“He'll talk to us,” said Alvarez when the other stepped out the door.

“Good,” said Bunting. “Social pressure is bound to get to him eventually. An odd character. How he escaped genetic adjustment I'll never know. -But you do the talking. He irritates me past tact.”

Together they swung down the corridor along the Executive Trail, which was, as always, sparsely occupied. They might have taken the Moving Strips, but there were only two miles to go and Alvarez enjoyed walking, so I Bunting didn't insist. I

Alvarez was tall and rather thin, with the kind of athletic figure one would expect of a person who cherished the muscular activities; who routinely used the stairs and rampways, for instance, almost to the edge of being considered an unsettling character himself. Bunting, softer and rounder, avoided even the sunlamps, and was quite pale.

Bunting said dolefully, “I hope the two of us will be enough.”

“I should think so. We want to keep it in our sector, if we can.”

“Yes! You know, I keep thinking-why does it have to be our sector? Fifty million square miles of seven-hundred-level living space, and it has to be in our apartment bloc.”

“Rather a distinction, in a grisly kind of way,” said Alvarez.

Bunting snorted.

“And a little to our credit,” Alvarez added softly, “if we settle the matter. We reach peak. We reach end. We reach goal. All mankind. And we do it.”

Bunting brightened. He said, “You think they'll look at it that way?”

“Let's see to it that they do.”

Their footsteps were muted against the plastic-knit crushed rock underfoot. They passed crosscorridors and saw the endless crowds on the Moving Strips in the middle distance. There was a fugitive whiff of plankton in its varieties. Once, almost by instinct, they could tell that up above, far above, was one of the giant conduits leading

in from the sea. And by symmetry they knew there would be another conduit, just as large, far below, leading out to sea.

Their destination was a dwelling room set well back from the corridor, but one that seemed different from the thousands they had passed. There was about it an intangible and disconcerting note of space, for on either side, for hundreds of feet, the wall was blank. And there was something in the air.

“Smell it?” muttered Bunting.

“I've smelled it before,” said Alvarez. “Inhuman.”

“Literally!” said Bunting. “He won't expect us to look at them, will he?”

“If he does, it's easy enough to refuse.” They signaled, then waited in silence while the hum of infinite life sounded all around them in utterly disregarded manner, for it was always there.

The door opened. Cranwitz was waiting. He looked sullen. He wore the same clothes they all did; light, simple, gray. On him, though, they seemed rumpled. He seemed rumpled, his hair too long, his eyes bloodshot and shifting uneasily.

“May we enter?” asked Alvarez with cold courtesy.

Cranwitz stood to one side.

The odor was stronger inside. Cranwitz closed the doorbehind them and they sat down. Cranwitz remained standing and said nothing.

Alvarez said, “I must ask you, in my capacity as Sector Representative, with Bunting here as Vice-Representative, whether you are now ready to comply with social necessity.”

Cranwitz seemed to be thinking. When he finally spoke his deep voice was choked and he had to clear his throat. “I don't want to,” he said. “I don't have to. There is a contract with the government of long-standing. My family has always had the right-”

“We know all this and there's no question of force involved,” said Bunting irritably. “We're asking you to accede voluntarily.”

Alvarez touched the other's knee lightly. “You understand the situation is not what it was in your father's time; or even, really, what it was last year?”

Cranwitz's long jaw quivered slightly. “I don't see that. The birth rate has dropped this

year by the amount computerized, and everything else has changed correspondingly. That goes on from year to year. Why should this I year be different?”

His voice somehow did not carry conviction. Alvarez was sure he did know why this year was different, and he said softly, “This year we've reached the goal. The birth rate now exactly matches the death rate; the population level is now exactly steady; construction is now confined to replacement entirely; and the sea farms are in a steady state. Only you stand between all mankind and perfection…

“Because of a few mice?”

“Because of a few mice. And other creatures. Guinea pigs. Rabbits. Some kinds of birds and lizards. I haven't taken a census-”

“But they're the only ones left in all the world. What harm do they do?”

“What good?” demanded Bunting.

