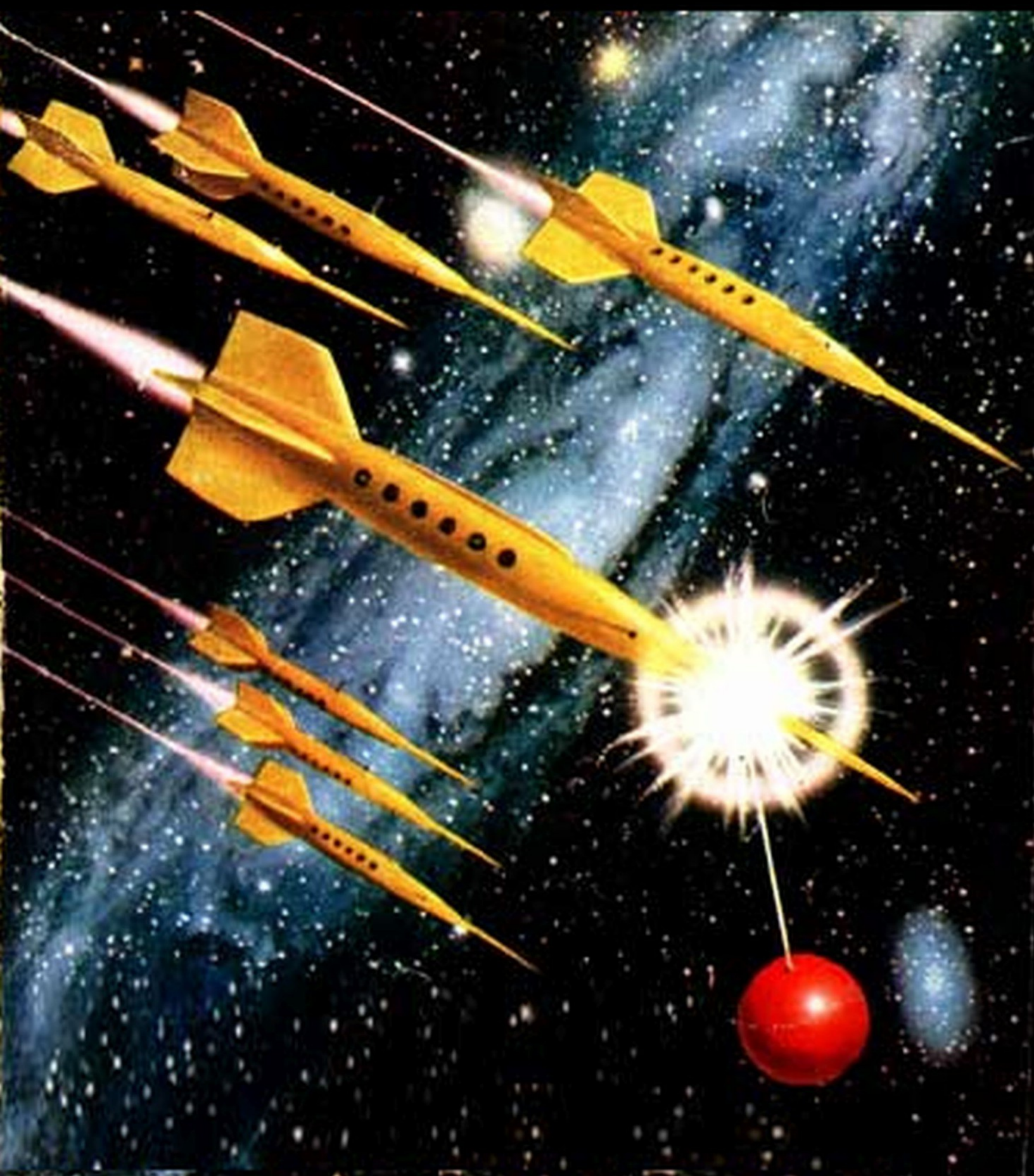


# VOYAGE TO ETERNITY

Milton Lesser



# **VOYAGE TO ETERNITY**

**By**

**Milton Lesser**

*Temple faced leaving Earth—and the girl he loved—if his country drafted him.  
But the hard part was in knowing he'd never return!...*



## CHAPTER I

When the first strong sunlight of May covered the tree-arched avenues of Center City with green, the riots started.

