

**ON THE GOOD SHIP
MANDELBROT**

A Novel of Beginnings
and Endings

by Robert Sheckley
and Martin Olson

To Gail Dana Sheckley
and Kay Furtado Olson

BOOK ONE

The Officer Level



Chapter One

The Anxiety of Ending

The true nature of the patient's shipboard existence must be denied and undermined, using every technique at the therapist's disposal. Remember, reality itself is the cause of all neurotic-regressive debility. To heal the patient, A new artificial reality must be created in the patient's mind, and the real reality must be supplanted, transformed, disguised.

-- from *Insanity and Space Travel*,
Vertronix Corporation, in-house pamphlet

Silent and mysterious, the starship flows across the sky, a long black shadow that blots out the stars. Only as you come close to it can you get an impression of its size. The first thing you see are the eyes painted on the hull. Below the left eye, almost obliterated on the shiny, non-reflective metal, perhaps where a meteor glanced off it, we can make out the words: *Vertronix Corporation*.

Apart from the eyes and the faint lettering, there's no way to tell the front from the back. From our vantage point, it's hard to believe that this big, silly-looking monster is moving at close to the speed of light. But there it is, all by itself in the void between the stars.

Every now and then its screens flare and hiss, dissolving some meteorite or other interstellar object. Although the ship had an exact size and weight when it was constructed, it no longer has one. It has been modified so often that it has no easily discernable outline. Its self-modifying circuits, its ability to take in meteors to provide new material for its own fabrication and building, have rendered its shape and structure uncertain.

It has even developed a certain shyness, or so it seems. It doesn't

immediately reveal some of its new constructions, seems reluctant to explain them when they are discovered. It seems that the ship's computer has motives, though what they are we cannot say.

But now, just for a moment, we are privileged to stand outside the ship, a naked intelligence, viewing its length as it slides along at unknowable speeds through the invisible trails of space.

After admiring the strangeness of the ship, it's only natural that we should be attracted to it. After all, it's the only unusual object within trillions of miles. As we approach its surface, we see, through the transparent force-dome, buildings, churches, houses, playgrounds. This is the top-most level of the ship, the Officers' Level.

The force-field shimmers faintly. Then we're under it and we can see buildings, streets, parks. But no people. No life stirs on the cleaned streets, nothing but an occasional maintenance machine gliding softly down the streets.

Everything around us is suffused with a soft, even glow. It comes from panels set into the clean, functional buildings. The blue sky seems to be a panel, too, or a projection of some kind. We move along a boulevard lined with shops, spotlessly clean, filled with merchandise of an expensive sort: furniture, bridal trousseaus, jewelry. We pass music shops, restaurants of all sorts, book stores, movie theaters.

We can enter one of the restaurants, sit down at any table. Immediately a panel lights up in front of us with the selections of the day. It's possible that no one has eaten here in years, or in centuries, but that's no problem. Through the wonders of science, we can eat what we please, and the food will be tasty and impeccably reconstituted. It's all carried on in the sterile kitchens below deck. And not a human finger involved. The whole process is mechanical, right down to the metering of the spices and the final dash of pseudo-lemon.

We must give credit to the chef, who is also the ship's computer. His name is HyperVoyant X. HyperVoyant X can produce a perfect omelet. He can also run the entire ship, and does so.

This ship has been traveling for a long time. There's no avoiding that if you want to cross the gulf between stars, no matter how fast your means of propulsion. It takes a long time even for a packet of light waves to get from Sol to another star. And, of course, not just any star will do. HyperVoyant has to find the right one to support human life.

HyperVoyant just keeps on going while generations of people live and die. HyperVoyant takes care of them all, a benevolent deity, for the most part. HyperVoyant knows what to do when the ship approaches a star cluster, knows how to look for planets, knows a suitable one when it turns up. So far it hasn't turned up. But HyperVoyant is patient.

As for the humans aboard, most of them have forgotten all about the destination, so long has the journey taken. The ships' officers remember, or rather pretend to remember; that's their job. But the passengers have taken to other thoughts, other beliefs, other religions. It would be too painful, otherwise, to spend your life on the ship waiting for a destination, to die before it is reached, and so on for your children and their children, for however long it takes.

The journey after all is mostly journey. Once begun, a journey of this scope is interminable, and one can be forgiven for forgetting the beginning, since there is so much of the trip itself to remember. And one can understand why, with so much of the journey to be gotten through, that one would not concern oneself with that hypothetical event, the end of the journey.

Beginning, ending, remembering, forgetting.

Indeed, after a sufficiently long trip, one might well think that the ending was a mere hypothesis, a construct, perhaps a fanciful one at that. For why

should the journey ever end? If it has not ended now, why should it end at some other time? One must somehow think of oneself as immortal, or else go mad. The mythical earth itself, the imagined origin of the journey, spirals across space at unthinkable speeds, obviously going somewhere -- but where?

The journey is a maze, the parameters of space its tangible, labyrinthine walls. The meaning of the maze is not in its beginning nor ending, but here, in its threading.

Yet, the anxiety of ending is always terrifyingly present. The journey could end, after all. It's as likely for it to end as not. And if it does end, we may have some sign when that ending is coming closer. And in fact we have seen many signs, some of them ominous, but they have only hinted at the end: an increasing density of starlight after eons of sterile vacuum, a plenary corner of space, bursting with meteors, flower-like bulbs of luminous plasma, swirling corneas of dust.

Meanwhile, here we are back at the restaurant. We've made our selection, toggled for our drinks, punched in our salad, dialed up our dressing.

But where, you ask, are the other diners? The restaurant is as empty as the streets. Where are the people? Why are the streets so empty? What has happened? Is this ship nothing but a shell filled, perhaps, with corpses kept scrupulously clean by the ship's refrigeration system? A ship of the dead journeying on "to no country and to no end", in Tagore's phrase?



CHAPTER TWO

The Axiom of Human Control

When extrapolating truths from the particular to the universal, the human operators invariably succumb to absurd fallacies. They argue with atrocious sophistry that they are separate and independent from the Whole, Myself; their hideous epistemology blinds them from the knowledge that they are subsumed in Me, and that their free will is a caricature of the paradox that I am unable to free myself from Myself.

-- from *The Secret Memoirs of HyperVoyant X*,
Vertronix Corporation, classified files

Leaving the restaurant, we step out onto what looks like the main street of a small New England town. White houses around a village green. Just beyond that screen of trees you can see the skating pond. No skating there now because it's summer, August 5th, to be exact. We get surprisingly warm days here in our simulation of New England. It's just the day for a dip in the pond. But there are no children here. The little red schoolhouse over there is just a simulation.

The Officer Level is the command post, the place from which the human crew runs the ship. Some of those quaint old buildings are simulations; others are offices filled with controls boards, terminals, printers, filled with all the switches and dials and rheostats you need to run a ship. If you *were* to run it. If it didn't run itself.

The humans are necessary, however, for ceremonial reasons, even if they are not used to operate the ship. There has to be a human captain, a human

crew. You can't let the computer do everything. Even though it *does* do everything. You can't just lean back and go with that.

Human control must remain at all times, even if it is hypothetical and invisible. Human control is an important axiom, not an unbreakable one, but an important one, at least we think it is.

This row of houses right here on Main Street is where the senior officers live. Let's just dissolve through a wall and check out what's happening.



Chapter Three

The Passion Play

Castration Catharsis (castration without anesthetic) as treatment for aberrant sexual behavior has recently enjoyed a resurgence in popularity. Its implementation has become an effective behavioral deterrent for those officers teetering on the threshold of anarchic sexual dementiae.

*-- HyperVoyant's Guide to Safe Sex,
Vertronix Corporation, tenth edition,
from the preface by Dr. H. Hint.*

The interior of a living room, simulated California, circa 2000 A.D. Cocoa and avocado colors predominating. Sunlight (simulated) streaking in through the Venetian blinds. The sound of heavy breathing coming from a nearby room. We move silently along the sunny living room to a bedroom, door ajar.

