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DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

A SPACESHIP, A TELEPATHIC CHILD, AND A SEARCH FOR A
SECRET TOO DANGEROUS TO KNOW!

P.S. Nim



FACE TO FACE WITH THE UNKNOWN

"The computer has answered our questions, Doctor. He is seeing something. It's something he doesn't call by its right name. He just calls it dust—"

"Cosmic Dust of some kind?" Oberon put in. His voice was unduly tight. He felt he had to speak.

"No, Captain, Elijah is seeing ether."

Oberon nodded stiffly. He felt an absurd desire to laugh and a miserable qualm of fright. But he also felt the placating inner void of common sense telling him to wait, think, examine carefully this thing that made no sense at all. . . .

P.S.Nim

**DOUBLE
MOBIUS SPHERE**

**A STORY OF THE SHAPE OF
THE UNIVERSE**



PUBLISHED BY POCKET BOOKS NEW YORK

Another *Original* publication of POCKET BOOKS



POCKET BOOKS, a Simon & Schuster division of
GULF & WESTERN CORPORATION
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020

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For information address Pocket Books, 1230 Avenue
of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020

ISBN: 0-671-81131-2

First Pocket Books printing December, 1978

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

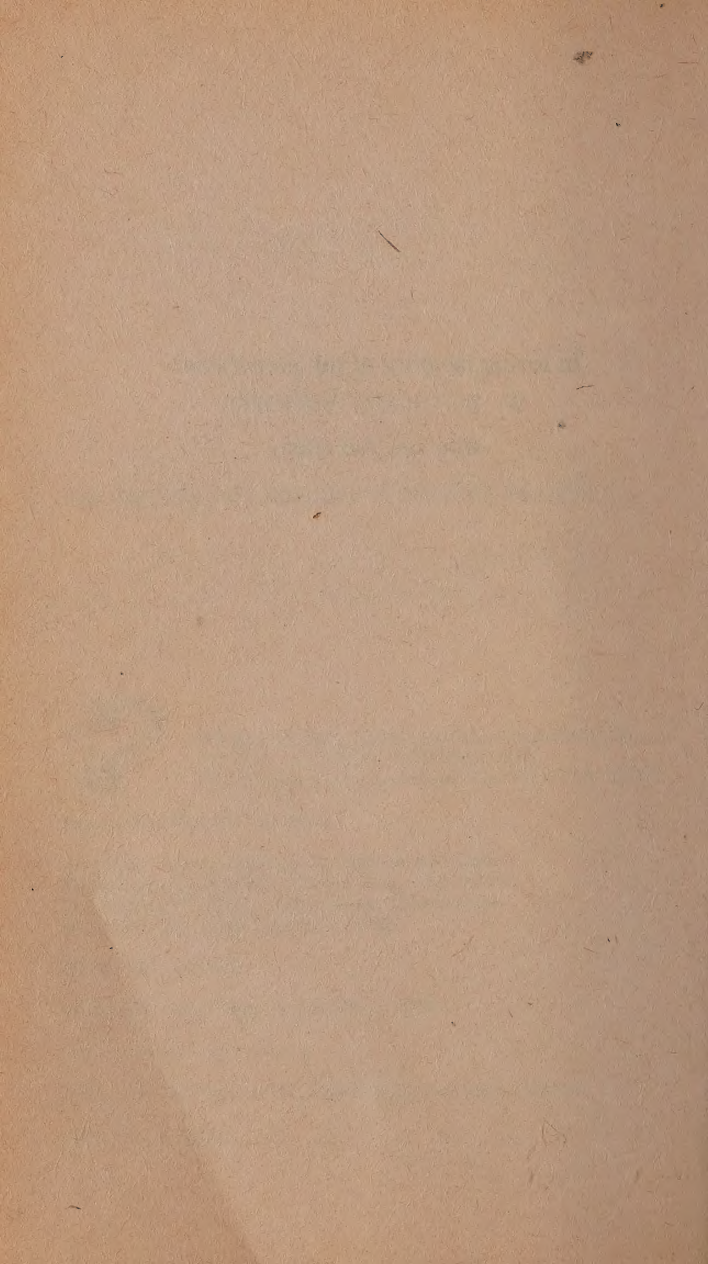
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In loving memory of my grandfather

W. D. CRAIG WRIGHT

who saw the ether.



**DOUBLE
MOBIUS SPHERE**

***This day I breathed first:
time is come round,
And where I did begin,
there shall I end.***

Shakespeare

SHYLA BENSON STAMPED her foot with fury as her younger brother broke away from the other children and raced toward the nearest hill.

“Will! Come back, Will!” she screamed. Dropping her insect attractor, she glanced desperately around for Miss Reynolds, but their teacher had disappeared through some trees in search of another straying child.

There was nothing to do but run after him.

“Will! You promised you wouldn’t leave the gro-up!” He would fall and hurt himself, and she would be blamed for not watching him.

Gasping with excitement and the triumph of escape, Will Benson stumbled up the side of the hill, ignoring her shouts. This would give him new status among his classmates, for he had broken out of the prison of Everybody Do.

Don't touch that. Now we'll all look at these. Now we'll take a sample of this, and this and that. That's enough. Don't touch. Now we'll all touch. Everybody look. Everybody smell. Everybody pick.

Oh, the other kids would smirk when he got scolded, but they’d envy him. He might get to see something they had missed, and even if he didn’t they would think he had.

Overhead the sky blinked. It was as if something brighter than the sun had flared up for less than a second.

Will squinted up into an atmosphere as white as oyster shell. He looked back over his shoulder without stopping, but his sister was left farther and farther behind.

“Will! What was that?” At such a distance her voice

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

was feeble and ridiculous. Far beyond her the shuttle was a faint dazzle at its launching pad and Miss Reynolds and the rest of the class were just swarming specks of school-suit colors.

It wasn't every day that their teacher was able to charter a shuttle for a field trip to Vicarus.

Will charged over the crest of the hill. Pausing by a flat pool of water, he studied his reflection. Eyes that were almost slanted gleamed with exertion. Black tufty hair clung wetly to his forehead. He hurtled on just before another burst of light from above was mirrored where his image had been.