The people gathered in angry knots outside the city hall, met in the park and littered its walks with newspapers and magazines as they gobbled up editorial comment at a furious rate, slipped with dark of night through back alleys and planned things with furious futility. Center City's finest knew when to make themselves scarce: their uniforms stood for everything objectionable at this time and they might be subjected to clubs, stones, taunts, threats, leers—and knives.

But Center City, like most communities in United North America, had survived the Riots before and would survive them again. On past performances, the damage could be estimated, too. Two-hundred fifty-seven plate glass windows would be broken, three-hundred twelve limbs fractured. Several thousand people would be treated for minor bruises and abrasions, Center City would receive half that many damage suits. The list had been drawn clearly and accurately; it hardly ever deviated.

And Center City would meet its quota. With a demonstration of reluctance, of course. The healthy approved way to get over social trauma once every seven-hundred eighty days.

"Shut it off, Kit. Kit, please."

The telio blared in a cheaply feminine voice, "Oh, it's a long way to nowhere, forever. And your honey's not coming back, never, never, never...." A wailing trumpet represented flight.

"They'll exploit anything, Kit."

"It's just a song."

"Turn it off, please."

Christopher Temple turned off the telio, smiling. "They'll announce the

names in ten minutes," he said, and felt the corners of his mouth draw taut.

"Tell me again, Kit," Stephanie pleaded. "How old are you?"

"You know I'm twenty-six."

"Twenty-six. Yes, twenty-six, so if they don't call you this time, you'll be safe. Safe, I can hardly believe it."

"Nine minutes," said Temple in the darkness. Stephanie had drawn the blinds earlier, had dialed for sound-proofing. The screaming in the streets came to them as not the faintest whisper. But the song which became briefly, masochistically popular every two years and two months had spoiled their feeling of seclusion.

"Tell me again, Kit."

"What."

"You know what."

He let her come to him, let her hug him fiercely and whimper against his chest. He remained passive although it hurt, occasionally stroking her hair. He could not assert himself for another—he looked at his strap chrono—for another eight minutes. He might regret it, if he did, for a lifetime.

"Tell me, Kit."

"I'll marry you, Steffy. In eight minutes, less than eight minutes, I'll go down and get the license. We'll marry as soon as it's legal."

"This is the last time they have a chance for you. I mean, they won't change the law?"

Temple shook his head. "They don't have to. They meet their quota this way."

"I'm scared."

"You and everyone else in North America, Steffy."

She was trembling against him. "It's cold for June."

"It's warm in here." He kissed her moist eyes, her nose, her lips.

"Oh God, Kit. Five minutes."

"Five minutes to freedom," he said jauntily. He did not feel that way at all. Apprehension clutched at his chest with tight, painful fingers, almost making

it difficult for him to breathe.

"Turn it on, Kit."

---

We dialed the telio in time to see the announcer's insincere smile. Smile seventeen, Kit thought wryly. Patriotic sacrifice.

"Every seven-hundred eighty days," said the announcer, "two-hundred of Center City's young men are selected to serve their country for an indeterminate period regulated rigidly by a rotation system."

"Liar!" Stephanie cried. "No one ever comes back. It's been thirty years since the first group and not one of them...."

"Shh," Temple raised a finger to his lips.

"This is the thirteenth call since the inception of what is popularly referred to as the Nowhere Journey," said the announcer. "Obviously, the two hundred young men from Center City and the thousands from all over this hemisphere do not in reality embark on a Journey to Nowhere. That is quite meaningless."

"Hooray for him," Temple laughed.

"I wish he'd get on with it."

"No, ladies and gentlemen, we use the word Nowhere merely because we are not aware of the ultimate destination. Security reasons make it impossible to...."

"Yes, yes," said Stephanie impatiently. "Go on."

"... therefore, the Nowhere Journey. With a maximum security lid on the whole project, we don't even know why our men are sent, or by what means. We know only that they go somewhere and not nowhere, bravely and not fearfully, for a purpose vital to the security of this nation and not to slake the thirst of a chessman of regiments and divisions.

"If Center City's contribution helps keep our country strong, Center City is naturally obligated...."

"No one ever said it isn't our duty," Stephanie argued, as if the announcer

could indeed hear her. "We only wish we knew something about it—and we wish it weren't forever."

"It isn't forever," Temple reminded her. "Not officially."

"Officially, my foot. If they never return, they never return. If there's a rotation system on paper, but it's never used, that's not a rotation system at all. Kit, it's forever."

"... to thank the following sponsors for relinquishing their time...."

"No one would want to sponsor *that*," Temple whispered cheerfully.

