

Our Friends from Frolix 8

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Extract

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Part One

ONE

Bobby said. 'I don't want to take the test.'

But you must, his father thought. If there is going to be any hope for our family as it extends itself into the future. Into periods lying long after my death — mine and Kleo's.

'Let me explain it this way,' he said aloud, as he moved along the crowded sliding sidewalk in the direction of the Federal Bureau of Personnel Standards. 'Different people have different ability.' How well he knew that. 'My ability, for example, is very limited; I can't even qualify for a government G-one rating, which is the lowest rating of all.' It hurt to admit this, but he had to; he had to make the boy understand how vital this was. 'So I'm not qualified at all. I've got a little nongovernment job . . . nothing, really. Do you want to be like me when you grow up?'

'You're okay,' Bobby said, with the majestic assurance of his twelve years.

'I'm not,' Nick said.

'To me you are.'

He felt baffled. And, as so many times of late, on the edge of despair. 'Listen,' he said, 'to the facts of how Terra is run. Two entities maneuver around each other, with first one ruling and then the other. These entities—'

'I'm not either one,' his son said. 'I'm an Old and a Regular. I don't want to take the test; I know what I am. I know what you are and I'm the same.'

Within him, Nick felt his stomach dry and shrink, and because of that he felt acute need. Looking around, he made out a drugbar on the far side of the street, beyond the traffic of squib cars and the larger, rotund public-transit vehicles. He led Bobby up a ped-ramp, and ten minutes later they had reached the far sidewalk.

'I'm going into the bar for a couple of minutes,' Nick said. 'I'm not well enough to take you to the Federal Building, at this particular junction of time and space.' He led his son past the eye of the door, into the dark interior of Donovan's Drugbar - a bar which he had never visited before but liked on first impact.

'You can't bring that boy in here,' the bartender informed him. He pointed to the sign on the wall. 'He's not eighteen. Do you want it to look like I sell nibbles to minors?'

'At my regular bar—' Nick began, but the bartender cut him brusquely off.

'This isn't your regular bar,' he declared, and stumped off to wait on a customer at the far end of the shadow-clouded room.

Nick said, 'You look in the shop windows next door.' He nudged his son, indicating the door through which they had just entered. 'I'll meet you in three or four minutes.'

'You always say that,' Bobby said, but he trudged off, out onto the midday sidewalk with its legions of squashed-together humanity ... for a moment he paused, glancing back, and then he continued on, out of sight.

Seating himself on a bar stool, Nick said, 'I'd like fifty milligrams of phenmetrazine hydrochloride and thirty of stelladrine, with a sodium acetyl-salicylate chaser.'

The bartender said, 'The stelladrine will make you dream of many and far-off stars.' He placed a tiny plate before Nick, got the pills and then the sodium acetyl-salicylate solution in a plastic glass; laying everything before Nick he stood back, scratching his ear reflectively.

'I hope it does.' Nick swallowed the three meagre pills - he could not afford any more this late in the month - and downed the brackish chaser.

'Taking your son for a Federal test?'

As he got out his wallet he nodded.

'You think they're rigged?' the bartender inquired.

'I don't know,' Nick said briefly.

The bartender, resting his elbows on the polished surface of the bar, leaned toward him and said, 'I think they are.' He took Nick's money; turned to the cash register to ring it

up. 'I see folks going by here fourteen, fifteen times. Unwilling to accept the fact that they - or as in your case, your kid - isn't going to pass. They keep trying and it comes out the same, always. The New Men, they aren't going to let anybody else into the Civil Service. They want—' He glanced about, lowered his voice. 'They don't intend to split up the action among anybody extra beyond themselves. Hell, in government speeches they practically admit it. They—'

'They need fresh blood,' Nick said doggedly . . . said it to the bartender as he had said it to himself so many times.

The bartender said, 'They have their own kids.'

'Not enough.' Nick sipped his chaser. He could already feel the phenmetrazine hydrochloride going to work on him, building up his sense of worth, his optimism; he experienced a powerful glow deep within him. 'If it got out,' he said, 'that the Civil Service tests were rigged, this government would be voted out of office within twenty-four hours and the Unusuals would be in, replacing them. Do you think the New Men want the Unusuals to rule? My god.'

'I think they're working together,' the bartender said. And walked off to wait on another customer.

How many times, Nick thought as he left the bar, I've thought that myself. Rule first by the Unusuals, then the New Men . . . if they have actually worked this out to a fine point, he thought, where they control the personnel testing apparatus, then they could constitute, as he said, a self-perpetuating structure of power; but our whole political system is based on the fact of the two groups' mutual animosity . . . it's the basic verity of our lives - that, and the admission that due to their superiority they deserve to rule and can do so wisely.

He parted the moving mass of pedpeople, came upon his son, who stood gazing raptly into a store window. 'Let's go,' Nick said, placing his hand firmly - the drugs had made him so - on the boy's shoulder.