It was harder to go down the steep hill and Will tumbled and slid. At the bottom he sat with grimy clothes in the vegetation and stared at the empty plains of the little planetoid. The silence was distracting. The isolation made him a little uneasy. Carelessly, he began to hum a song the class had learned in their ancient music program. "Swing low, sweet chariot. Comin' for to car-ry me home." It was a Terran song, and centuries old. Soon, the off-key grumbling in his throat made him feel better, and he climbed to his feet.

Once again, he squinted upward.

A blinding flash of sunlight on something enormous made his eyes wince shut. When they opened again, he saw that the enormous thing was only a small spaceship hovering into a depression in the plains many yards ahead.

There was nothing unusual about that. Survey ships constantly patrolled Vicarus, keeping it free of mineral poachers or tampering eco-experimentalists. But Will could see that this craft was different. It had been a ball of fiery brightness when it passed overhead, and everybody in the League of Worlds knew that glare-proof exteriors were required by law for all landing spacecraft. Besides, now that he could see it clearly, it did not look like a survey ship. No oval starports, no fuel pods. As he approached warily, it glowed like something burning and emitted a funny muted humming like the treble of an insect.

A door appeared in the side of the vehicle and something emerged.

With a cry of fright, Will turned to run. But someone

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

in the glow was calling his name and the impulse to run disappeared. A tuneless music shimmered in his head. A tunnel of light drew him inward. There he found himself entering a tremendous crescent of stars, and he blinked at it uncomprehendingly, thinking it a beautiful thing.

When he awoke to Vicarus again, he was lying in a cool, shady spot. His frightened teacher and Shyla and the others were clustering around him. He was suddenly very important, but not quite the way he had wanted to be. The fiery ship was gone, replaced almost in the same location by a real survey ship which had been called from the spaceport by Miss Reynolds. Many questions were asked. No one else had seen the strange craft. Will was too disoriented to talk about anything except the light and a choir. Miss Reynolds, who was always a bit maudlin, decided that he had had a religious experience. But the spaceport officials decided that he had been stunned by the landing jets of some sort of trespassing vehicle. An alert was sent out. Will was conveyed to the spaceport infirmary, where he was given a physical examination.

Except for a tiny puncture on the back of his hand, he seemed unharmed.

The incident was soon forgotten. Will and Shyla Benson graduated from the Institute eighteen years later. Like the rest of their classmates, they joined the Space Troop, first Solar Division, then Star Division, and ultimately their names appeared on the roster for long-term mission assignment.

It never was made clear why they were assigned to the *Anriahd*. All others who were selected were chosen for very special reasons. Each person whose name was finally agreed upon by the Council after the months-long, seemingly endless debates, was picked for some unique qualification. The Bensons, albeit two moderately efficient, well-educated adults, would have represented nothing special to the Council. Out of the several hundred names on the final list, only theirs had no particular reason for being there.

The odd thing was that this never came to anyone's attention.

Still ending, and beginning still.

Cowper

IN THE LOUNGE adjoining the commodore's office, Captain Daniel C. Oberon stalked restlessly. He should have known better than to arrive early for his appointment with Paiselle. Ordinarily, he would have permitted himself the banal chatter and titillating shape of the secretary in the outer office, but this time he had looked through her with a slightly wild-eyed stare and left her behind a closed door. He could afford no distractions at the moment.

Oberon flung a hostile glance at the mirror he wished had not been mounted there on the wall. After sixteen years of service in the League Space Troop, panic was a new experience and not one that he could easily stomach. Forcing a deep breath, he studied himself, relieved that his state of nerves was not evident on the outside. The image he had not given the secretary her usual opportunity to enjoy was of an agile, medium build, well-muscled in the right places, commanding out of habit, but not arrogant. Training, duty and intense ambition had given him a powerful enough body, but he would rather have been taller. He also disliked his expressive mouth, an overlong, scholarlike nose and wide-open eyes which were those of a thinker. These things defeated any air of infallibility he might ever hope to wear.

The room darkened. A thunderstorm was passing over the spaceport. Unwillingly, Oberon lowered himself to a chair and gazed across the darkened city, hoping that the conference light on Paiselle's door would soon go off so that he could enter and wring the neck of his friend and, in a way, mentor.

First on his roster of gripes, although he did not plan

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

to mention this to Paiselle, was the eerie sensation of familiarity which had jarred him when he first inserted the itinerary tape in a reader. He did not believe in clairvoyance, and what had followed bothered him more than he cared to admit. He could still see himself sitting at a table in the library wing of the orbital station, a reader before him and the itinerary of his new mission popping out of its capsule, entering the slot in the top of the reader. . . .

He looked at the first frame without seeing it, lost in the peculiar feelings that overwhelmed him. He knew before he scanned the text that he was about to be upset and outraged. He knew that he had been expecting this—whatever it was to be—all his life, and that his career, despite the last sixteen years, had suddenly just begun. But why did he know this? He turned a knob, read, and a tingling sweat burst out on his body.

Oberon twisted in his seat, as if to rid himself of the memory, and glanced again at the glowing conference light. He forced himself to think about his new command, a V-class pioneer starship called the *Anriahd*. Before boarding the Earthbound shuttle at space station three, he had glimpsed her on her docking arm, and had been suitably impressed. She was larger than his previous commands, more gracefully streamlined, a newer model, he supposed. She was still flanked by the purely decorative wing structures, but they were smaller and made her look less like a gigantic gnat and more like a vessel a man could find inspiring. Sleek, tapered, glossed on the outside with sparkling vitrion. When viewed from a distance she looked solitary, but Oberon knew that behind those bulkheads her loading bays and service ports were swarming with officials who prepared her for departure with all the delicate caution of bridesmaids attending a bride. Momentarily soothed by this picture, Oberon's thoughts roamed her decks. The crew was listed in the itinerary.

A deep anxiety gnawed at him. His hand plunged into a pocket and brought out the capsule.