"Kit," said Stephanie, "I—I suddenly have a hunch we have nothing to worry about. They missed you all along and they'll miss you this time, too. The last time, and then you'll be too old. That's funny, too old at twenty-six. But we'll be free, Kit. Free."

"He's starting," Temple told her.

A large drum filled the entire telio screen. It rotated slowly, from bottom to top. In twenty seconds, the letter A appeared, followed by about a dozen names. Abercrombie, Harold. Abner, Eugene. Adams, Gerald. Sorrow in the Abercrombie household. Despair for the Abners. Black horror for Adams.

The drum rotated.

"They're up to F, Kit."

Fabian, Gregory G....

Names circled the drum slowly, like viscous alphabet soup. Meaningless, unless you happened to know them.

"Kit, I knew Thomas Mulvany."

N, O, P....

"It's hot in here."

"I thought you were cold."

"I'm suffocating now."

R, S....

"T!" Stephanie shrieked as the names began to float slowly up from the bottom of the drum.

Tabor, Tebbets, Teddley....

Temple's mouth felt dry as a ball of cotton. Stephanie laughed nervously. Now—or never. Never?

Now.

Stephanie whimpered despairingly.

TEMPLE, CHRISTOPHER.

---

"Sorry I'm late, Mr. Jones."

"Hardly, Mr. Smith. Hardly. Three minutes late."

"I've come in response to your ad."

"I know. You look old."

"I am over twenty-six. Do you mind?"

"Not if you don't, Mr. Smith. Let me look at you. Umm, you seem the right height, the right build."

"I meet the specifications exactly."

"Good, Mr. Smith. And your price."

"No haggling," said Smith. "I have a price which must be met."

"Your price, Mr. Smith?"

"Ten million dollars."

The man called Jones coughed nervously. "That's high."

"Very. Take it or leave it."

"In cash?"

"Definitely. Small unmarked bills."

"You'd need a moving van!"

"Then I'll get one."

"Ten million dollars," said Jones, "is quite a price. Admittedly, I haven't dealt in this sort of traffic before, but—"



"But nothing. Were your name Jones, really and truly Jones, I might ask less."

"Sir?"

"You are Jones exactly as much as I am Smith."

"Sir?" Jones gasped again.

Smith coughed discreetly. "But I have one advantage. I know you. You don't know me, Mr. Arkalion."

"Eh? Eh?"

"Arkalion. The North American Carpet King. Right?"

"How did you know?" the man whose name was not Jones but Arkalion asked the man whose name was not Smith but might as well have been.

"When I saw your ad," said not-Smith, "I said to myself, 'now here must be a very rich, influential man.' It only remained for me to study a series of photographs readily obtainable—I have a fine memory for that, Mr. Arkalion—and here you are; here is Arkalion the Carpet King."

"What will you do with the ten million dollars?" demanded Arkalion, not minding the loss nearly so much as the ultimate disposition of his fortune.

"Why, what does anyone do with ten million dollars? Treasure it. Invest it. Spend it."

"I mean, what will you do with it if you are going in place of my—" Arkalion bit his tongue.

"Your son, were you saying, Mr. Arkalion? Alaric Arkalion the Third. Did you know that I was able to boil my list of men down to thirty when I studied their family ties?"

"Brilliant, Mr. Smith. Alaric is so young—"

"Aren't they all? Twenty-one to twenty-six. Who was it who once said something about the flower of our young manhood?"

"Shakespeare?" said Mr. Arkalion realizing that most quotes of lasting importance came from the bard.

"Sophocles," said Smith. "But, no matter. I will take young Alaric's place for

ten million dollars."

Motives always troubled Mr. Arkalion, and thus he pursued what might have been a dangerous conversation. "You'll never get a chance to spend it on the Nowhere Journey."

"Let me worry about that."

"No one ever returns."

"My worry, not yours."

"It is forever—as if you dropped out of existence. Alaric is so young."

"I have always gambled, Mr. Arkalion. If I do not return in five years, you are to put the money in a trust fund for certain designated individuals, said fund to be terminated the moment I return. If I come back within the five years, you are merely to give the money over to me. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

"I'll want it in writing, of course."

"Of course. A plastic surgeon is due here in about ten minutes, Mr. Smith, and we can get on with.... But if I don't know your name, how can I put it in writing?"

Smith smiled. "I changed my name to Smith for the occasion. Perfectly legal. My name is John X. Smith—now."

"That's where you're wrong," said Mr. Arkalion as the plastic surgeon entered. "Your name is Alaric Arkalion III—*now*."