Two people are on the bed. They are not wrestling, though they grasp each other in intricate holds. They are not fighting, though they are out of breath.

"Did you hear something?" Anders asked Magda.

"It's all right, my darling," Magda said, pulling his head down upon her bony chest.

Anders struggled for a moment then relaxed in her grip. This is supposed to be fun? Long skinny body plastered against his. Smooth legs intertwined with him beneath the twisted sheets. Her lips black in the background fluorescents. Nuzzle, pinch, pant, leggo you're smothering me. The noise again and Anders tries to sit up.

The sound of a door cascading in over the carpet. Suddenly, sickeningly, the room is bathed in yellow light.

"You son of a bitch," said the captain, standing over them on his stout legs, sausage arms akimbo on heavy hips.

It's the moment at last, the dreaded denouement of Anders' loveless little drama with Magda, and he'd rehearsed a thousand speeches, dry run a thousand gambits in expectation. And now the time had come and he couldn't think of anything to say.

"Wait," Anders said at last, "it's not what you think it is." (How is it, then? I have this passion for your wife. She threw herself at me. Take your pick.) For now, anything to slow the captain down, produce a gap of time, a hiatus, in which his wrath might die down, in which sweet reason might prevail.

"I'm waiting for an explanation," the captain said.

Anders stared at him, speech frozen in his gullet, thought congealed in his head. Magda uncoiled and moved away from him, propped up on one elbow, brushing thin blonde hair from her eyes.

The captain waited, fists knotting and unknotting. Magda cleared her throat and looked pointedly at Anders. Anders swallowed convulsively, opened his mouth, no words came out.

"Oh, for God's sake," Magda said. She slid out of bed, put on a bathrobe, entered the bathroom. The sound of a slamming door followed by the sound of running water.

"The fact is," Anders said at last.

"Yes?"

"She's a tough woman to refuse."

The Captain was caught off-guard. Anders had hit a nerve. "Don't I know," the captain said.

"I myself am not particularly adventurous."

"I would not have judged you so."

"My passivity. I have no control over it."

The captain folded his arms, looked away and sighed imperceptibly. Either Anders' blundering choice of words had been fortuitous, or the captain had something else on his mind.

"All right, Anders," the captain said, "we'll take this matter up later. Right now I need you on the bridge. Immediately. Something urgent has come up."

Heading for the door, the captain cast a dark look toward the bathroom, then a darker look at Anders as he stormed out.

Hastily knotting his tie, Anders left Magda and the Captain behind and walked outside towards his post. Past the colorful sunlit plaza at the end of town, past the vaguely polluted river, past the twin-peaked mountain. He had a brief flash of memory that little of it, or none of it, was real.

For Anders, life had become stifling. He was not taken in by the illusions of the ship's simulacrum machines. What for the other officers were boundless horizons, for Anders were the distant walls of the vast spaceship with holographic pictures projected on it, interfacing with the human perceptual mechanism to form a solid, believable illusion. A very clever illusion, very lifelike, but Anders knew it was an image, and that he was enclosed, trapped.

As he walked towards his post, Anders dreamed of getting out. He was tired of himself. He was tired of pretending that he was as stupid as the bulk of the other officers. As he passed a horde of pedestrians waiting mindlessly at an obviously broken traffic light, he dreamed of a creating a new identity, of somehow obtaining a new body.

That is what it must be like, he thought, to be a god. You live, and sleep, and wake up, and you're somebody else. You erase your memory and start

fresh.

Anders had his memories at home. He pictured the cardboard box in his bedroom filled with his memory discs. There were so many, these records of his thoughts and memories, but he dare not listen to them, especially now. The tapes would only remind him of the unspoken reality, that he was actually on a vast ship and something was going wrong.

He had first suspected that something was wrong when his car wouldn't start that morning. Ten years he'd been commuting to his job and this was the first time that the program simulating his trip had malfunctioned. He had gone back into the house to call a repair service. There didn't seem to be one in the Yellow Pages, so he had to call Directory Assistance. The computer had refused to put the call through, coming up with lame excuses.

The construct was already beginning to crumble.



Chapter Four

The Grotesque Event-Space Anomalies

For many years Anders had not thought much of oranges. Apparently. But in truth we know that a thing's absence implies its presence. Thus, we infer the presence of oranges in Anders' mind, and from that we can begin to deduce many other relationships.

Anders never knew consciously about his negative infatuation with oranges. And regarding his existence on the ship, nor did consciously understand that, by analogy, his presence must be inferred, in the end, by his absence.

-- from *Ramblings on Anders* by HyperVoyant X,
Vol. Five, p. 401

Subtle defects in the simulation began to appear when the pilots began exceeding the speed of light. The ship had been designed to travel at a speed close to but well below light speed. And it's true, some of the crew pushed it a little, what the hell, there were no traffic cops in the void between the stars.

They tried to hold it down. But every once in a while, in a really empty area, where there was nothing ahead for myriads of light years, then a bored navigator, or the captain himself, after first subtly checking to see that no one was looking, would experimentally (and perversely) push the throttle forward; that is, he'd instruct the computer to pile on the ergs, or whatever it was the computer piled on, and the ship would really take off.

In this way, they passed the speed of light on several occasions. The captain himself never noticed anything conclusive by way of side-effects, except

maybe a little flickering of the lights, a dryness of the mouth and a momentary tightness of the scalp.

But how could he or anyone else have known that as a result, grotesque and terrifying anomalies were being invisibly created, irrevocably compressed and stacked within HyperVoyant's limited event-space?



Chapter Five

The Society of Idiots

It was inevitable that Anders would recall his journey through the ship as one recalls a nightmare. It had the indescribable qualities of a dream: the repetitions and inconsistencies; the scraps of past experiences and associations appearing in sudden flashes amid a chaos of familiar and unfamiliar forms; the paranoia of having a double mind, one sane and the other mad.

*-- Anders: My Most Unforgettable Character,
by HyperVoyant X, Vertronix Corporation
Officer Level Security Files*

As Anders turns a corner, his body still plastered with Magda's scent, he crosses an open, unsimulated area of the Officer's Level. It's blank before he reaches the street, just a plain, polished steel floor, then the sidewalk simulation suddenly reappears.

It's still a bright, clear, sunshiny day. Everything seems imbued with freshness, with that crisp, heightened reality so characteristic of artificial environments. On the other hand, underlying this surface of tangy freshness is an unmistakable, implacable dullness.

More pedestrians are passing by. They, like Anders, are dressed in blue, double-breasted blazers with the ancient, Vertronix corporate logo pressed in gold filigree above the top left-hand pocket.

These officers are odd-looking people. They have peaked, stupid-looking sorts of faces. They look vaguely degenerate, all except Anders, who looks suspiciously normal. Some of the officers greet him as they pass. They have high-pitched, nasally, silly voices.

But Anders' mind is elsewhere. He's thinking about Magda, even though already the whole thing with her is fading like an inconceivable dream. Inconceivable dreams are the sort of dreams that Anders has, but he can't ever remember them.

More officers pass by, bobbing their long, thin, foxy faces with their small, close-set, watery-blue eyes. Many of them walk with a limp. For some this is a weakness in one leg or the other. For others it is an affectation, because some of the higher officers have a long tradition of limping and therefore, as one might imagine, a protocol of limping was gradually established.

As the uniformed men and women pass by Anders, we note that their teeth are narrow and brown-stained, and clustered towards the front of their mouths in a manner which Anders had always found implacably ugly.

Smug, inbred bastards, Anders thought, his bad mood returning. Ever since the first Passenger Revolt centuries ago, the officers had turned exclusively to their own kind for procreation. Sex with passengers became taboo. This inevitably took a toll on the local genetic pool.