Cranwitz said, “The good of being there to look at. There was once a time when-”

Alvarez had heard that before. He said, with as much sympathy as he could pump into his voice (and, to hissurprise, with a certain amount of real sympathy, too), “I know. There was once a time! Centuries ago! There were vast numbers of life forms like those you care for. And millions of years before that there were dinosaurs. But we have microfilms of everything. No man need go ignorant of them.”

“How can you compare microfilms with the real thing?” asked Cranwitz.

Bunting's lips quirked. “The microfilms don't smell.”

“The zoo was much larger once,” said Cranwitz. “Year by year we've had to get rid of so many. All the large animals. All the carnivores. The trees. There's nothing left but small plants, tiny creatures. Let them be.”

Alvarez said, “What is there to do with them? No one wants to see them. Mankind is against you.”

“Social pressure-”

“We couldn't persuade people against real resistance. People don't want to see these life distortions. They're sickening; they really are. What's there to do with them?” Alvarez's voice was insinuating.

Cranwitz sat down now. A certain feverishness heightened the color in his cheeks.

“I've been thinking. Someday we'll reach out. Mankind will colonize other worlds. He'll want animals. He'll want other species in these new, empty worlds. He'll start a new ecology of variety. He'll…”

His words faded under the hostile stare of the other two.

Bunting said, “What other worlds are we going to colonize?”

“We reached the moon in 1969,” said Cranwitz.

“Sure, and we established a colony, and we abandoned it. There's no world in all the solar system capable of supporting human life without prohibitive engineering.”

Cranwitz said, “There are worlds circling other stars. Earthlike worlds by the hundred of millions. There must be.”

Alvarez shook his head. “Out of reach. We have finally exploited Earth and filled it with the human species. We have made our choice, and it is Earth. There is no margin for the kind of effort needed to build a starship capable of crossing light-years of space. -Have you been immersing yourself in twentieth-century history?”

“It wasn’t the last century of the open world,” said Cranwitz.

“So it was,” said Alvarez dryly. “I hope you haven't over-romanticized it. I've studied its madness, too. The world was empty then, only a few billions, and they thought it was crowded-and with 'good reason. They spent more than half their substance on war and preparations of war, ran their economy without forethought, wasted and poisoned at will, let pure chance govern the genetic pool, and tolerated the deviants-from-norm of all descriptions. Of course, they dreaded what they called the population explosion, and dreamed of reaching other worlds as a kind of escape. So would we under those conditions.

“I needn't tell you the combination of events and of scientific advances that changed everything, but just let me remind you briefly in case you are trying to forget. There was the establishment of a world government, the development of fusion power, and the growth of the art of genetic engineering; With planetary peace, plentiful energy, and a placid humanity men could multiply peacefully, and science kept up with the multiplication.

“It was known in advance exactly how many men the Earth could support. So many calories of sunlight reached the Earth, and, using that, only so many tons of carbon dioxide could be fixed by green plants each year, and only so many tons of animal life could be supported by those plants. The Earth could support two trillion tons of animal life-”

Cranwitz finally broke in, “And why shouldn't all two trillion tons be human?”

“Exactly.”

“Even if it meant killing off all other animal life?”

“That's the way of evolution.” said Bunting angrily. “The fit survive.”

Alvarez touched the other's knee again. “Bunting is right, Cranwitz,” he said gently. “The toleosts replaced the placoderms, who had replaced the trilobites. The reptiles replaced the amphibians and were in turn replacedby the mammals. Now, at last, evolution has reached its peak. Earth bears its mighty population of fifteen trillion human beings-”

“But how?” demanded Cranwitz. “They live in one vast building over all the face of the dry land, with no plants and no animals beside, except what I have right here. And all the uninhabited ocean has become a plankton soup; no life but plankton. We harvest it endlessly to feed our people; and as endlessly we restore organic matter to feed the plankton.”

“We live very well,” said Alvarez. “There is no war; there is no crime. Our births are regulated; our deaths are peaceful. Our infants are genetically adjusted and on Earth there are now twenty billion tons of normal brain; the largest conceivable quantity of the most complex conceivable matter in the universe.”