It did not explain the exact nature of the mission, of course; that would come from Paiselle's own lips in ten minutes—or sooner, Oberon fervently hoped. The itinerary only listed the crew and their credentials, mapped the ship and gave him the rundown of sectors to be patrolled on the way. On the way to what? A number of things

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

confused him. Their route took them all the way out to the border of Telphon 281, the farthest fringe of League pioneering, and supposedly the beginning of the oldest part of the universe, and ended there. No return course was plotted. The crew itself was an anomaly. Only the most experienced, the most versatile, the most accomplished in each field had been selected. To his further surprise, various League citizens of no military connection and Institute professors and scientists, as well as the standard fare of Space Troop officers, had been assigned by the Council to this mission. It was a selection you might find in the front row of an intergalactic space convention, but would hardly expect on a routine assignment, and certainly not all at once.

The most irksome feature of all was something that just had to be an error in the print-out. He was to take on a mascot, as usual, and his mascot was only seven years old. Most Institute children received their "mascot" training aboard ship at twelve or thirteen; ten was the minimum age, and even so, a ten-year-old mascot was exceedingly rare. But seven? There had to be some mistake, or else the Council was turning his ship into a nursery school.

League citizens had a choice of sending their children to public schools or signing them, at birth, into the Institute. At the Institute they received an education that did not obligate them to join the Space Troop, yet shaped them to fit that destiny should they ultimately choose it. Only Institute children could be mascots aboard a space-going vessel. The rank was an unrestricting one. You were free to observe all aspects of the ship and crew, and every person aboard was, by unswerving requirement, your teacher. As mascot you soon established a rapport with the ship—and with the spectacular abyss it traveled—that you could never quite get back again unless you became a captain. To Oberon every previous form of rank had seemed a pigeonhole.

Abruptly, he stood up and stretched. His impatience was now a festering agony. He glanced around the lounge.

A book lay on the table.

Except for the usual inelegant school texts, anything in book form these days was a rarity, a collector's item, highly priced and highly prized. His curiosity aroused, Oberon picked it up. It was—he might actually have

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

guessed it—Ergang's *Cosmology* in a well-worn black leatheroid binding. Reverently, he turned the gilt-edged pages. They were almost tissue-thin because the book was quite thick, actually two books in one, and the red marker was in the first chapter of book two, "The New Ether." As it fell open his eyes glanced over the familiar words.

"Again and again man finds . . ."

He could almost recite them at this point in his career. This edition, he noticed, was full of plates and diagrams, all covered with penciled notations, and on the fly leaf someone had scrawled a list of cosmic events covering several generations' time right up to the last recorded nova.

Just then the inner office door slid back and Commodore Matt Paiselle stepped out briskly, his gray eyes lighting with anticipation when he saw the younger man.

He bounded forward and wrung Oberon's hand. "Dan! Great to see you! I hope you haven't been waiting long. I had my conference light on for the sake of solitude. Had to get my arguments together—"

"As a matter of fact, I've been climbing your walls," Oberon declared without wasting time on formalities. He had known Paiselle all his life. He regarded the commodore skeptically.

"Arguments, you say. You'll need them. For the amount of sense this capsule makes, you might as well be asking me to start an evangelical crusade on Draco Two. What the hell is this all about?"

Paiselle ignored this, as Oberon knew he would. Grinning, the stocky, heavysset man nodded toward the book that Oberon had carefully laid aside. "Done your yearly duty?"

Oberon grinned back. Paiselle had been hounding him about his homework since he was a boy. "Reading Ergang? Certainly have. I finished yesterday. I'm afraid I usually put it off till the last week before departure, but you know all about that. What's it here for—to remind me?"

Paiselle chuckled. "As long as every man in the Troop is required to read it once every standard Terran year, you'll find a copy in my waiting room. Come on in, now. I've got a lot of things to tell you."

Oberon followed him into a room where the outer glass

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

wall overlooked the spaceport. Paiselle talked on conversationally while he cleared piles of notes from the table.

"Actually, I suppose I don't need to push Ergang," he said. "He's only the biggest best seller of the twenty-third century. Kids read their first watered-down versions in elementary school even if they don't go to the Institute. People in all walks of life seem to be equally interested these days: scientists, teachers, businessmen—"

"Space Troopers," Oberon inserted. "You make it sound like the Bible."

Paiselle looked smug as he sat down across from his friend. His eyes sparkled. "Let's face it, Dan—it's been the Bible for almost a whole century now. Statistics say it outsells the Bible ten to one—"

"I think that's terrible," Oberon began, but he stopped when he heard himself. Was it really terrible? He didn't really know whether it was or not. Let the older, more experienced man before him decide.

But the subject had changed officially when Paiselle sat down. He was poring over several sheets of vellum which Oberon recognized as the itinerary in its original handwritten form.

"Now, then, Dan," he proceeded, "you want to know what your mission is all about. I can tell you in one sentence. I want you to find the Capacians."

Oberon stared in complete amazement. He would never have consciously anticipated this—it was the furthest thing from his imagination—yet beneath his surprise there was something familiar ringing strong and clear. A cue had been given him, but for what? Unable to reason it out, he sat rigidly contained, waiting for Paiselle's next statement.

Paiselle observed his reaction with a smile and an indulgent chuckle. "Give me time, Dan, before you decide I'm crazy." Rising again, he paced to the glass, where he stood gazing out at the rain. Then he looked back at Oberon with stern pride. He remembered the terrified three-year-old whose small, cold hand had clutched his as they entered Institute doors for the first time together. Oberon didn't call him "Uncle Matt" anymore, of course, but Paiselle would not have minded if he still did. He had been impressed with the fast, easy adjustment his charge had made to Institute life. Oberon had rapidly be-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

come one of its most promising students, and was still remembered by his instructors as the boy with the strong, serious face and the most thorough answers. Not one to swagger, Oberon had completed many a successful mission with the low-keyed, reflective air of a man who could prove himself without feeling pressured to do so.

He was the most stable individual Paiselle had ever known. This one fact, above all else, was crucially important now.

"Let me tell you briefly what little we know about them," he began, "because you probably skimmed over that part of Ergang, thinking it totally irrelevant. Too many people think Ergang discovered the Capacians, though I couldn't guess exactly how they think he discovered them—intuition, perhaps."

"That's how he discovered everything else," Oberon remarked.

