancer by throwing his own song back at him. At the same instant, his fingers were performing a third set of actions which Sto Odin's mind no

longer had to heed. Sto Odin's hand opened a lid in the robot's chest, right into the laminated controls of the brain. The hand itself changed certain adjustments, commanding that the robot should within the quarter-hour, kill all forms of life within reach other than the command-transmitter. Flavius did not know what had been done to him; Sto Odin did not even notice what his own hand had done.

"Take me over to the old computer," said Sto Odin to the robot Flavius. "I want to discover how the strange story which I have just learned may be true." Sto Odin kept thinking of music which would even startle the user of the congohelium.

He stood at the computer.

His hand, responding to the triple-think command which it had been given, turned the computer up and pressed the button, Record this scene. The computer's old relays almost grunted as they came to the alert and complied.

"Let me see the map," said Sto Odin to the computer.

Far behind him, the dancer had changed his pace into a fast jog-trot of hot suspicion.

The map appeared on the computer.

"Beautiful," said Sto Odin.

The entire labyrinth had become plain. Just above them was one of the ancient, sealed-off anti-seismic shafts—a straight, empty tubular shaft, two hundred meters wide, kilometers high. At the top, it had a lid which kept out the mud and water of the ocean floor. At the bottom, since there was no pressure other than air to worry about, it had been covered with a plastic which looked like rock, so that neither people nor robots which might be passing would try to climb into it.

"Watch what I am doing!" cried Sto Odin to the dancer.

"I am watching," said Sun-boy and there was almost a growl of perplexity in his sung-forth response.

Sto Odin shook the computer and ran the fingers of his right hand over it and coded a very specific request. His left hand—preconditioned by the triple-think, coded the emergency panel at the side of the computer with two simple, clear engineering instructions.

Sun-boy's laughter rang out behind him. "You are asking that a piece of the congohelium be sent down to you. Stop! Stop, before you sign it with your name and your authority as a Lord of the Instrumentality. Your unsigned request will do no harm. The Central Computer up top will just think that it is some of the crazy people in the Bezirk making senseless demands." The voice rose to a note of urgency, "Why did the machine signal 'received and complied with' to you just now?"

The Lord Sto Odin lied blandly, "I don't know. Maybe they will send me a piece of the congohelium to match the one that you have there."

"You're lying," cried the dancer. "Come over here to the door."

Flavius led the Lord Sto Odin to the ridiculous-beautiful Gothic archway.

The dancer was leaping from foot to foot. The congohelium shone a dull alert red. The music wept as though all the anger and suspicion of mankind had been incorporated into a new unforgettable fugue, like a delirious atonal counterpoint to Johann Sebastian Bach's *Third Brandenburg Concerto*.

"I am here." The Lord Sto Odin spoke easily.

"You are dying!" cried the dancer.

"I was dying before you first noticed me. I set my vitality control to maximum after I entered the Bezirk."

"Come on in, then," said Sun-boy, "and you will never die."

Sto Odin took the edge of the door and let himself down to the stone floor. Only when he was comfortably seated did he speak:

"I am dying, that is true. But I would rather not come in. I will just watch you dance as I die."

"What are you doing? What have you done?" cried Sun-boy. He stopped dancing and walked over to the door.

"Search me if you wish," said the Lord Sto Odin.

"I am searching you," said the dancer, "but I see nothing but your desire to get a piece of the congohelium for yourself and to out-dance me."

At this point Flavius went berserk. He ran back to the litter, leaned over, and ran toward the door. In each hand he carried an enormous solid-steel bearing.

"What's that robot doing?" cried the dancer. "I can see your mind but you are not telling him anything! He uses those steel balls to break obstructions—"

He gasped as the attack came.

Quicker than the eye could follow the movement, Flavius' sixty-ton-capacity arm whistled through the air as he flung the first steel missile directly at Sun-boy. Sun-boy, or the power within him, leapt aside with insect speed. The ball plowed through two of the rag-clothed human bodies on the floor. One body said *whoof!* as it died, but the other body let out no sound at all: the head had been torn off in first impact. Before the dancer could speak, Flavius flung the second ball.