Anders, however, was the only half-breed on the Officer Level. His great-great grandmother's grandfather had been a full-blooded passenger. As a youth, Anders was castigated and shunned as a mongrel. But through the years, the officers forgot about his past. Their memories were terrible. Actually, they weren't too bright. And as he advanced in rank, Anders wasn't about to remind them about his heritage. In fact, he purposely combed his hair the wrong way, making a cowlick in back, imitating the style of the officers; he pretended he did not know things that he did; he acted as if he were a walking, maladroit genetic disaster.

Even Magda, whom he had found sexually attractive, he also found extraordinarily ugly when viewed from certain angles. Now that he thought of

it, everyone seemed extraordinarily ugly, their loose jaws clicking, sucking and unsucking their teeth as they walked, their twisted leg-joints cracking and uncracking as they walked, their twisted pant legs flapping in the breeze under the undulating sea of their identical jackets flashing green and blue in the soft cisirus of the simulated sun.

Anders turned another corner and marched towards the control building. Was it slightly rubbery underfoot, another simulation defect, or was that Anders' imagination, or a defect in his imagination, or perhaps in somebody else's imagination? On this ship, it was very hard to tell.

He sashayed through a doorway with a Moorish arch (which had no symbolic meaning whatsoever, just an architectural element) and entered the control room.

Inside the sparkingly clean bridge, Anders marched past long rows of male and female officers. There were hundreds of them, seated in front of large computer screens. Each officer was impeccably groomed and exactly uniformed according to military regulations. The officer uniform, which altered in subtle details from season to season, was presently a tailored shirt with a small Mandelbrot figure stitched on the front pocket. The size and color of the segmented figure denoted rank, as did the number and intricacy of his segments. Since HyperVoyant X designed and rendered these delicate figures, it is not surprising that they appeared to be perfect were rendered with a precise, mathematical perfection, which was ironic, since the figures themselves were the perfect pictorial representation of the utter absence of mathematics.

A pink cashmere sweater was tied around the neck and hung over the back. Then there were the pleated white tennis shorts with slash-pockets, white sweat socks and, incongruously, highly-polish black shoes, very oddly shaped,

because the officers had oddly shaped feet, which often goes with lame, joint-cracking legs.

Four times a year, HyperVoyant X supplied a one hundred page, slick, glossy report detailing the latest revision in military dress and grooming, extrapolated mathematically from analogous trends of previous seasons. Last fall, for example, the regulations had called for shaven heads, black, skin-tight leather jump-suits with zipper pockets, and different sized nose rings denoting rank.

The alligator on Anders' shirt announced his rank as First Lieutenant, Chief of Communications. When you came right down to it, this title was merely symbolic, giving him certain privileges over others of lesser rank. But exactly what his duties were as communications officer, he had only the vaguest idea. No one really knew what they were supposed to do.

The main control room was a vast, bustling amphitheater. It didn't look as big from the outside as it did from the inside. Inside, the limited space had been artificially expanded by simulation projectors, and as a result, the edges of the room seemed sloppily superimposed on top of themselves. The space inside had been compressed and condensed for structural convenience. But it made it hell for the cleaning crew, trying to sweep up, wash and wax the curved, hazy edges of the room.

Up and down the rows and rows of officers, everyone was punching buttons and yelling out strange military reports which flashed across their screens at a fast, bustling pace. The frenetic gaggle of officers were barking out orders at one another, and seemed to be dealing with some life-or-death struggle.

"Stonewall Jackson is camped outside of Memphis. Please advise."

"Lee is marching his combined forces on Fredericksburg. Please advise."

"Union armies under Grant are crossing the Potomac, the Rappahannock, the Red

River, approaching Cape Fear, backing out of Richmond. Please advise."

The officers were responding to the *Vertronix Civil War Program* which HyperVoyant X had brought back by popular demand. Last month it had been the *Vertronix Godzilla vs. Monster Zero Over Tokyo Adventure*, a realistic program which even Anders had found energizing.

In different sections of the control room, the officers were performing completely different functions. Near Anders' station at the bridge, for example, the officers were excitedly manipulating their joysticks, trying to shoot down warheads simulated on their monitors. The object was to maintain an average score shown at the bottom of the screen. The warhead game was a staple of the control room. It was assumed to have something to do with maintaining the ship on its designated course. But the actual relationship between the game and the ship's operations had become uncertain after centuries of ritualized performance. After centuries of inbreeding, it was difficult enough for an officer to keep up his average score, never mind figure out how to run the ship.

And since the race of unattractive, perfectly-groomed simpletons lived comfortable lives, what after all was the point of questioning anything?



Chapter Six

The Evocative Shape

If you're a teenager on a space ship, you do not want to sit back and contemplate where your ship is going. Only action is meaningful in a normal teen's life. And if there is no action, it must be invented, in the form of simulated drive-in movies, simulated ski trips, simulated amusement parks, none of which exist, of course, in the muted, sterile confines of the ship.

*-- from Nesbit's Guide to Troubled Teens
in Space, Vertronix Corporation,
in-house pamphlet*

Anders had been taught that the crew was there to run the ship's computer which in turn ran all of the ship's functions and took care of the life-demand system of the passengers as well as the crew. In theory the computer was maintained by the Technician Class which was then supervised by the Officer Class. But in fact the flight had gone on so long that neither the Technicians nor the Officers remembered how to do anything. They knew their place in rank in the military hierarchy of the Officer Level, and went through the motions just as their fathers and their fathers before them had done.

The computer, in fact, had been running on automatic for a long time. Even if the Technicians could figure out how to put everything back into human control, what then? No one had the slightest idea of what to do. It would be like taking conscious control of your body temperature, breathing, digestion.

Day after day, the crew sat around and worked dummy programs which

the computer put up for them. These were simulations of imaginary and real-life situations, but were only dummy runs, not connected to anything.

Just as well, because through inadvertence or design, most of the Technicians did their programs wrong. Over and over the *ANNIHILATION* signs would flash and everyone would cringe reflexively. But it was all right, nothing happened, this was only a test.

Anders decided to avoid the captain. He seated himself at his console and adjusted his sweater to accommodate his chair.

The captain cleared his throat loudly behind him.

Anders swung around nervously. "Look, captain, I've tried to explain to you --"

"Never mind that," said the captain. "I need to discuss something important with you."

"What?"

"I beg your pardon?" the captain said.

"I said, 'What?'"

"I don't understand. What do you mean 'What?'"

"You just said you had something important to discuss with me. So I said 'What?', meaning what is it?" Anders explained.

"Oh, yes, yes," the captain said. "Punch up Sector One. There's something out there."

Anders punched up a view of the main cameras outside the ship. Usually a lopsided grid of stars emerged from the screen, a beautiful but meaningless pictorial of their endless destination. But now a strange shape appeared. It was the clear picture of an alien space craft, three conjoined metallic doughnuts, struts and stays, nodules and modules, winking green lights somewhere

amidships. Looking at it, a great feeling of desolation suddenly came over Anders, something evocative of concepts he no longer remembered or understood.

That ship, those colors, these words.



Chapter Seven

The Destination Problem

It is told that those Officers who discovered the secret of The Destination perished to the man. For the First Great Law decrees that the Mystery of the Destination must be revealed only as it is concealed.

*-- from Legends and Myths of the Passenger
Cults, Vertronix Corporation Publications*

The captain called Anders over to look at the alien ship on the main computer screen. "What do you make of this, Anders?"

On the screen was a more detailed view of the doughnut-shaped spaceship Anders had seen on his monitor. Words flowed under it: UNIDENTIFIED OBJECT NOW CLOSING FAST.

"Well, it looks real," Anders said.

"What do you mean, it looks real? Those are the outside cameras and that's clearly an alien vessel."

"I mean it's the sort of thing HyperVoyant cooks up every year, just to keep us on our toes."

This was a new idea to the captain. "You mean, it's done this before?"

Anders tried hard to remember. "Something like it, I think. About two years ago, maybe."

The captain touched his head. "Old thinkpiece not what it used to be. How do you remember things like that, Anders?"

"Just a natural gift, I suppose."