"Yes, Dan, but you and I know that our civilization has been 'discovering' these Capacians slowly—very slowly—since pre-biblical times. UFO's are as old as man," he narrated contentedly. "So are notions of a superior race of beings, and not necessarily an actively interfering race as you find in mythology. As space science developed, we realized that there had to be a race—or races—superior to ourselves. Then we identified the Capacians. And not long after that, Ergang made the traditionally top-secret League files available to the public through his *Cosmology*. That's all he did."

"He didn't say anything new about them?" Oberon questioned. Paiselle shook his head and leaned against a star map, a background of constellations for his square, assertive figure.

"Absolutely not a thing. He merely presented the history of UFO's—the standard stuff—and then reported that, as our technology developed, we were able to secure some concrete evidence of these fleeting visitors and could not decode any. Their ships were always the same—saucer shaped, with no fuel pods and a kind of shimmering overglow—and powered by something that defeats our wildest guesses."

"Obviously something more efficient than hyperlight," Oberon said. "But isn't there a mathematical dead end at hyperlight?"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Yes, quite a dead end. We can't imagine how they operate." Paiselle turned back to the glass, shrugging away the issue. "The point is that the Capacians, as we named them, never seemed anxious to communicate with us and never have. That goes for all League planets—until seven years ago." He paused dramatically.

Oberon leaned toward him. "Yes, go on."

"Our orbital monitoring systems began blipping an extra blip," Paiselle continued. "And when we went up to investigate, we found something odd, indeed: a sheet of our own vellum, covered with inscriptions made by a common stylus, housed in an inoperative life-support bubble. The inscriptions matched, in character, the type we had seen on Capacian ships." He paused again, letting the impact sink in. "We call it the Capacian Code. We don't know what it says."

"What about the computers?" Oberon requested. The whole thing was ludicrous. "We've been able to crack all the Draconian military codes. Do you mean these Capacians have our whole technology stumped?"

Paiselle nodded gravely. "We're stumped. These beings, whoever or whatever they are, must know that we are incapable of deciphering their message, at least presently. They must expect us to solve it in the future. They want to tell us something, but not right away."

"It would seem so," Oberon muttered. "Have we spotted any ships since they delivered this item?"

"That's the damnedest thing!" Paiselle said fervently. "This planet has not recorded a single Capacian visitation since we plucked that code from the orbital bed. I might add here, Dan, that part of your mission is to find out if certain other League planets have the same record. We don't have statistics from them all."

Oberon considered for a moment. "In the past, have we been able to monitor their escape course for any length of time?"

"We usually did just that. And we've traced them as far as the range of our instruments will allow—"

"Telphon 281." Oberon supplied with resignation. "That explains the itinerary."

"Part of it," Paiselle corrected. "Once you have achieved that distance, the rest is up to you, Captain. The Council is placing this whole matter in your hands."

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Oberon stared. To be allowed such freedom was almost unheard of. "Thanks," he said weakly. "Exactly what do you expect me to do once I've found them?"

Either the problem was somehow inconsequential or Paiselle was making a huge effort to play it down. "Do what we normally do when we encounter a new civilization," he stated flatly. "You know the routine: bridge the language barrier—you'll have experts on board for just that purpose—contact their leader or leaders, offer membership in the League—"

Oberon cringed. "Offer membership to the Capacians? You're out of your mind. Anyone that superior would laugh us back into space so fast—"

Paiselle was smiling and shaking his head. "You take me too literally, Dan. What I mean to suggest is that some sort of alliance can be established, and you've had plenty of experience with that sort of thing. Look, they must know all about us. They must be expecting us to make a move."

Oberon nodded slowly, digesting this without pleasure. There were many theories about Capacian visitation, all with one common denominator. The Capacians were observing. The haunting question was why. Why had they been flying in and out of Sol since prehistoric times? With a superiority this old, what could they possibly be learning from the human species, and why, after millions of years, did they choose this time to attempt to communicate?

Paiselle was shuffling through notes and reports. "To further explain the itinerary," he went on. "You have here a list of League planets whose UFO files have not been thoroughly investigated. As far as we know, none of them has pulled a Capacian Code out of an orbital bed, but we'd like to be sure. There is the possibility, remote as it seems, that someone else has deciphered a message from them, and we do want to know as much as we can about our elusive friends before we meet them."

"If these are the details," Oberon interceded, "then we've hardly anything to go on."

"You're right," the commodore admitted, unperturbed. He continued solidly, "Nothing except their general direction in Telphon. The course that has been plotted for the *Anriahd* is a duplicate of their common path of re-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

treat, with a few sidetrips to those member planets with incomplete UFO files."

"I couldn't help noticing that Draco isn't on the list of places to visit. I don't imagine they'd cooperate."

"Hardly." Paiselle coughed. "Even if we didn't give them any toothy smiles." He examined his notes for a moment in silence while Oberon grinned at the remark. The Draconians had one trait—aside from their unlivable savageness—that set them apart from all other humanoid races. Their teeth were retractable.

This was a quality that could never be fully explained by League anthropologists, and its social accessory was even more bizarre. Among the Draconians it was an unforgivable breach of conduct to display or otherwise indicate the presence of teeth in the mouth except during meals. At all other times teeth were considered atavistic, and were kept discreetly retracted into the gums. It never failed to amuse Oberon that the average Draconian, a creature slaving over the ecstasy of war and conquest, could be made to shudder at the sight of teeth.

Through the rain-streaked glass the large, purple dome of the half-built Draconian embassy caught his eye, and he smiled grimly. Diplomacy was a foreign language to that militant pocket of the universe where Draco I and Draco II orbited their separate suns. Yet he couldn't blame the Council for resorting to conventional modes of appeasement. The Draconians were tradition-oriented racists, unwilling and unable to get along with the League. A constant civil war within their own galaxy, and a simple lack of materials for invasions beyond, was all that kept them from becoming an active threat to the League. It was doubtful that an embassy would solve anything.

"Any more questions about the course?" Paiselle's voice brought him back to the matter at hand.

Oberon quickly spun the itinerary tape through the reader at his place. "No. You've made it all quite clear. But I do have a question or two about my crew—mainly about Mascot Elijah Brandon, aged seven." He faced Paiselle angrily. But the commodore parried him with another broad smile. He appeared to savor this moment.