This time the doorway caught it. The powers which had immobilized Sto Odin and his robots were back in operation. The ball sang as it plunged into the doorway, stopped in mid-air, sang again as the door flung it back at Flavius.

The returning ball missed Flavius' head but crushed his chest utterly. That was where his real brain was. There was a flicker of light as the robot went out, but even in dying Flavius seized the ball one last time and flung it at Sun-boy. The robot terminated operation and the heavy ball, flung wild, caught the Lord Sto Odin in the right shoulder. The Lord Sto Odin felt pain until he dragged over his manikin meee and turned all pain off. Then he looked at the shoulder. It was almost totally demolished. Blood from his organic body and hydraulic fluid from his prosthetics joined in a slow, heavy stream as the liquids met, merged and poured down his side.

The dancer almost forgot to dance.

Sto Odin wondered how far the girl had gone.

The air pressure changed.

"What is happening to the air? Why did you think about the girl? What is happening?"

"Read me," said the Lord Sto Odin.

"I will dance and get my powers first," said Sun-boy.

For a few brief minutes it seemed that the dancer with the congohelium would cause a rock-fall.

The Lord Sto Odin, dying, closed his eyes and found that it was restful to die. The blaze and noise of the world around him remained interesting, but had become unimportant.

The congohelium with a thousand shifting rainbows and the dancer had attained near-transparency when Sun-boy came back to read Sto Odin's mind.

"I see nothing," said Sun-boy worriedly. "Your vitality button is too high and you will die soon. Where is all that air coming from? I seem to hear a far-away roar. But you are not causing it. Your robot went wild. All you do is to look at me contentedly and die. That is very strange. You want to die your way when you could live unimaginable lives in here with us!"

"That is right," said the Lord Sto Odin. "I am dying my way. But dance for me, do dance for me with the congohelium, while I tell you your own story as you told it to me. It would be a pleasure to get the story straight before I die."

The dancer looked irresolute, started to dance, and then turned back to the Lord Sto Odin.

"Are you sure you want to die right away? With the power of what you call the Douglas-Ouyang planets, which I receive right here with the help of the congohelium, you could be comfortable enough while I danced and you could still die whenever you wished. Vitality buttons are much weaker than the powers which I command. I could even help to lift you across the threshold of my door..."

"No," said the Lord Sto Odin. "Just dance for me while I die. My way."

IX

Thus the world turned. Millions of tons of water were rushing toward them.

Within minutes the Gebiet and the Bezirk would drown as the air whistled upward. Sto Odin noted contentedly that there was an air-shaft at the top of the dancer's room. He did not allow himself to third-think of what would happen when the matter and antimatter of the congohelium were immersed in rushing salt water. Something like forty megatons, he supposed, with the tired feeling of a man who has thought a problem through long, long ago and remembers it briefly only after the situation has long passed.

Sun-boy was acting out religion before the age of space. He chorused hymns, he lifted his eyes and his hands and his piece of the congohelium to the sun; he played the rattle of whirling dervishes, the temple bells of the Man on the Two Pieces of Wood and the other temple bells of that saint who had escaped time simply by seeing it and stepping out of it. Buddha, was that his name? And he went on to the severe profanities which afflicted mankind after the Old World fell.

The music kept measure.

And the lights, too.

Whole processions of ghostly shadows followed Sun-boy as he showed how old mankind had found the gods, and the sun, and then other gods. He pantomimed man's most ancient mystery—that man pretended to be afraid of death, when it was life that never understood it.

And as he danced, the Lord Sto Odin repeated his own story to him:

"You fled the surface, Sun-boy, because the people were stupid clods, happy and dull in their miserable happiness. You fled because you could not stand being a chicken in a poultry house, antiseptically bred, safely housed and frozen when dead. You joined the other miserable, bright restless people who sought freedom in the Gebiet. You learned about the drugs and their liquors and their smokes. You knew their women, and their parties,

and their games. It wasn't enough. You became a gentleman-suicide, a hero seeking a fun-death which would stamp you with your individuality. You came on down to the Bezirk, the most forgotten and loathesome place of all. You found nothing. Just the old machines and the empty corridors. Here and there a few mummies or bones. Just the silent lights and the faint murmur of air through the corridors."