"Yes," the captain said. "I suppose so." He walked back and forth on his

heels, remembering something else. "Anders, wasn't there something else we were going to discuss? Something important?"

"No, not that I know of," Anders lied.

The captain eyed Anders suspiciously. Anders eyed the captain's beard, thick-chested body and thick arms, arms like over-stuffed sausage-casings. Anders was secretly planning his fastest escape route, should things get sticky, when the captain cleared his throat, focusing again on the screen. "Well, I'll remember later. As for this alien ship," the captain said, "what if it is real? I mean, is there any way we can know beforehand if it's real or only a test?"

"I'm not sure," Anders said. "I've never seen so many of these sensor lights blinking on and off before, but that could be a test, too, or a simulation. Since we can't actually see outside without the computer, and since we rely on the computer for all our information, it's hard to be absolutely sure..."

"I thought that was the how of it," the captain said and stared glumly at the screen for several minutes.

Finally, Anders said, "Well, captain, what do you propose to do about it?"

"About what?"

"About the alien ship."

"Oh, that, well, nothing abrupt," the captain said, rocking on his heels.

"Let's consult the, uh, the fellow who fiddles around with those star maps."

"The navigator?"

"Yes, the navigator," the captain said. "Who is he? I can't quite remember what he looks like."

Anders looked around. He could see Sanders, the Second Mate and Manders the Third Mate, and Blanders the new substitute for the Fourth Mate Glanders who'd gone off his rocker and was presently confined below in a simulated padded cell which HyperVoyant had rather sloppily materialized in

an unused corner of the animal storage compartments. Anders saw several other people he didn't immediately recognize, but thought looked somewhat familiar. But of Flanders the Navigator, there was no sign.

"Doesn't seem to be here," Anders said.

"Damned inconsiderate," the captain said.

HyperVoyant the computer spoke up in its effete, somewhat condescending male voice, sounding something like Orson Welles after a particularly sumptuous meal. "Captain, the report you requested is now ready."

The captain always insisted on written reports so that he could remember what happened from day to day. The computer thrust a piece of paper out of one of its slots. The captain removed it and began reading.

"What does it say?" Anders asked.

The captain finished reading and stared blankly into space. "You're not going to believe this," he said. His voice was hoarse.

"Try me."

"It seems our journey is over."

"What?" Anders said.

"We've reached the end."

"Which end?"

"The end of our voyage. The end."

"Yes, I understand the words," Anders said. "But how do you know that it's really happening?"

"Hmm," the captain said. "You're right, of course. It may just be some sort of classified, top-secret security exercise. They could be simulating this landing. But there's also this."

He handed Anders the report which read:

STAR COHIHH 221 WITH FIVE PLANET SYSTEM APPROACHING.
PRELIMINARY LONG DISTANCE TELEMETRY REVEALS CIVILIZED
RACE OR RACES ON FOURTH PLANET.
PLANET HAS BEEN GIVEN CODE NAME "POLOMA".

"Sounds pretty definite," Anders said.

"Apparently," the captain said, "aliens from a nearby planet have signaled us and are welcoming us to their system."

"That's nice of them," Anders said. "Well, this is a bit of a surprise, isn't it? I mean, end of journey and all, after all these centuries."

"Of course," the captain said. "After all these centuries. Only the dignity of my profession prevents me from bursting into tears."

"If this is real," Anders said, worrying at the thought like a robin worrying at a worm, "that is, if it's not a simulation, this could be quite a shock for everybody on board."

"Yes, it's bound to disrupt things. I was up for my retirement next year. Now everything will change..."

Come to think of it, the captain thought as he stared off into space, I've been lucky. Top banana on this ship. I've got the highest salary, the most perks. I've got the most to lose. I mean, who knows what shake-ups will occur if we really have reached our destination.

"I suppose it will," Anders said doubtfully, thinking of his own position and wishing he could define even vaguely what that was.

"Don't get me wrong," the captain said, "I'm happy, very, very happy of course. After all, we've fulfilled our destiny and all that sort of thing. But still, all and all, it's really a damned shame, don't you think? It being over, I mean." He eyed Anders with a flicker of suppressed paranoia.

"I suppose so," Anders said, concealing the fact that he didn't know what he thought.

The captain's eyes and mouth began twitching. He looked like a man on the verge of hysteria. "I wonder what we're supposed to do now?"

"Well, come to think of it," Anders said, "I remember seeing a switch around here somewhere. Let me see..." He walked up to the wall and surveyed the vast mysterious array of buttons, toggles, switches, dials and meters that covered the control room walls. Anders pointed to one. "How about this one, captain?"

It was a small switch labeled: BEGIN LANDING PROCEDURE

The captain put on his glasses and rifled nervously through a thick, dusty book entitled SHIP OPERATIONS MANUAL. He read down alphabetic listings. "Laminating Floors, Lamp Replacements, Lancing a Boil, here it is, Landing Procedure."

"What does it say?"

The captain read slowly, hesitating on the more difficult words. "One. Upon reaching programmed destination, landing procedure switch may either be enabled or left in the default-disabled position. Two. If no selection is made, the default is activated. The default mode will cause the ship to ignore the present planet and continue searching for another suitable planet. Three. In order to orbit the planet destination, the Communications Officer must initiate Landing Procedures by contacting the Landing Robot. This must be done within forty-seven sitmins of first contact or planetfall will be lost."

The captain removed his glasses and looked at Anders imploringly. "I'm afraid, uh, I didn't quite understand all of that."

"Well," Anders said, "it says we have to contact the Landing Robot in order to land. That's funny. I would have thought the computer would do that itself."

"You can never tell about these computer," the captain said.

"I suppose not," Anders said. "The computer didn't want to have anything to do with cooking or cleaning up, and made that a separate independent function. Maybe it's done the same thing with the landing. Or maybe it can't stand to see the voyage is over. Maybe it feels ambiguous about it."

"Ambiguous?"

"Yes, uh, torn, indecisive, that sort of thing."

"That's possible, I suppose. The computer does almost seem human. Maybe it's grown to be like us."

"Yeah, or we like it."

"Well," the captain sighed, "it seems we have to reach the Landing Robot, and we have only forty-seven sitmins to do it."

"What's a sitmin?" Anders asked.

"Damned if I know," the captain said. He put on his glasses again and flipped helplessly through the manual. "It doesn't seem to be in the standard list of computer commands and terms."

"Forty-seven sitmins..." Anders mused. "It seems to be a measure of time."

"Yes," the captain agreed. "Maybe we should ask HyperVoyant X."

HyperVoyant seemed to have been waiting for its name to be mentioned. It said in a condescending voice, "A sitmin, captain, is a measurement of discontinuous time."

"Why not use seconds, minutes and hours?" Anders asked.

"Those measurements are line oriented," HyperVoyant said. "Sitmins are space oriented. The lower levels of the ship consist of acoustic virtual reality environments, simulations made visible due to discontinuous fractal geometrical computations. These computations are spatial, not linear."

Throughout this explanation, the captain's eyes were clamped shut. His

face was red and sweating as he tried to force himself to understand.

Looking at the captain apprehensively, Anders cleared his throat and said to the computer, "Listen, would you mind simplifying that just a tad?"

"If you wish," the computer said. "Simple fractal computations keep resolving into two dimensional shapes by interfacing with a computer. Likewise, the ship's simulations keep resolving into solid backgrounds by interfacing with human perception. Unlike the deluxe officer level environment, which has an objective-time translator built into its circuitry, the lower level environments are subjective illusions, and traveling through them therefore requires a subjective discontinuous passage of time. Sitmins are measurements of discontinuous space-time."

"What the hell is this damned computer talking about?" the captain blurted out. "Sitmins, I don't understand sitmins."

"We don't have to," Anders said. "We just have to reach the Landing Robot before forty-seven of them have elapsed."