“And all that weight of brain doing what? ”

Bunting heaved an audible sigh of exasperation but Alvarez, still calm, said, “My good friend, you confuse the journey with the destination. Perhaps it comes from living with your animals. When the Earth was in process of development, it was necessary for life to experiment and take chances. It was even worthwhile to be wasteful. The Earth was empty then. It had infinite room and evolution had to experiment with ten million species or more-till it found the species.

“Even after mankind came, it had to learn the way. While it was learning, it had to take chances, attempt the impossible, be foolish or mad. -But mankind has come home, now. Men have filled the planet and need only to enjoy perfection.”

Alvarez paused to let that sink in, then said, “We want it, Cranwitz. The whole world wants perfection. It is in our generation that perfection has been reached, and we want the distinction of having reached it. Your animals are in the way.”

Cranwitz shook his head stubbornly. “They take up so little room; consume so little

energy. If all were wiped out, you might have room for what? For twenty-five more human beings? Twenty-five in fifteen trillion?”

Bunting said, “Twenty-five human beings represent another seventy-five pounds of human brain. With what measure can you evaluate seventy-five pounds of human brain?”

“But you already have billions of tons of it.”

“I know,” said Alvarez, “but the difference between perfection and not-quite-perfection is that between life and not-quite-life. We are so close now. All Earth is prepared to celebrate this year of 2430 AD. This is the year when the computer tens us that the planet is fun at last; the goal is achieved; all the striving of evolution crowned. Shall we fan short by twenty-five-even out of fifteen trillion. It is such a tiny, tiny flaw, but it is a flaw.

“Think, Cranwitz! Earth has been waiting for five billion years to be fulfilled. Must we wait longer? We cannot and will not force you, but if you yield voluntarily you will be a hero to everyone.”

Bunting said, “Yes. In all future time men win say that Cranwitz acted and with that one single act perfection was reached.”

And Cranwitz said, imitating the other's tone of voice, “And men will say that Alvarez and Bunting persuaded him to do so.”

“If we succeed!” said Alvarez with no audible annoyance. “But tell me, Cranwitz, can you hold out against the enlightened will of fifteen trillion people forever? Whatever your motives-and I recognize that in your own way I you are an idealist-can you withhold that last bit of perfection from so many?”

Cranwitz looked down in silence and Alvarez's hand waved gently in Bunting's direction and Bunting said not a word. The silence remained unbroken while slow minutes crept by.

Then Cranwitz whispered, “Can I have one more day with my animals?”

“And then?”

“And then-I won't stand between mankind and perfection.”

And Alvarez said, “I’ll let the world know. You will be honored.” And he and Bunting left.

Over the vast continental buildings some five trillion human beings placidly slept; some two trillion human beings placidly ate; half a trillion carefully made love. Other trillions talked without heat, or tended the computers quietly, or ran the vehicles, or studied the machinery, or organized the microfilm libraries, or amused their fellows. Trillions went to sleep; trillions woke up; and the routine never varied.

The machinery worked, tested itself, repaired itself. The plankton soup of the planetary ocean basked under the sun and the cells divided, and divided, and divided, while dredges endlessly scooped them up and dried them and by the millions of tons transferred them to conveyors and conduits that brought them to every corner of the endless buildings.

And in every corner of the buildings human wastes were gathered and irradiated and dried, and human corpses were ground and treated and dried and endlessly the residue was brought back to the ocean. And for hours, while all this was going on, as it had gone on for decades, and might be doomed to go on for millennia, Cranwitz fed his little creatures a last time, stroked his guinea pig, lifted a tortoise to gaze into its uncomprehending eye, felt a blade of living grass between his fingers.

He counted them over, all of them-the last living things on Earth that were neither humans nor food for humans-and then he seared the soil in which the plants grew and killed them. He flooded the cages and rooms in which the animals moved with appropriate vapors, and they moved no more and soon they lived no more.

The last of them was gone and now between mankind and perfection there was only Cranwitz, whose thoughts still rebelliously departed from the norm. But for Cranwitz there were also the vapors, and he didn’t want to live.

And, after that, there was really perfection, for over all the Earth, through all its fifteen trillion inhabitants and over all its twenty billion tons of human brain, there was (with Cranwitz gone) not one unsettling thought, not one unusual idea, to disturb the universal placidity that meant that the exquisite nothingness of uniformity had at last been achieved.