"You have been selected for two very unique and important jobs, Dan. To begin with, you are to lead the first expedition into Capacian territory, and second, you are to

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

take part in the education of the most awesome brain ever born to mankind. Ever hear of a hypermentality?"

Oberon nodded warily. It was the highest level of intellectual ability known to human beings; Ergang had been the only one in all of written history. Not even Einstein or Goethe came close.

"You don't mean to tell me," he phrased slowly, "that you're afflicting me with a hypermentality? You're insane to send him into space at all, but why with me?" He stared at the beaming commodore, momentarily unnerved. Surely this was madness, a joke.

Paiselle grew serious as he studied the younger man. There was a self-assured strength in Oberon that always made him seem older than he really was. He was the best decision-maker in the Troop.

Undoubtedly, he was the best guardian for Elijah.

"Because I wouldn't entrust him to anyone else, Dan. It's as simple as that—"

"But the risk!" Oberon burst out. "There's risk in sending out any crew on a starship. You try to balance the expendable with the expendable. You know what I mean. That's a cold-blooded way to look at it, but it is Council practice. This strikes me as downright reckless. And I'm not just talking about the case of Mascot Brandon!"

"I understand your misgivings, Dan," Paiselle soothed. "But this is exceptional, and we've got to chance it. For anything this monumental, your crew has got to be outstanding right down to the maintenance department."

Oberon submitted with extreme reluctance. "All right. But you're letting ambition take precedence over simple caution. Go on, then. Tell me about your wonderchild."

"Naturally, it's a gamble," Paiselle went on, unruffled, "sending Elijah out on a mission with an unpredictable end. In short, we have to take advantage of the hand-picked group he'll have for tutors. It's only once in a lifetime that we can get together a crew like this, and it just happens that Elijah is more than ready, at seven, for mascot training. That's not surprising when you know his history—"

Oberon prepared himself. "Which is?"

Paiselle rubbed his hands gleefully. "I could simply let you go through his Personal Data capsule aboard ship," he said. "But I'm one of the honored few who have been

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

allowed in the inner circle of Elijah's training program, and I'm afraid I take the enormous presumption—as we all do—of considering him a personal brainchild."

"I suppose he's an Institute Possession," Oberon remarked dryly.

"Much as I object to that term," Paiselle answered with a brief glare, "I guess he really is just that. He has never even laid eyes on his own parents—"

Oberon started suddenly. "Wait a minute—he wouldn't happen to be the son of Ambassador Brandon? Ambassador Gareth Brandon?"

Paiselle nodded gravely. "Elijah is his son—conceived quite accidentally and born seven years ago in a starship orbiting Orion. The Brandons had not intended to have any children. They were regular with the contraceptive shots—the records prove that—so you can imagine how it appalled the medical world when Elijah suddenly showed up despite the fact that the drug has never been known to fail. But the fact is Elijah was born inconveniently, so we would probably have ended up with him even if the neural analyzer had showed just moderate genius. You know the statistics on how many children with good ratings are signed over to us per year. But this one classified as a hyper, so his parents didn't even wait to hear his first cry."

"Is this rating detailed in his PD?" Oberon asked. Usually every person's mental capacity was outlined in his or her Personal Data capsule, but in most cases Oberon did not pay much attention to this area. In most cases he was not that interested.

Paiselle nodded and explained. "The analysis is calibrated to Ergang's level of hypermentality. Elijah's readings run right off the graph. So you see, we don't know, and we're still trying to find out, exactly what he is."

Oberon groaned.

"If he's a complete mutation"—Paiselle shrugged—"chances are we'll never have another like him. So far his progress has outpaced Ergang's infant rate in all aspects." He rolled a photo-sphere across the table. "That's his picture. You'll be meeting him sometime tonight."

"He's here?"

"Yes. We had him shuttled in from Orion last week. It's about time he saw Earth, anyway."

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Oberon picked up the sphere and examined its three-dimensional contents. He was surprised to find that Elijah Brandon was a very ordinary-looking child. He was expecting the oddness of feature that sometimes went with heavy intellect, but no—Elijah was ordinary: black, tufty hair, wide brown eyes, a short snub nose, a mild expression. There was only one thing that struck him as he examined the miniature head, turning the sphere to catch the profile and back again. Elijah's eyes were slanted, just slightly slanted. He must have some Ayhillian blood.

"Does Elijah have any Ayhillian in his background?" Oberon spoke up.

"No, absolutely not a trace," the commodore said bleakly. "And no Terran Oriental, either. We can't figure out the eyes, but, of course, his genes are very different from ours. Besides, he represents a much greater biological problem than that—"

"Just a moment. I see what you mean." Oberon was gazing intently at the child's image. "The Brandons are both blond, Nordic types; in fact, they are about the palest blonds I've ever seen. They couldn't possibly have a child like this." He looked askance at the commodore. "This child is the product of a dominant dark gene. Black hair. Brown eyes. Come, now, Commodore—you have all the official secrets. Is Ambassador Brandon really the father of this boy?"

Paiselle sighed. "There's no question of that," he answered doggedly. "At least in the opinion of the Council, there's no question of it. Now it just happens that I've known Camille Brandon personally for years—she's impeccable. I would say there's no question even if the boy had antennae, three eyes and a row of plates down his back. And you know, Dan, you just don't go running blood scans on ambassadors to find out if their offspring is really their own."

Oberon's lips pursed thoughtfully. "How do the Brandons react to this?"

"They're just as baffled as we are," Paiselle reported. "You may wonder if Brandon suspects his wife. He doesn't. When he first got wind of the discrepancy, he told us that just in case there should ever be any doubt, the child is his and he knows it. He expects his word to be taken. And Dan, I believe him. But I also believe in the

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

law and order of nature. I don't know what to make of it."

He paced to the glass and leaned on it. Then, restlessly, he strode back and sat down.

"And, besides, when you view Elijah as a person and a case, this is a very minor peculiarity among his many. For instance—" A trace of uneasiness crept into his voice and he glanced at Oberon, as if afraid to deposit the last straw. "At least this is not unheard of—your mascot is also a telepath."