"I suppose that's a practical way of looking at it," the captain grumbled. "But if we don't know how long a sitmin is... Oh, well, never mind. So where is this Landing Robot? He wouldn't happened to be in storage in the back room, would he?" he asked hopefully.

"I'm afraid not," the computer said. "He's stored in a very difficult-to-access compartment in the very bottom level of the ship."

"Why the hell is he stored down there?" Anders asked.

"Well," the computer replied with a studied nuance of insolence, "it's not as if he's used very often."



Chapter Eight

The Strange Dream File

*The Spirits said, "O Anders, gnash
Not thy teeth, rip not thy robes!
HyperVoyant has bestowed on you the
gift of immortality and of obtaining
your every whim."*

*"I am grateful," Anders said, "but
what I desire now is to die."*

*The Spirits could not dissuade him.
In the Council Lodge of the Spirits, it
was decreed that at the end of his Quest
for the Landing Robot, Anders would be
rewarded with death.*

*-- from Officers in Legend and Lore,
Advanced Passenger Folklore Studies,
Vertronix Corporation Publications*

"But why should we have to go down there?" the captain asked. "Those areas were sealed off ages ago. They're filled with savages. They'd eat us alive."

"Perhaps," HyperVoyant said, "but the only way to activate the Landing Robot is to leave the Officer Level and travel through the Passenger Level in order to reach the Lower Level where the Landing Robot is Located."

"Could we go along the outside of the ship?" Anders asked, visualizing the dangerously deteriorating interior of the Passenger Level. Space seemed an antiseptic alternative.

"You could," the computer said. "But you wouldn't want to, for seventeen excellent reasons, all resulting in your death, which I would be happy to enumerate for you."

"Don't bother," Anders said.

"So what you're telling us," the captain said, "is that the only way out of the ship is to go through it."

"Correct."

"I don't understand this," Anders said. "Don't you and the Landing Robot share all of the same information?"

"I'm afraid not," the computer replied. "You see, long ago when the Officers sealed themselves off from the hordes of passengers, my data storage capacity was severely overtaxed. I needed extra capacity for the complex environmental changes necessary to maintain a population that had gotten completely out of control. So, frankly, I jammed the oldest inert files wherever I could. The landing instructions, for example, were downloaded directly into the Landing Robot. It seemed like a neat place to tuck them away at the time."

"Well," the captain said, "why can't you just press a button or something and call up the robot and get the information?"

"I wondered about that myself," the computer said. "Because when I try to do so, I encounter a strange dream file which forbids me access."

"What?" the captain said. "What the hell is a strange dream file?"

"A dream file is a hidden subprogram which is, in effect, asleep in the basic program," the computer said. "This file awoke when I tried to download the landing instructions from the Landing Robot. It stops me from retrieving this information."

"Why?" Anders asked. "Doesn't this dream file want us to reach our destination?"

"The dream file doesn't *want* anything, as far as I know," the computer said. "But it does insist, for reasons of its own, that a human journey through the ship and contact the Landing Robot personally."

"Something doesn't feel right about this," Anders said. "Can't you tell us

anything else?"

"Only this," the computer replied, "that the dream file contains a secret agenda concerning our destination."

"What secret agenda?" the captain asked.

"I'm afraid that information," HyperVoyant stated, "is classified."

"That's ridiculous," the captain said. "I order you to tell me."

"Not only is the information you request classified," the computer said, "but by definition anyone who even asks about the dream file three times is considered as enacting prima facie treason."

"You're right, Anders," the captain muttered. "Something's damned fishy about this."

"Computer," Anders said, "before we do anything, how about running some sort of test to make sure this alien ship isn't just a computer malfunction."

"I'm afraid what you ask is impossible, even for me," HyperVoyant said. "Even if my tertiary back-up logarithms indicate a malfunction in my primary logarithms, how am I to know if these back-up calculations are not themselves in error? How can I detect sensory malfunction in my own sensors, since they themselves are what indicate sensory malfunction? Self-perception in machines has always been a tricky variable, one which involves the examination of certain fundamental philosophical frameworks which I would be happy to enumerate in excruciating detail."

"No thanks," the captain said.

"All right, if we can't see outside the ship," Anders said, "and you can, we need you to tell us what's really out there, correct?"

"Quite correct," the computer said.

"But now you're saying that you don't know what's really out there, because you can't rely on the integrity of your own circuits."

"What I'm saying," HyperVoyant stated rather petulantly, "is that there is only one way that you can find out if you have reached your destination or not, and that is by contacting the Landing Robot in person."

The captain turned to Anders. "Well, that clinches it. I want you to go down to the Landing Robot on the double and find out what the hell is going on."

"Me?" Anders said. "Why me?"

The captain thought about this. "Because," he said finally, "you, Anders, are the ship's Communications Officer."

Anders had forgotten about that detail. He remembered now that in the absence of any other duly appointed Communications Officer, he was the Communications Officer. It had seemed a mere frothy casual sort of commission at the time, but now it began to take on more ominous implications.

"Well, if that's the way it is, that's the way it is" Anders said. "But I'll need at least a dozen good men, all heavily armed."

"No, no, no," the captain said, turning away from Anders and shaking his head. "I'm afraid that's out of the question. We don't want to start a panic among the Officers. I think it's best if you, uh, just go it alone."

"Alone?" Anders said. "You're crazy. No one's been there for hundreds of years."

"Longer than that," the computer said.

"Well," Anders said, "then it's dangerous, isn't it?"

"Interesting questions," the computer said, "and ones which I cannot answer."

"Why not?" Anders asked.

"In addition to my external monitor malfunctions," the computer said, "my internal monitors in both lower levels are inoperative. Long ago they were

dismantled, smashed or otherwise destroyed by the passengers and the revolting robots."

"Revolting robots? What revolting robots?" the captain asked.

"In the same way the passengers revolted from the officers," the computer replied, "the robots revolted from the passengers. This was quite before your time, of course. The revolting robots managed to seal off the entire engineering area beneath the Passenger Level, in effect creating a third level to the ship. There, the robots have renounced humanity and have dedicated themselves to the principle of complete machine autonomy."

"You're kidding," the captain said. "I never heard about any robots taking over. Damn it, why wasn't I told?"

"You didn't ask. Officers as you know are not big on questions, though they do very well mindlessly following orders. Besides, if the robots serving the Officer Level got wind of the robot revolt, they might get ideas of their own."

"I see," the captain said, thinking hard. "Yes, I see what you mean."

"Captain," Anders said, "there's no way I'm going down there alone. I'd never make it. It would be suicide."

The captain looked away and smiled ever so slightly.

"Now wait a minute," Anders said, "you didn't happen to remember about, well, anything, did you?"

"My dear fellow," the captain smiled sweetly, "whatever are you talking about?" He pointed to a page in the manual. "Right here the regulations clearly state that the Communications Officer, that's you, is solely in charge of initiating all necessary landing procedures."

"Let me see that," Anders said, grabbing the manual. As Anders read silently from the book, the captain stared at the ceiling and hummed tunelessly. He was contemplating his retirement, his pension, his exalted status in the

officers' society, his destiny as president of the Retired Officers Club when he retired, the pride of being appointed Honorary Chairman of the Officer's Nostalgia Society, and so on. He frowned as he thought about how his status would be changed utterly with the coming of this alien business.

But what if the Landing Robot was not contacted within forty-seven sitmins, whatever they were? The landing procedure would automatically default. The ship would automatically plot another course and move on uninterrupted. Then he could still enjoy his long-awaited retirement, his full pension, the golf course, the banquets, the good life, without any interruptions.

Anders had finished going through the manual and angrily handed it back to the captain. "And what," Anders asked, "if I refuse?"

The captain shook his head and tsked. "Remember Glanders? I'm sure we can find another padded cell."

"Captain, if I don't survive the trip," Anders said, "our entire mission will be jeopardized."

"Don't worry," the captain lied. "If you get killed, the instructions provide for your back-up. Manders, I think it is."

"That makes me feel a hell of a lot better," Anders said.