"I hear water now," said the dancer, still dancing, "rushing water. Don't you hear it, my dying Lord?"

"If I did hear it, I wouldn't care. Let's get on with your story. You came to this room. The weird door made it look like a good place for a fun-death, such as you poor castaways liked to seek, except that there was not much sport in dying unless other people know that you did it intentionally, and know how you did it. Anyway, it was a long climb back up into the Gebiet, where your friends were, so you slept by this computer.

"In the night, while you slept, as you dreamed, the computer sang to you:

I need a temporary dog
For a temporary job
On a temporary place
Like earth!

When you woke up you were surprised to find that you had dreamed an entire new kind of music. Really wild music which made people shudder with its delicious evil. And with the music, you had a job. To steal a piece of the congohelium.

"You were a clever man, Sun-boy, before the trip down here. The Douglas-Ouyang planets caught you and made you a thousand times cleverer. You and your friends, this is what you told me—or what the presence behind you told me, just a half hour ago—you and your friends stole a subspace communicator console, got a fix on the Douglas-Ouyang planets, and got drunk at the sight. Iridescent, luminescent. Waterfalls uphill. All that kind of thing.

"And you did get the Congohelium. The congohelium is made of matter and antimatter laminated apart by a dual magnetic grid. With that the presence of the Douglas-Ouyang planets made you independent of organic processes. You did not need food or rest or even air or drink any more. The Douglas-Ouyang planets are very old. They kept you as a link. I have no idea of what they intended to do with Earth and with mankind. If this story gets out, future generations will call you the merchant of menace, because you used the normal human appetitiousness for danger to trap other people with hypnotics and with music."

"I hear water," interrupted Sun-boy. "I *do* hear water!"

"Never mind," said the Lord Sto Odin, "your story is more important. Anyhow, what could you and I do about it? I am dying, sitting in a pool of blood and effluvium. You can't leave this room with the congohelium. Let me go on. Or perhaps the Douglas-Ouyang entity, whatever it was—"

"*Is*," said Sun-boy.

"—Whatever it is, may just have been longing for sensuous companionship. Dance on, man, dance on."

Sun-boy danced and the drums talked with him, *rataplan, rata-plan! kid-nork, kid-nork, nork!* while the congohelium made music scream through the solid rock.

The other sound persisted.

Sun-boy stopped and stared.

"It is water. It *is*."

"Who knows?" said the Lord Sto Odin.

"Look," screamed Sun-boy, holding the congohelium high. "Look!"

The Lord Sto Odin did not need to look. He knew full well that the first few tons of water, mud-laden and heavy, had come frothing down the corridor and into their rooms.

"But what do *I* do?" screamed the voice of Sun-boy. Sto Odin felt that it was not Sun-boy speaking, but some relay speaking from the power of the Douglas-Ouyang planets. A power which had tried to find friendship with man, but had found the wrong man and the wrong friendship.

Sun-boy took control of himself. His feet splashed in the water as he danced. The colors shone on the water as it rose. *Ritiplin, tiplin!* said the big drum. *Kid-nork, kid-nork,* said the little drum. *Boom, boom, doom, doom, room,* said the congohelium.

The Lord Sto Odin felt his old eyes blur but he could still see the blazing image, of the wild dancer.

"This is a good way to die," thought he, as he died.

X

Far above, on the surface of the Planet, Santuna felt the continent itself heave beneath her feet and saw the eastern horizon grow dark as a volcano of muddy steam shot up from the calm blue sunlit ocean.

"This must not, must not happen again!" she said, thinking of Sun-boy and the congohelium and the death of the Lord Sto Odin.

"Something must be done about it," she added to herself.

And she did it.

In later centuries she brought disease, risk and misery back to increase the happiness of man. She was one of the principal architects of the Rediscovery of Man, and at her most famous she was known as the Lady Alice More.

[End of *Under Old Earth*, by Cordwainer Smith]