Oberon's eyes widened. "You don't say?" he muttered.

Paiselle continued in a rush. "Yes. His mental rating at birth made that quite clear. He's a level-three telepath, able to read minds at will. But he doesn't do it except on permission, and then he's confined to the outer fringes only. We had to train him out of mind-reading, of course. He's been taught to respect other people's privacy and rely on his other senses instead. He could talk long before he could walk, Dan, probably a direct result of the telepathy. I'm glad infancy doesn't last long. There's nothing more nerve-racking than a baby in diapers repeating out loud every thought in your head—like a game, and so happy about it!" He caught himself on the brink of a favorite tangent. "Oh, well, I won't recite all of his biography. It's all in his PD capsule, anyway. If you want to lose your self-respect, go through it sometime."

"You haven't said anything about his personality yet," Oberon pointed out. And he said wryly, "With an entire Institute to hover over him, I'll bet he's a little charmer."

"Oh, he'll be no trouble at all," Paiselle exclaimed, as if this fact awed him more than anything else. "He's no spoiled hellion, if that's what you're worried about, not that he's an angel, either—"

"Who's to be in charge of him?"

"The first officer, as usual." He consulted the list. "Nimmo Christie, an Orion. Works out well, since Elijah's been reared by the Orion branch of the Institute. Christie's also our leading cryptographer. He's working on the code. Any more questions about personnel?"

Oberon's mind was spinning. "Yes. I see that Nimmo Christie's rank is only honorary. Some medical reason?"

Paiselle nodded. "Epileptic—"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"What?" Oberon stared at him. "Orion epileptics aren't usually allowed on starships."

"It's nothing to worry about," Paiselle assured him. "He's not violent, or dangerous, and he happens to be qualified over anyone else in the League for this particular job. And he loves kids. And Elijah's used to Orions. Good enough?"

Oberon was silent.

"Your friend Edwards will give you a full report if you're not satisfied. Anything more?"

"No, I guess not at the moment."

"Yes, what is it?" Paiselle flipped a switch to answer the insistent beeping of the intercom at his place, and the secretary's face appeared on the miniscreen. Before she could say a word, he spotted the tall figure behind her and glanced up at Oberon again with a beaming face.

"Speaking of the Devil!"

"A Dr. Edwards to—"

"Send him in! Send him in!" Paiselle blanked her off and rubbed his hands with anticipation as the door opened behind Oberon.

"Dragon!" Oberon spun out of his chair and gave a yelp of pleasure as he collided with his old friend. Edwards' powerful embrace lifted him clear off the floor. He felt instantly disburdened, secure. But the feeling died when he was set down again and could see the expression of the man who towered over him.

Confusion jabbed him, but he tried to ignore it. "You've grown," he remarked, tapping the oldest source of humor between them. There just weren't that many people who were seven feet tall, except the Draconians, who averaged this height as a physical norm. And there was only one man of Draconian blood in the entire League of Worlds—Dr. Andrew Edwards, recently assigned to the *Anriahd* as chief medical officer. He was a friend of long duration—and about the only familiar name on the itinerary list.

"The Dragon," as he was affectionately known, had a personal history as melodramatic as a video show. He had been found among the remains of a Draconian crash on an asteroid, a six-month-old baby in a life-support bubble, miraculously alive. He had grown up on Earth, practically a possession of the Institute, to become one of the

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

League's most outstanding physicians, as well as a brilliant medical researcher. Unlike the rest of his kind, he had a passive, unexcitable nature. But he did have a Draconian build, very tall with a rather elongated appearance and what he felt was the most ridiculous attribute of all, retractable teeth. Andrew Edwards never retracted his teeth. It was a standing joke among his friends that this was the one reason why his own people never attempted to reclaim him.

The Dragon smiled fleetingly as Paiselle shook his hand. Then his eyes traveled across the piles of notes on the table, his hands retreated into his pockets and he stood in silence. It was like him to say little, but it was unlike him to say nothing at all.

"You look like a man in a trance," Paiselle declared a little too loudly. "Something wrong?"

The Dragon stared past them, sighed, regarded the floor. One gaunt hand closed absently on Oberon's shoulder.

"You've been briefed?" Paiselle encouraged. "You're not happy about the mission?" He was smiling subtly into a fistful of vellum which he flipped through and sorted with restless fingers.

"No, I'm not happy with the mission." The Dragon inclined his head toward Oberon. "I'm happy with your choice of captain. Everything else is preposterous. The mission's a frivolity. You're all out of your minds."

Oberon suppressed a grin. His own habit of outspokenness had been acquired from the Dragon years ago and had stuck. It was the only thing they had in common, really. Oberon enjoyed the vagueries of ideas; the Dragon preferred the crispness of facts and details. They were apt to reach the same conclusions, but in radically different ways. Oberon searched for heroes among the people he knew; the Dragon maintained that he was no particular respecter of persons. Yet to earn his friendship was to build yourself a bastion for life.

Paiselle merely shrugged at the Dragon's outburst. "I think you'll change your mind," he said without elaboration. "Are the labs equipped to your satisfaction?"

The Dragon relaxed a little and gave a nod. "I've done inventory between physicals. Everything seems to be in order. I'm on my way back up there now, as a matter of

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

fact. Got to fetch our mascot for the big bash tonight. Oh—and I've completed all pre-departure physicals except for Obi, here." He regarded his friend with some attentiveness for the first time. "We'll wedge you in sometime tomorrow."

Paiselle glanced at the time panel, and Oberon realized that the briefing session was over. "I don't have any more questions at the moment, Commodore," he said.

"Good. If either of us thinks of anything more, we can discuss it tonight at the banquet." Paiselle was referring to the Departure Banquet, a tradition as old as space missions. Most of the crew would be present, and most would be meeting their captain for the first time. Space Troop personnel numbered an estimated forty-five billion, nothing like the family affair it had been in the early days of interstellar travel, before the exchange of diplomacy and commerce with outworlds made it the largest organization in the known universe.

"I don't know whether to thank you or desert the force immediately," Oberon said as he shook Paiselle's hand.