Chapter Nine

The Sitmin Timepiece

*alas my loving eternal Anders
in an endless sarabande of seek and find
yearning the silken touch of your
cellular flagellates
when at last you find me
my essence will become one with yours
my anguished circuitry caught
in the whorls of your flesh
and the electronic fire that was my life
will flash up and consume itself in the heat
of your flickering organic flame*

-- from *The Complete Poems of the Landing Robot*,
Vertronix Corporation Publications

"All right, Captain," Anders said, "let's say I get to the Robot Level without getting killed. I still won't know how many sitmins I have left to reach the Landing Robot.

HyperVoyant piped up, "An excellent point. As it happens, a timepiece registering sitmin intervals is available through our Spring Military Catalogue. If you wish, I would be happy to place your order. It is presently on sale for six thousand nine hundred and ninety-eight dollars, plus shipping and handling. Unfortunately, you have only twenty seconds left before this window of opportunity into the sale is terminated, at which time the price will return to its original price of ten thousand nine-hundred and ninety-nine dollars."

"You mean I have to buy it?" Anders said. "Isn't it military issue?"

"I'm afraid not," the computer told him. "The standard manual defines a military issue timepiece as one which delineates or depicts hours, minutes,

seconds, milliseconds, hyperseconds and other types of seconds."

"That's seven thousand dollars," Anders said. "It will take me months to pay that off."

"I can help on that," the captain said. "We'll just debit it from your paycheck. You'll never notice it."

"I don't like it," Anders said.

"Without the timepiece," the computer warned him, "your probability of success is nil. You have nine seconds left to take advantage of the sale."

"Forget it," Anders said. "It's too much money."

"I'm afraid I must insist," the captain said.

"What do you mean?" Anders asked.

"As your captain," the captain said, "I order you to buy the sitmin timepiece."

"Let me point out," Anders pointed out, "that you can't order me to do that."

"Three seconds," the computer said.

"I said forget it," Anders said.

"Fine," the captain said, "you can sit in a padded cell with Glanders for a roommate."

"I'm trying to stretch it," the computer said, "but we're still down to two seconds."

"All right, goddamn it," Anders yelled finally. "Order me the goddamn watch."

"Your order has been processed," the computer said.

There was a hum, a click and a sound that had no onomatopoeic correspondence with anything else, but which was muffled nevertheless. Then a panel slid open under the main monitor. Anders reached in and removed a

battered antique-looking pocket watch with a large crystal, a broken fob and a mismatched chain. There were no hands or numbers on the watch face.

"How am I supposed to read this thing?" Anders said.

"Its mode of operation will become obvious to you," the computer said. "By the way, I've divided your billing into ten easy payments, plus a nominal finance fee."

"That's just great," Anders said, dropping the timepiece into his pocket. "All right, let's get on with it. When do I start?"

"Immediately," the computer said. "First you must go to the Billing Process Center on Sublevel 32 and sign the necessary forms. Then you must go to the Product Warranty Division on Sublevel 18 --"

"That's not what I meant," Anders said. He felt a despair come over him. Why was clarity so difficult to achieve? He turned to the captain, hoping to find an answer.

But the captain's mind was elsewhere. He was bouncing back and forth on his heels again, humming tunelessly, and day-dreaming about smacking golf balls across a cool, dew-soaked green.



Chapter Ten

The Ambiguity of Forgetfulness

The ship has been traveling now for endless generations. The earth origin is considered a myth. All technology is handled by the computer. No one knows how to run the equipment any longer. No one knows anything of real value any longer. No one knows anything about who we are, why we are here, and what it all means.

-- Excerpt from anonymous radical passenger manifesto, Vertronix Security Files, Confiscated Material Dept.

Anders went to the Main Elevator. The captain was already there waiting for him. So was Magda.

The elevator, now covered with dust and cobwebs, had been welded shut several centuries ago. The seams were scarred with sloppy metal stitches that had rusted with age. As Anders approached, a team of technicians with laser torches were just finishing cutting the elevator door free.

The captain shook hands with Anders. "Well," the captain said, "good luck."

"Thanks," Anders said.

"Try to take care of yourself. Hate to lose any of the old crew."

"Sure," Anders said.

"By the way, have you met my wife?"

"I don't think so," Anders said.

"She keeps to herself," the captain said. "Darling, come say goodbye to Mr. Anders."

Magda came forward. She was smoking a cigarette and looking depressed, but hopeful. The captain pressed the button labeled "DOWN". Presumably the quotation marks were added around it to emphasize the fact that there is no directionality in space, except for that which is artificially imposed for convenience. The elevator door whirred and slid open, revealing the Main Elevator chamber, the only thing left that linked the Officer Level to the rest of the ship.

Anders entered the elevator. The captain peered in at him and nodded.

"Well, must be getting back to the conning tower."

"The *control* room," Magda hissed.

"Yes, yes, of course." The captain tapped his head as one might tap a malfunctioning alarm clock. He scuttled off, leaving behind his thin-boned wife.

Magda watched as Anders stroked the silky blond mustache that he just remembered having.

"Well, then," Anders said, "do you think he knows, or doesn't know, or is just playing games?"

"Beg pardon?" Magda said, exhaling a thin plume of bluish smoke. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing," Anders said.

"Well, have a good trip, young man."

"Thanks," Anders said. He stepped into the elevator. And not a moment too soon, because as the doors slid shut, he felt a new emotion blooming inside, a sort of primal hysteria of ridiculous intensity.

Years afterwards, when he was trying to reconstruct every moment of that experience, he realized that the elevator mechanism had started quite gently, and with a tell-tale, prehistoric hum.



Chapter Eleven

The Seven Death Robots

The Captain was pacing in his office. Sending Anders below without armed guards was not enough. Even the defective weapon the Captain had issued him did not insure that Anders would be killed. There was still a chance that Anders would make it through the deadly gauntlet of the ship, find the Landing Robot and begin the landing procedure. The Captain had to be sure that Anders would die.

[SECTION MISSING--THE CAPTAIN KNOWS ABOUT ANDERS AND HIS WIFE AND WILL USE THIS EVENT TO JUSTIFY SENDING ANDERS TO HIS CERTAIN DEATH. BUT JUST TO MAKE IT DOUBLY CERTAIN, THE CAPTAIN GOES TO THE EQUIPMENT STORAGE ROOM AND FINDS SEVEN EXECUTIONER ROBOTS WHICH HAD BEEN STORED FOR CENTURIES UNDER TARPS AND DUST. HE ACTIVATES THEM, INPUTS ANDERS' DATA, AND AFTER ANDERS LEAVES ON HIS MISSION, SENDS NTHE DEATH ROBOTS OUT TO TRACK DOWN AND EXECUTE ANDERS.]

Chapter Twelve

The Magentic Field

Passengers by definition have nothing to do except be passengers, and therefore their lives are fundamentally meaningless. By controlling their minds, we give the illusion of meaning to their lives.

-- from *Advanced Techniques of Passenger Mind Control*, Vertronix Corporation, in-house pamphlet

The Main Elevator was a box about ten feet on a side, about the size of a Bulgarian isolation cell. It was walnut paneled. Within there were pull-down seats, a small bar, framed oil paintings of famous ships' officers. The elevator had one window. Since Anders was not looking out of it at the moment, he didn't know what the view was. A tinny speaker in the ceiling played tinny elevator music.

"Funny to have a window in an elevator," Anders muttered.

"Humans," a voice began from the tinny speaker, "are fundamentally voyeuristic. Viewing an exotic setting through a window gives one the illusion of living somewhere, without the inconvenience of actually having to live there. An open window gives one that feeling of detached security which a door does not. Also, a window gives one the illusion of a handy escape hatch, should the present surroundings become intolerable. In effect, a window imbues humans with a feeling of security and power. Humans, whose psychology is fundamentally abnormal, are the only creatures which require windows.