Not moving, Bobby said, 'There's a distance pain inflicting knife they're selling. Can I have one? It'd give me more self-confidence if I was wearing that while I take the test.'

'It's a toy,' Nick said.

'Even so,' Bobby said. 'Please. It really would make me feel a lot better.'

Someday, Nick thought, you will not have to rule through pain infliction – rule your peers, serve your masters. You will be a master yourself, and then I can happily accept everything I see going on around me. 'No,' he said, and steered his boy back into the dense stream of sidewalk traffic. 'Don't dwell on concrete things,' he said harshly. 'Think of abstractions; think of processes of neutrologics. That's what they'll be asking.' The boy hung back. 'Move!' Nick grated, urging him forcibly on. And, physically sensing the boy's reluctance, felt the overwhelming presence of failure.

It had been this way for fifty years, now, since 2085 when the first New Man had been elected . . . eight years before the first Unusual had taken upon himself that high office. Then, it had been a novelty; everyone had wondered how the lately-evolved irregular types would function in practice. They had done well – too well for any Old Man to follow. Where they could balance a bundle of bright lights, an Old Man could handle one. Some actions, based on thought processes that no Old Man could even follow, had no analogue among the earlier variety of human species at all.

'Look at the headline.' Bobby had halted before a newspaper rack.

CAPTURE OF PROVONI REPORTED NEAR

Nick read it without interest, not believing it and at the same time not really caring. As far as he was concerned, Thors Provoni no longer existed, captured or otherwise. But Bobby seemed fascinated by the news. Fascinated – and repelled.

'They won't ever capture Provoni,' Bobby said.

'You're saying it too loud,' Nick said, his lips close to his boy's ears. He felt deeply uneasy.

'What do I care if somebody hears me?' Bobby said hotly. He gestured at the streams of men and women flowing by

them. 'They all agree with me anyhow.' He glared up at his father with churning wrath.

'When Provoni left,' Nick said, 'and headed out of the Sol System, he betrayed all mankind, Superior and – otherwise.' He believed this strongly. They had argued this many times, but never had they been able to integrate their conflicting views about the man who had promised to find another planet, another useful world, on which Old Men could live . . . *and govern themselves.* 'Provoni was a coward,' Nick said, 'and subpar mentally. I don't even think he was worth chasing. Anyhow, they've evidently found him.'

'They always say that,' Bobby said. 'Two months ago they told us that within twenty-four hours—'

'He was subpar,' Nick broke in sharply. 'And so he doesn't count.'

'We're subpar, too,' Bobby said.

'I am,' Nick answered. 'But you're not.'

They continued on in silence; neither of them felt like talking to the other.

Civil Service Officer Norbert Weiss withdrew a green slip from the processing computer behind his desk and read with care the information thereon.

APPLETON, ROBERT.

I remember him, Weiss thought to himself. Twelve years old, ambitious father . . . what had the boy shown on the prelim test? A marked E-factor, considerably above the average. But—

Picking up his interdepartmental v-fone, he dialled his superior's extension.

Jerome Pikeman's pocked, elongated face appeared, showing the stress of overwork. 'Yes?'

'The Appleton boy will be in here shortly,' Weiss said. 'Have you made a decision? Are we going to pass him or are we not?' He held the green slip before the scanner of the fone, refreshing his superior's memory.

'The people in my department don't like his father's servile attitude,' Pikeman said. 'It's so extreme – in respect to authority – that we feel it could readily generate its negative

in his son's emotional development. Flunk him.'

'Completely?' Weiss said. 'Or pro tem?'

'Flunk him forever. Totally out. We'll be doing him a favour; he probably wants to drop out.'

'The boy scored very high.'

'But not exceptional. Nothing we have to have.'

'But out of fairness to the boy—' Weiss protested.

'Out of fairness to the boy we're turning him down. It isn't an honour or a privilege to get a federal rating, it's a burden. A responsibility. Don't you find it so, Mr. Weiss?'

He had never thought about it that way. Yes, he thought; I am overtaxed by my job, and the pay is slight and, as Pike-man says, there's no honour, only a sort of duty. But they would have to kill me to make me give it up. He wondered why he felt this way.

In September of 2120 he had obtained his Civil Service status, and he had worked for the government since, under first an Unusual Council Chairman, then a New Man Chairman . . . whichever group held ultimate control, he, like other Civil Service employees, stayed on, performing their skilled functions. Skilled – and talented.