The plastic surgeon skittered around Smith, examining him minutely with the casual expertness that comes with experience.

"Have to shorten the cheek bones."

"For ten million dollars," said Smith, "you can take the damned things out altogether and hang them on your wall."



Sophia Androvna Petrovitch made her way downtown through the bustle of tired workers and the occasional sprinkling of Comrades. She crushed her

*ersatz* cigarette underfoot at number 616 Stalin Avenue, paused for the space of five heartbeats at the door, went inside.

"What do you want?" The man at the desk was myopic but bull-necked.

Sophia showed her party card.

"Oh, Comrade. Still, you are a woman."

"You're terribly observant, Comrade," said Sophia coldly. "I am here to volunteer."

"But a woman."

"There is nothing in the law which says a woman cannot volunteer."

"We don't make women volunteer."

"I mean really volunteer, of her own free will."

"Her—own—free will?" The bull-necked man removed his spectacles, scratched his balding head with the ear-pieces. "You mean volunteer without —"

"Without coercion. I want to volunteer. I am here to volunteer. I want to sign on for the next Stalintrek."

"Stalintrek, a woman?"

"That is what I said."

"We don't force women to volunteer." The man scratched some more.

"Oh, really," said Sophia. "This is 1992, not mid-century, Comrade. Did not Premier Stalin say, 'Woman was created to share the glorious destiny of Mother Russia with her mate?'" Sophia created the quote randomly.

"Yes, if Stalin said—"

"He did."

"Still, I do not recall—"

"What?" Sophia cried. "Stalin dead these thirty-nine years and you don't recall his speeches? What is your name, Comrade?"

"Please, Comrade. Now that you remind me, I remember."

"What is your name."

"Here, I will give you the volunteer papers to sign. If you pass the exams, you will embark on the next Stalintrek, though why a beautiful young woman like you—"

"Shut your mouth and hand me those papers."

There, sitting behind that desk, was precisely why. Why should she, Sophia Androvna Petrovitch, wish to volunteer for the Stalintrek? Better to ask why a bird flies south in the winter, one day ahead of the first icy gale. Or why a lemming plunges recklessly into the sea with his multitudes of fellows, if, indeed, the venture were to turn out grimly.

But there, behind that desk, was part of the reason. The Comrade. The bright sharp Comrade, with his depth of reasoning, his fountain of gushing emotions, his worldliness. *Pfooey!*

It was as if she had been in a cocoon all her life, stifled, starved, the cottony inner lining choking her whenever she opened her mouth, the leathery outer covering restricting her when she tried to move. No one had ever returned from the Stalintrek. She then had to assume no one would. Including Sophia Androvna Petrovitch. But then, there was nothing she would miss, nothing to which she particularly wanted to return. Not the stark, foul streets of Stalingrad, not the workers with their vapid faces or the Comrades with their cautious, sweating, trembling, fearful non-decisions, not the higher echelon of Comrades, more frightened but showing it less, who would love the beauty of her breasts and loins but not herself for you never love anything but the Stalinimage and Mother Russia herself, not those terrified martinet-marionettes who would love the parts of her if she permitted but not her or any other person for that matter.

Wrong with the Stalintrek was its name alone, a name one associated with everything else in Russia for an obvious, post-Stalin reason. But everything else about the Stalintrek shrieked mystery and adventure. Where did you go? How did you get there? What did you do? Why?

A million questions which had kept her awake at night and, if she thought about them hard enough, satisfied her deep longing for something different. And then one day when stolid Mrs. Ivanovna-Rasnikov had said, "It is a joke, a terrible, terrible joke they are taking my husband Fyodor on the Stalintrek when he lacks sufficient imagination to go from here to Leningrad or even

Tula. Can you picture Fyodor on the Stalintrek? Better they should have taken me. Better they should have taken his wife." That day Sophia could hardly contain herself.

As a party member she had access to the law and she read it three times from start to finish (in her dingy flat by the light of a smoking, foul-smelling, soft-wax candle) but could find nothing barring women from the Stalintrek.

Had Fyodor Rasnikov volunteered? Naturally. Everyone volunteered, although when your name was called you had no choice. There had been no draft in Russia since the days of the Second War of the People's Liberation. Volunteer? What, precisely, did the word mean?

She, Sophia Androvna Petrovitch would volunteer, without being told. Thus it was she found herself at 616 Stalin Avenue, and thus the balding, myopic, bull-necked Comrade thrust the papers across his desk at her.