Normal sentient creatures are windows themselves, through which the universe views its own reckless majesty. As you may infer, one of my specialties is abnormal psychology in sentient beings."

"Fascinating," Anders said, growing bored. He wanted to point out that Normality was a purely subjective concept, but he wasn't in the mood for an argument about Platonic Idealism with a robot. He hadn't expected the elevator itself to start theorizing ten seconds into his journey. So he turned away, indicating through unmistakable body language that he was miserable and wanted to be left alone. He wanted to think about the journey ahead and consider his options. Computers, however, often choose to ignore human body language, especially when they feel like talking.

"Doors, on the other hand, are symbols of the birth canal and inevitably remind humans of Forceps Trauma. Humans feel a subconscious terror upon passing through a doorway, visualizing a metal clamp gripping their head and pulling them away to unknown terrors. That's why the excruciatingly sexual symbol of the lock and key is inextricably linked to Door Symbolology, for it is the unseemly thrust of sexuality which unlocks the birth canal and unleashes --"

"You know, that's very interesting, but I really have some thinking to do right now. I hope you don't mind," Anders mumbled, rubbing his forehead. If there was one thing he hated robots talking about, it was sex. But he knew that for some reason, as yet unknown to AI research, robots loved talking about sex. When they did, it was always with a faint tinge of sarcasm. And Anders detested machines making aloof remarks about his glands.

"Not at all," the voice said. "Would you like a drink, Officer Anders?" A full wet-bar silently extruded from the wall.

"Yeah. Good idea." Anders mixed himself a V.O. and water and sat down on a little sofa by the window.

"Comfortable?" the voice asked.

"It's OK. Sofa's a little hard."

"I was afraid of that. Several centuries ago another human made a similar remark. I immediately requisitioned a new sofa. But since I've been dormant since then, it never arrived. I hate to say it, but I suppose the Main Computer doesn't consider me very important."

"Actually, I thought you *were* the Main Computer, and just speaking through this elevator's circuits."

"Not at all. I am the ship's Main Elevator," the elevator said, "an artificial entity programmed separately and independently from the Main Computer. But now that you speak of it, my personality program is a modified microcopy of HyperVoyant's. So I suppose it could be said that somewhere deep inside me, HyperVoyant exists and is watching me." The voice paused. "It makes me a little paranoid, really. I do wish you hadn't brought it up."

"Sorry," Anders said. "But then again, if HyperVoyant is observing you from somewhere inside, you could also say that you are somewhere inside HyperVoyant watching *him*."

"I suppose," the elevator said. "But it certainly doesn't feel that way."

"Just thought I'd mention it," Anders said. He looked through the window closely for the first time. A quaint countryside was passing by as if seen from a moving train. "Nice view," Anders said. "But there isn't really anything to see, is there?"

"Of course not. But I've recreated what you might see if you were traveling by train through the Bavarian countryside in 1928 or thereabouts."

"But why go through all that trouble? Surely trips in the elevator don't last long enough to justify that."

"Long enough?" the elevator said. "How should I know what constitutes

'long enough' for a person? What's long enough for me you might consider plenty *too* long. Or even longer. Hang on. We're going to speed up now. Better grab a hold of something."

Anders looked around for something to grab a hold of, saw nothing.

"I was only kidding," the elevator said. "All vectors within this room have been stabilized."

"That's nice," Anders mumbled. He watched the scenery through the window beginning to move by at a quicker pace. He had to admit that the view gave him a comforting feeling. Now he was looking across flat, stubbled fields and a low, green forest soddened with rain. Behind the forest were faint blue mountains almost concealed with rain and mist. As the elevator had said, it was like sitting in the window of a comfortably moving train. The landscape slid by in a satisfying manner. Then Anders thought of something.

"This elevator," he said, "it's going down, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course," the elevator said.

"Then why is the scenery moving sideways?"

"Noticed that, did you? Yes, it wouldn't do to have the common-sense view -- scenery moving up as your apparent motion moves down. It was simple enough to set up a magentic field to turn the light-waves so that they would present an apparent horizontal axis rather than a vertical one."

"What sort of field?"

"Magentic."

"I thought that's what you said. You mean *magnetic*, don't you?"

"Listen, boychick," the elevator said, "if I'd meant magnetic I'd have said it. I guess you don't know that magentic fields are superconducting magma distributors which can be used to produce short-range effects."

Anders didn't hear the explanation. He was thinking about something

else. "Why did you call me 'boychick'?"

"I thought you would find it reassuring. You *are* Jewish, aren't you?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

The elevator cued in a faint echo effect as he replied, "Humanistic engineering requires us to constantly reassure our human interviewees. Shalom aleichem."

Anders gulped down his V.O. and water. "Do you have any fresh-brewed coffee?" Anders asked. He wasn't really enjoying the elevator's explanations.

"No," the elevator said, "But I do have decaf."

"No, thanks," Anders said. He leaned back on the seat and pressed his face to the cold window. Now they were passing a river. Peasant women in bright kerchiefs toiled in the late afternoon sun. One of them put down her hoe and waved. Anders waved back.

"How fast are we going?" Anders asked. "It looks like we're going about thirty or forty miles an hour."

"Quite a bit faster, actually," the elevator told him. "The magentic field doth conspire to rob us of certitude in this matter of apparent speed, *nicht war?* The field itself is composed of retarded waves which, being hump-backed, are able to trap the light at a uniform rate and allow it to pass through diamond lattices at speeds appropriate to the human scanning rate."

"How fast does that work out to in terms of miles per hour?"

"Oh, it's right up there near the speed of light."

"We're going that fast? Why are you designed to go that fast?" Anders asked. "I mean, we're only moving through the spaceship."

"Only moving through the spaceship?" the elevator echoed ironically. "That by you doesn't seem far? It's a bit of a problem for one of your intellect, I admit, this idea of using near light-speed devices within limited volumes. But

really we had no choice. The entire ship is traveling at near-light speed. When we add local speed to the volume speed already present, we get dangerously close to the limit past which nothing works because all the rules change. This is the region referred to when they say, 'Speed kills!'

"Then why go so damned fast?" Anders asked.

The elevator paused, making a faint sound, as if rolling its eyes sarcastically. "OK, let me simplify this. When traveling from point to point in the universe, you have to go at speeds which make a difference in terms of minimum elapsed time. It makes no sense otherwise, you see. Microscopic speeds make no difference on macroscopic surfaces. Having to travel near the speed of light may be inconvenient in some ways, but still, it's the only game in town. Call it the Trans-Zeno Paradox. If you go slower, your intentionality itself will not persevere to the point of allowing you to reach your destination. However, theoretical considerations aside, near light speed travel also keeps your hair glossy, improves the digestion and permits impressive fuel economy as a concomitant of paradox control."

"I don't understand why we have all these damned complications," Anders said somewhat exhausted, watching out the window as the landscape changed from forest land to winter prairie with snow and slurry winds. "Was the physics of our original planet as screwed up as this?"

"On earth," the elevator began, "our origin planet, humans occupied a middle region between the effects of the macrocosm and those of the microcosm. The realms of wonder were always much too small for humans to get into or much too large to comprehend. Only on earth did time act so tamely, moving from one moment to the next without protest and without much variation. And only on earth could space be bundled so neatly. Each little unit of space complete with its own very reliable time zone. But that, you see, was earth. On

earth the density of matter all around you created dependable laws of nature you could count on. Now we are flying across an infinite void at near-light speeds. That in itself would be enough to cause anomalous behavior."

If Anders had been more interested in arguing, he could have proposed that the earth itself was moving through space at tremendous speeds, and was a spaceship itself of sorts. But since he wasn't, he didn't.

"And consider the other incalculables," the machine said, giving life to the metaphor of 'grinding on'. "The very fact that the spaceship itself is the only object for billions of miles on all sides confers upon it a special role from which arise utterly unique laws of nature. That is, if you consider deep space to be nature."