Paiselle replied, "I only wish I were in your place, Dan. If you find the Capacians, you'll go down in history as a first. I think that's quite an honor to have on your horizon." This was said seriously, but from above Oberon's head came a contemptuous snort.

"What a lot of buckram," the Dragon muttered as he turned toward the door.

Oberon said dutifully, "If I can bring League membership to a new and decent world, it will be reward enough, Commodore." The Dragon left the room in disgust.

"There's more than that in this case," Paiselle reminded him. "They'll be able to answer questions that I don't have to tell you to ask. You've undoubtedly wondered what so advanced a civilization can be learning from a society at our level—we've all wondered. But the fact is they must be learning something. And we'd all like to know what it is."

"I'll find out," Oberon said.

"I think you will," Paiselle replied.

***For everything the will has ever sought
Is gathered there, and there is every quest
Made perfect, which apart from it falls short.***

Dante

OBERON WAS DISSATISFIED with his departure speech, he realized as he spoke it across the sea of politely attentive faces. He wished he had been able to arrange that conference with Paiselle sooner, so that there could have been more time for him to organize his thoughts about the mission. Somehow the speech, which he had hastily scribbled during lunch, seemed unstructured and vague. Its lack of perfection made him gloomy, and he was afraid that his voice would project it, so he vocalized in a tone of false heartiness that grated on his nerves.

But it must have sounded more confident than he had imagined, for when he finished the applause was enthusiastic and continued even after he had descended from the podium. Satisfied, he merged with the crowd. There was little elbow room left in the banquet hall, which had become a turmoil of dress uniforms and the academic regalia of Institute professors. Oberon searched impatiently for the Dragon.

A young man with tousled black hair rushed up and wrung his hand excitedly.

"How do you do, sir! I'm your helmsman, Ensign William Benson—unfortunately, it rhymes!" He gave a short, nervous laugh, and Oberon returned a smile.

"You've got reason enough right there to want a promotion." He noticed the cast of the young man's dark eyes and asked with quick interest, "Do you have Ayhillian blood, Benson?"

The young man nodded. "Yes, sir. My sister and I—she's in communications—have an Ayhillian grandfather. He came from Ayhill Seven." Benson plunged into the

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

subject of his sister. "Shyla's still up on the ship. She's supposed to baby-sit for Mascot Brandon tonight after he shuttles back up. I've heard he's real young and the party goes past his bedtime. But I suppose you've met him by now, haven't you? I haven't seen him at all yet, myself."

It occurred to Oberon that while his mind had been preoccupied with the speech, he had quite forgotten to look for his mascot in the crowd. "I didn't know he'd arrived yet," he remarked, glancing about. "Where is he?"

The Dragon's voice exclaimed over his head, "Right here, Obi."

He whirled and found himself face to face with Elijah Brandon.

The Dragon was holding him.

Oberon's first impression was that Elijah was ridiculously small and ridiculously masqueradish in his child-sized dress uniform. Again, his appearance was surprising. He did not look like a phenomenon, and now he certainly did not act like a phenomenon. But how should one act? Elijah was just like any other youngster as he squirmed on the Dragon's arm and demanded, "I want to get down, please! I want to see the room with the mirrors."

"Hold it, young man," the Dragon admonished firmly, setting him down and turning him to Oberon. "Don't you know a captain when you see one?" He explained, "Sorry, Obi, but we missed your speech—just got in. The shuttle was delayed because of a track repair and we had to make an extra orbit."

Elijah had become instantly attentive. "A captain?" he repeated. "My captain?" The delighted grin should have won an answering one from Oberon, but he found that he could not respond beyond shaking the tiny, extended hand.

"How do you do, sir? I'm Mascot Elijah Brandon."

"And this is Captain Daniel Oberon, your commanding officer for the mission," the Dragon said, taking over when he saw that his friend was tongue-tied.

Oberon finally found his voice. Turning stiffly, he introduced Benson, wishing at once that the young officer would not stare at the boy with his mouth hanging stupidly open. Then he began to notice there was more than

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

simple awe in the man's response. Here was genuine astonishment. At what?

"The ensign will acquaint you with the helm, especially with navigation," he concluded, finding it hard to visualize this shrimp of a youngster taking part in helm activities. Benson gave a nod and said faintly, "Hope you learn a lot from the trip."

"Thank you. I hope we all do," Elijah said precociously, and Oberon felt an unexpected pang of dislike.

Absolute dislike, unwelcome, uncalled for. Dismayed, he felt himself tightening up inside, as if to guard against a blow.

The Dragon intervened. "I'm sure the captain has a lot of people to talk to, so say good-bye, Elijah." He cast a worried look back down at Oberon as he took the boy away. Elijah hung onto the Dragon's hand.

The whole thing was ridiculous, Oberon decided. Again, he became uncomfortably aware of Benson's expression. He was staring after the departing pair, his mouth still open, his face actually pale.

"What's the matter with you, Ensign?" Oberon snapped.

The young man jumped. His mouth opened and shut helplessly. Then he gasped out, "Sir—I—when I was a kid his age, I looked just like him."

Somehow it was just too much. "That's very possible," Oberon said brusquely. "To me all kids look alike." He gave an apologetic shrug.

As he strode away through the crowd, it struck suddenly that Benson did resemble the boy. But it was only because they both had Ayhillian traits. Yet Elijah was not Ayhillian; at least he was not supposed to be.

He was more than ready for a drink by the time he caught up with a waiter. When he saw Paiselle standing alone in a window alcove he headed straight for him.

Paiselle spoke first, as if he had prepared for it. "What's troubling you now, Dan? You look awfully grim."

Oberon swallowed half his drink and thumped the glass down on the nearest surface. "You've picked the wrong man," he declared. "I'm sorry, Paiselle, but I don't see how I can be the correct choice for this mission when I feel this way about the boy."

Paiselle humored him with an understanding smile.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Come now, Dan. I know all about you and your moods. Now, what's this about Elijah? How do you feel about him?"

Oberon groped. "It's hard to say, exactly. It's unreasonable, I know, but I dislike the boy—" He broke off disgustedly, waiting for Paiselle to dismiss it all with more excuses, until he realized that the commodore was waiting, also. He met a gaze of close attention.

"Go on."