He, himself: he had since childhood defined himself legally as a New Man. His cerebral cortex showed visible Rogers nodes – and, in intelligence-testing, he displayed, on cue, the proper ability. At nine years of age he had out-thought a mature Old Man; at twenty he could mentally plot a random table of one hundred numbers . . . as well as much else. For example, he could, without the use of a computer, plot the course-position of a ship subject to three gravities; by his innate mental processes he could project its locus at any given moment. He could deduce a wide variety of correlates from a given proposition, either theoretical or actual. And at thirty-two—

In a widely distributed paper he had presented objections to the classic theory of limits, showing in his own unique way, a possible return – at least theoretically – to Zeno's concept of progressively halved motion, utilizing as a fulcrum Dunne's theory of circular time.

And as a result of this he held a minor post in a minor

branch of the government's Federal Bureau of Personnel Standards. Because what he had done, although original, was not much. Not compared with the advances made by other New Men.

They had changed the map of human thought . . . in fifty short years. Changed it into something which the Old Men, the persons of the past, could neither understand nor recognize, Bernhad's Theory of Acausality, for example – in 2103 Bernhad, working at the Zürich Polytechnic Institute, had demonstrated that Hume, in his enormous skepticism, had been fundamentally right: custom, and nothing else, linked events understood by the Old Men as cause-and-effect. He had brought Leibnitz's monad theory up to date – with devastating results. For the first time in human history it had become possible to predict outcomes of physical sequences on the basis of a spectrum of variable predicates, each equally true, each as much 'causal' as the next. Applied sciences had because of this taken a new form, one which the Old Men could not deal with; in their minds a principle of acausality meant chaos: they could predict nothing.

And there had been more.

In 2130 Blaise Black, a certified G-sixteen New Man, had upset Wolfgang Pauli's Synchronicity principle. He had shown that the so-called 'vertical' line of connectivity operated as a predictable factor, as easily plotted – using the new methods of random selection – as the 'horizontal' sequence. Thus, the distinction between the sequences was effectively obliterated – freeing abstract physics from the burden of a double determination – making all computations, including those derived from astrophysics, fundamentally easier. Black's System, as it was called, ended at last any reliance on Old Man theory and practice.

Contributions by Unusuals had been more specific; they had to do with operations involving actual entities. So – at least as he, a New Man, saw it – his race had contributed the underlying pinions of the reshaped map of the universe, and the Unusuals had done their work in the form of application of these general structures.

The Unusuals, he knew, would not have agreed with this. But that did not bother him.

I have a G-three rating, he said to himself. And I have done a little; I have added a jot to our collective knowledge. No Old Man, however gifted, could have done so. Except perhaps Thors Provoni. But Thors Provoni had been absent for years; he did not stir the sleep of either Unusuals or New Men. Provoni raged and roamed the outskirts of the galaxy, searching, in his wrath, for something vague, something even metaphysical. An answer, to so speak. A response. Thors Provoni yelled into the emptiness, dinning out his noise in hope of a response.

God help us, Weiss thought, if he ever finds it.

But he was not afraid of Provoni; neither were his peers. A few nervous Unusuals muttered among themselves as the months turned into years and still Provoni did not die and was not captured. Thors Provoni constituted an anachronism: he remained the last of the Old Men who could not accept history, who dreamed of orthodox and thoughtless action . . . he lived in a dismal past, most of it not even real, a dreamless and dead past which could not be recalled, even by a man as gifted, as educated, as active as Provoni. He is a pirate, Weiss said to himself, a quasi-romantic figure, steeped in exploits. In a sense I will miss him when he dies. After all, we emerged from the Old Men; we are related to him. Distantly.

To his superior, Pikeman, he said, 'It's a burden. You are very right.' A burden, he thought, this task, this Civil Service rating. I can't fly up into the stars; I can't pursue something which does not exist into the remote windings of the universe. How will I feel, he wondered, when we destroy Thors Provoni? My work, he thought, will be just that much more tedious. And yet I like it. I would not give it up. To be a New Man is to be something.

Maybe I'm a victim of our own propaganda, he reflected.

'When Appleton comes in with his boy,' Pikeman said, 'give little Robert the entire test . . . then tell them the rating won't be ready for another week or so. That way the blow will be less hard to endure.' He grinned starkly and added,

'And you won't have to deliver the news – it'll be in the form of a written notice.'

'I don't mind telling them,' Weiss said. But he did. Because, probably, it would not be the truth.

The truth, he thought. *We* are the truth; we create it: it is ours. Together we have drawn a new chart. As we grow, it grows with us; we change. Where will we be next year? he asked himself. No way to know . . . except for the precogs among the Unusuals, and they saw many futures at one time, like – he had heard – rows of boxes.

His secretary's voice came from the intercom. 'Mr. Weiss, a Mr. Nicholas Appleton and his son are here to see you.'

'Send them in,' Weiss said, and leaned back in his large, imitation-naugahide chair, preparing to greet them. On his desk the test-form lay; he fiddled with it reflectively, seeing it, from the corner of his eye, assume various shapes. He squeezed his eyes almost shut for an instant . . . and made the form, in his mind, exactly what he wanted it to be.