She signed her name with such vehemence and ferocity that she almost tore through the paper.

## CHAPTER II

*Three-score men sit in the crowded, smoke-filled room. Some drink beer, some squat in moody silence, some talk in an animated fashion about nothing very urgent. At the one small door, two guards pace back and forth slowly, creating a gentle swaying of smoke-patterns in the hazy room. The guards, in simple military uniform, carry small, deadly looking weapons.*

FIRST MAN: Fight City Hall? Are you kidding? They took you, bud. Don't try to fight it. I know. I *know*.

SECOND MAN: I'm telling you, there was a mistake in the records. I'm over twenty-six. Two weeks and two days. Already I wrote to my Congressman. Hell, that's why I voted for him, he better go to bat for me.

THIRD MAN: You think that's something? I wouldn't be here only those doctors are crazy. I mean, crazy. Me, with a cyst big as a golf ball on the base of my spine.

FIRST MAN: You too. Don't try to fight it.

FOURTH MAN: (Newly named Alaric Arkalion III) I look forward to this as a stimulating adventure. Does the fact that they select men for the Nowhere Journey once every seven hundred and eighty days strike anyone as significant?

SECOND MAN: I got my own problems.

ALARIC ARKALION: This is not a thalamic problem, young man. Not thalamic at all.

THIRD MAN: Young man? Who are you kidding?

ALARIC ARKALION: (Who realizes, thanks to the plastic surgeon, he is the youngest looking of all, with red cheeks and peach-fuzz whiskers) It is a problem of the intellect. Why seven hundred and eighty days?

FIRST MAN: I read the magazines, too, chief. You think we're all going to the planet Mars. How original.

ALARIC ARKALION: As a matter of fact, that is exactly what I think.

SECOND MAN: Mars?

FIRST MAN (Laughing) It's a long way from Mars to City Hall, doc.

SECOND MAN: You mean, through space to Mars?

ALARIC ARKALION: Exactly, exactly. Quite a coincidence, otherwise.

FIRST MAN: You're telling me.

ALARIC ARKALION: (Coldly) Would you care to explain it?

FIRST MAN: Why, sure. You see, Mars is—uh, I don't want to steal your thunder, chief. Go ahead.

ALARIC ARKALION: Once every seven hundred and eighty days Mars and the Earth find themselves in the same orbital position with respect to the sun. In other words, Mars and Earth are closest then. Were there such a thing as space travel, new, costly, not thoroughly tested, they would want to make each journey as brief as possible. Hence the seven hundred and eighty days.

FIRST MAN: Not bad, chief. You got most of it.

THIRD MAN: No one ever said anything about space travel.

FIRST MAN: You think we'd broadcast it or something, stupid? It's part of a big, important scientific experiment, only we're the hamsters.

ALARIC ARKALION: Ridiculous. You're forgetting all about the Cold War.

FIRST MAN: He thinks we're fighting a war with the Martians. (Laughs) Orson Wells stuff, huh?

ALARIC ARKALION: With the Russians. The Russians. We developed A bombs. They developed A bombs. We came up with the H bomb. So did they. We placed a station up in space, a fifth of the way to the moon. So did they. Then—nothing more about scientific developments. For over twenty years. I ask you, doesn't it seem peculiar?

FIRST MAN: Peculiar, he says.

ALARIC ARKALION: Peculiar.

SECOND MAN: I wish my Congressman....

FIRST MAN: You and your Congressman. The way you talk, it was your vote got him in office.

SECOND MAN: If only I could get out and talk to him.

ALARIC ARKALION: No one is permitted to leave.

FIRST MAN: Punishable by a prison term, the law says.

SECOND MAN. Oh yeah? Prison, shmision. Or else go on the Nowhere Journey. Well, I don't see the difference.

FIRST MAN: So, go ahead. Try to escape.

SECOND MAN: (Looking at the guards) They got them all over. All over. I think our mail is censored.

ALARIC ARKALION: It is.

SECOND MAN: They better watch out. I'm losing my temper. I get violent when I lose my temper.

FIRST MAN: See? See how the guards are trembling.

SECOND MAN: Very funny. Maybe you didn't have a good job or something? Maybe you don't care. I care. I had a job with a future. Didn't pay much, but a real blue chip future. So they send me to Nowhere.

FIRST MAN: You're not there yet.

SECOND MAN: Yeah, but I'm going.