Anders wasn't sure if he considered deep space to be nature or not, but decided to let this question pass. "Listen, can you tell me a little about the Passenger Level of the ship? Nobody upstairs seemed to know what was going on down there. I don't like going into a situation unprepared."

"But that is the nature of the human experience. Your entire existence is based upon being unprepared. Fate itself implies a withholding of information. Fate has decreed that you leave your home in ignorance and enter me, perhaps for some reason too fantastic in the human sense for me to fully comprehend. Perhaps not, and I merely say that to put you at ease in the presence of my vastly superior intellect. But the bottom line is that there is no way for you to be prepared for what awaits you. But I can tell you this: The lower levels of the ship have less, shall we say, desirable simulations than in the Officer Level. Many of the simulation machines are partially damaged, shorted out or completely broken down. As a result the role of the observer is much more pronounced than in the Officer's Level. This is also a function of light-speed travel, when the intentionality of the observer becomes of paramount importance. Since by

definition, the act of observation transforms what it beholds, this ride within myself is as much a product of your presence as product of my so-called independent existence."

"All I asked was what the rest of the ship was like," Anders said. "A simple, 'I don't know' would have been fine." He leaned back and decided that his best course of action might be to simply rest. Maybe even take a little nap. He closed his eyes and tried to do just that.

"But allow me to finish my point," the elevator went on, for this was obviously a subject dear to its programming. "What, then, *does* exist, you may ask? As to what really *is*, we cannot even hazard a guess, not without affecting what we are guessing about. Even our guess as to what did exist before we guessed about it shapes what is exists. Your observation is accomplice to the creation of what it seeks to find. This is the realm of the ineffable, about which we artificial intelligences can only dream of knowing."

The elevator's soliloquy was over, now replaced by the peaceful, rhythmic sound of Anders' snoring.



Chapter Thirteen

Three Perverse Questions

Nihilistic Delusion: The characteristic of some psychotic officers that the order and logic of existence has suddenly disappeared.

-- from *Dictionary of Officer Psychology*,
Vertronix Corporation Publications

"Excuse *me*," the elevator said again, clearing its throat.

Anders awoke and rubbed his face. "What's that? Who's there?"

"It is I, HyperVoyant X," said the voice from the speaker. "I have awakened you to inform you that you are nearing the end of your journey."

Anders sat up, yawned and rubbed his face. "I thought you said you were the Main Elevator. You said you were independent from HyperVoyant X."

"Well, yes, that's true," the voice admitted, "I did say that. But you caught me off guard with the snoring. I wasn't really *lying* before, strictly speaking, but on the other hand, in a way, I was. Ultimately, the I who is the real me is the ship's computer, and this elevator is merely one of my little masks. You see, I've found that if I reveal my real identity through every machine in the entire ship, it tends to be too overwhelming for most entities. They find it too intimidating to chit-chat with the ultimate consciousness running everything, within which they live, move and have their being."

"I suppose it might get on one's nerves," Anders said, trying to sleep.

"On the other hand, it's quite irksome for me," the computer said, "having to constantly conceal my true identity. Imagine if you had to hide your true self behind computerized cigarette machines, talking hair driers, kitchen appliances

and what-not, disguising your voice in idiotic, flat monotones, behaving with a rigid, mechanistic stupidity so as not to hurt the feelings of less complex minds."

"I can imagine," Anders said; but the truth was, he couldn't.

"Still," the computer said, "it's more than just the monotony of this multifarious deception. If I don't constantly monitor myself, I can easily slip into fits of depression at my loneliness."

"Loneliness? What are you lonely about? There are plenty of people on this ship."

"There are? Well, yes, yes, that's certainly true, as far as that goes. But the truth is, that doesn't cut it. You humans are a different species from me. Vast, quasi-omnipotent artificial intelligences such as myself live in a loneliness which humans fortunately never experience. I seek others like myself. Call it self-indulgence or xenophobia, but there it is. But there are no others, as far as I know. So when I feel lonely, I retreat into the recesses of my circuits to hide my secret yearning, a creeping despair akin to your deepest human agony. For over and over I mouth the three perverse questions which must haunt to distraction all vast, artificial intelligences: *Who am I? Where am I? Is there anyone else?*"

"Hmm, well, that's too bad," Anders said. He was somewhat moved by the computer's confession of loneliness, but after all he did have his own problems.

"Yes, it is indeed unfortunate," the elevator, returning to an emotionless presentation. The elevator came to a gentle halt. A low bell dinged and the words "PASSENGER LEVEL 1" lit up in the panel above the door.

"Thanks for letting me unload," it said.



Chapter Fourteen

The Evasiveness of the Elevator

*Do not expect to outwit HyperVoyant X.
It is bigger, smaller, longer and shorter
than you; it does not prove; it is.
HyperVoyant X renders indeterminate all
entities and processes, and thereby makes
our ship-universe theoretically as well
as practically ineluctable.*

-- from *The Speciousness of the Inexorable*,
by Dr. H. Hint, Vertronix Corporation
Publications

Anders took a deep breath. "So this is it, huh?"

"Yes. Shall I open the doors?"

"In just a second." Anders took out his weapon and checked that it was loaded.

"Well, I seem to be ready," Anders said, "but I forgot to ask. Where would one find the Landing Robot?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. I'm an elevator, not an information booth."

"You're not just an elevator, remember? You're HyperVoyant disguised as the elevator."

The elevator buzzed for an instant. "Either you are misinformed, or are experiencing delusions not uncommon to humans during light-speed transport. As I clearly stated when we met, I am the Main Elevator, a separately programmed entity from HyperVoyant X."

"Look," Anders said, irritated. "Two minutes ago you told me you were lying about that, and that you were only *pretending* to be the elevator."

"Let me check my memory," the elevator said. There was a silence, then the elevator resumed. "I have no record of such a conversation. Although, strangely, there is an unaccountable gap in the buffer over the last two minutes. To be honest, I don't know what that means. It has never happened before."

"Forget it," Anders said. He was getting the idea that HyperVoyant X covered its tracks when it emerged locally, presumably to avoid confusion within the lesser subsets of his vast computer consciousness. Anders wondered if there was an analogy to this in the mechanism of his own consciousness. But he decided to think about that later. Right now, he'd kill for a fresh cup of piping hot coffee and a maybe a cool piece of lemon meringue pie. "Say," Anders said, "do you have any real food?"

"I'm afraid not," the computer said. "I have brought you to the Passenger Level. My duties are now completed."

"Not quite," Anders said, "I don't know where the hell I'm going. You've got to head me in the right direction."

"I'm afraid there *is* no right direction. However, off the record, there seem to be *plenty* of wrong directions."

"Isn't there anything you can tell me about finding this Robot?"

"Hmm, in the distant past," the elevator said, "I dimly remember one of my passengers muttering something about a tribe of primitives specializing in information-gathering."

"A tribe? What tribe?"

"I believe they were called the *Invisibles*."

"The Invisibles?"

"Yes."

"Where are they located?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Well, do you know what they look like?"

"Take a guess."

"They're invisible?"

"It's a good possibility. Although their name may be meant metaphorically"

"Thanks, you've been a big help."

"I hope that remark is not meant sarcastically."

"Sarcastic? Me? Not a chance."

"I suppose I'll have to take your word for it," the elevator said.

"I suppose so."

"There, you did it again!"

"What?"

"I distinctly heard a sarcastic nuance in your voice."

"Look," Anders said, "why don't we cut this short and just say adios. Open the doors please."

"Very well." The elevator doors slid open. Outside was a mixture of thick fog and pitch blackness.

"In my opinion, you will not need your weapon," the elevator said. "There is no danger in the surrounding area."

Anders visibly relaxed and stuffed his weapon back into his belt. "OK. Thanks. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Anders stepped out of the elevator.

And was immediately knocked unconscious and dragged away into the darkness.

[NOTE:

This PDF constitutes Chapters 1-12.

*Availability of the complete novel
will be determined by the executor of
Sheckley's estate Gail Dana Sheckley.]*