THIRD MAN: If only they let you know when. My back is killing me. I'm waiting to pull a sick act. Just waiting, that's all.

FIRST MAN: Go ahead and wait, a lot of good it will do you.

THIRD MAN: You mind your own business.

FIRST MAN: I am, doc. You brought the whole thing up.

SECOND MAN: He's looking for trouble.

THIRD MAN: He'll get it.

ALARIC ARKALION: We're going to be together a long time. A long time. Why don't you all relax?

SECOND MAN: You mind your own business.

FIRST MAN: Nuts, aren't they. They're nuts. A sick act, yet.

SECOND MAN: Look how it doesn't bother him. A failure, he was. I can just see it. What does he care if he goes away forever and doesn't come back? One bread line is as good as another.

FIRST MAN: Ha-ha.

SECOND MAN: Yeah, well I mean it. Forever. We're going away, someplace—forever. We're not coming back, ever. No one comes back. It's for good, for keeps.

FIRST MAN: Tell it to your Congressman. Or maybe you want to pull a sick act, too?

THIRD MAN: (Hits First Man, who, surprised, crashes back against a table and falls down) It isn't an act, damn you!

GUARD: All right, break it up. Come on, break it up....

ALARIC ARKALION: (To himself) I wish I saw that ten million dollars already—*if* I ever get to see it.





They drove for hours through the fresh country air, feeling the wind against their faces, listening to the roar their ground-jet made, all alone on the rimrock highway.

"Where are we going, Kit?"

"Search me. Just driving."

"I'm glad they let you come out this once. I don't know what they would have done to me if they didn't. I had to see you this once. I—"

Temple smiled. He had absented himself without leave. It had been difficult enough and he might yet be in a lot of hot water, but it would be senseless to worry Stephanie. "It's just for a few hours," he said.

"Hours. When we want a whole lifetime. Kit. Oh, Kit—why don't we run away? Just the two of us, someplace where they'll never find you. I could be packed and ready and—"

"Don't talk like that. We can't."

"You want to go where they're sending you. You want to go."

"For God's sake, how can you talk like that? I don't want to go anywhere, except with you. But we can't run away, Steffy. I've got to face it, whatever it is."

"No you don't. It's noble to be patriotic, sure. It always was. But this is different, Kit. They don't ask for part of your life. Not for two years, or three, or a gamble because maybe you won't ever come back. They ask for all of you, for the rest of your life, forever, and they don't even tell you why. Kit, don't go! We'll hide someplace and get married and—"

"And nothing." Temple stopped the ground-jet, climbed out, opened the door for Stephanie. "Don't you see? There's no place to hide. Wherever you go, they'd look. You wouldn't want to spend the rest of your life running, Steffy. Not with me or anyone else."

"I would. I would!"

"Know what would happen after a few years? We'd hate each other. You'd look at me and say 'I wouldn't be hiding like this, except for you. I'm young and—'"

"Kit, that's cruel! I would not."

"Yes, you would. Steffy, I—" A lump rose in his throat. He'd tell her goodbye, permanently. He had to do it that way, did not want her to wait endlessly and hopelessly for a return that would not materialize. "I didn't get permission to leave, Steffy." He hadn't meant to tell her that, but suddenly it seemed an easy way to break into goodbye.

"What do you mean? No—you didn't...."

"I had to see you. What can they do, send me for longer than forever?"

"Then you do want to run away with me!"

"Steffy, no. When I leave you tonight, Steffy, it's for good. That's it. The last of Kit Temple. Stop thinking about me. I don't exist. I—never was." It sounded ridiculous, even to him.

"Kit, I love you. I love you. How can I forget you?"

"It's happened before. It will happen again." That hurt, too. He was talking about a couple of statistics, not about himself and Stephanie.

"We're different, Kit. I'll love you forever. And—Kit ... I know you'll come back to me. I'll wait, Kit. We're different. You'll come back."

"How many people do you think said *that* before?"

"You don't want to come back, even if you could. You're not thinking of us at all. You're thinking of your brother."

"You know that isn't true. Sometimes I wonder about Jase, sure. But if I thought there was a chance to return—I'm a selfish cuss, Steffy. If I thought there was a chance, you know I'd want you all for myself. I'd brand you, and that's the truth."

"You do love me!"

"I loved you, Steffy. Kit Temple loved you."

"Loved?"

"Loved. Past tense. When I leave tonight, it's as if I don't exist anymore. As if I never existed. It's got to be that way, Steffy. In thirty years, no one ever returned."