Oberon muttered, "There's really nothing more. It's just an impression. Forget it."

Paiselle watched him keenly. "What are you really feeling, Dan? You're blaming the boy for something which is really misdirected. Think about it for a minute."

It did not take him long. "I suppose I'm just a little on edge because there are things about him that I don't understand—that you don't understand. And there are things about this mission, its purpose, what in the hell we're getting ourselves into . . ."

Paiselle looked past him to regard the passing faces. Voices and music seemed to float toward them from a great distance.

"You're worried about the unknown, Dan. Relax. It's something that plagues every one of us. It's what is really at the bottom of this quest if you scratch away all the routine. Why should they know more than we do? It just happens that when we uncover a neighbor who knows so much more, we just can't live with ourselves."

"Are you sure that we're ready for these titanic unknowns?" Oberon wondered. It was such a flimsy statement—too casually, too lightly, spoken—and yet he felt it summed up all his misgivings about this assignment.

"No, I'm not sure. Who can be sure?" The commodore continued to gaze pensively at the huge gathering of Institute and Space Troop personnel. "But we do it, anyway, just as we have always pushed on toward answers, even ones that we would rather not know." Oberon could almost see him mentally turning the pages of Ergang, drawing on the philosophy that governed the impulses and decisions of every Space Troop person. "They've been watching us ever since we first crawled out of the ocean. We know they were regular visitors when man first picked up a burned stick and drew on the wall of his

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

cave. Perhaps—just perhaps—they can tell us why we live.”

He turned back to Oberon, his eyes glistening. “And don’t let your first impression of Elijah disturb you. I have to confess that I felt that way, too, at first. Yes, I did. But you’ll get used to him—and to all the crazy dilemmas he causes. There will be a lot of those.”

Oberon considered this. “I suppose you’ve been feeding him on juvenile versions of Ergang—”

“Juvenile? Hardly!” Paiselle laughed uproariously. “Elijah read the real thing—all of it—last year, when he was six years old.”

“I suppose he’s written an interpretation, too,” Oberon commented wryly, but the commodore was shaking his head in good-natured despair.

“No, no, no, Dan. You’ve got it all wrong. Elijah can’t make any sense out of the philosophical implications in a book like that. He couldn’t possibly. It’s the physics he understands. You see, there’s always something to be remembered about child prodigies—something that can make you feel quite superior—”

“That’s always welcome,” Oberon said with an attempt at lightness.

Paiselle explained. “They perform superbly, it’s true. But they haven’t the ideas and insights that come from a lifetime of experiences. That’s why we don’t turn the world over to them. That’s why Elijah won’t be able to understand the philosophy of Ergang for years yet. He has to grow up like anyone else.”

A waiter offered them hors d’oeuvres, which they both declined absentmindedly.

“I don’t think I’ve met my other two senior officers,” Oberon muttered, glancing from person to person.

“Well, I expect Nimmo Christie is here somewhere,” Paiselle said. “But you won’t see Kate Sagen.” Then he amended, “I’ve never known her to attend anything that wasn’t strictly business.”

Dr. Katherine Sagen was the *Anriahd’s* chief engineer, but she always preferred to be called Sagen, even in lieu of her first name, if you happened to be on such familiar terms with her. But Oberon sincerely doubted that anyone ever could be.

In his mental turmoil over the mission, he had com-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

pletely forgotten that she was the one other familiar name on the list besides the Dragon. She had been his instructor in hyperlight mechanics back in his junior Institute days, and he recalled her harsh, indifferent presentation of the most awe-inspiring discovery of man—the ability to travel faster than the speed of light without time distortion. He remembered how she had demeaned this great advance, calling it insignificant because, she had pointed out, man had not yet named the farthest star and man was really no more in touch with reality than his ancient forebears. Blind, deaf and dumb little man, content to embroider futilely within the boundaries of his existence. She had said that, and had even offended her students by being sarcastic about Ergang. But then, at times, she treated her future Space Troopers with a strange, perplexing sympathy. And Sagen was the inventor of something almost as useful as Ergang's hyperlight mechanics. The Pathing Device, a special instrument for plotting uncharted space, was her own creation.

Now, after years of seeing nothing of her, Oberon was to work with her in a new kind of relationship. He wondered what her attitude toward Elijah would be.

Shyla Benson was not very familiar with the ship's layout yet, but when she saw that the sign beside the door said ENGINEERING, she was able to visualize the long, corridor-like area which housed the conversion units, main computers and huge fuel reserves at the stern of the *Anriahd's* triangular hull. She was sure that she would find the office on the right just inside the door. It slid open as she stepped on the sensor mat, and she saw that she was right.

Nervously, Shyla pushed back her rich dark hair and regarded the tall gray woman, who was bent over a viewing hood inside the office.

"Dr. Sagen?" she asked, uncertain.

Sagen snapped up from the hood and transferred her absorption to the girl who hovered beyond the open entrance. Vivid, translucent eyes fixed their gaze upon the intruder.

"Yes?" Sagen inquired, her voice husky and deep. Motionless, she stood with her elbows drawn back, her body

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

stooping forward over the hood, as if something had frozen her there.

Shyla had the uncomfortable feeling that the *Anriahd's* chief engineer was about to spring on her. She blurted out, "I-I just wanted to ask if you would—" She stopped, remembering that she had not introduced herself.

"My name is Shyla Benson. I was asked to baby-sit for Mascot Brandon, but I would much rather go to the party. And since you're not going—I heard that you weren't—do you think you would mind putting Mascot Brandon to bed tonight? He's very young, but I've heard that he's really good—"

"You seem to have heard a lot," Sagen muttered. Her eyes searched the girl, and she spoke with peculiar emphasis. "Have you met the boy yet, Miss Benson?"

"No."

"You have not seen him at all?"

"No. **Why?**" Shyla faltered.

"Very well," Sagen said, ignoring the question and peering again into the hood. "I'll relieve you."

"Thank you." Shyla stared for a moment longer, then gave a shrug and hurried out.

On her way to the transport deck, she stepped into an elevator just as the ship's chief medic, Dr. Andrew Edwards, and a small boy stepped out.

Shyla's eyes widened with astonishment, and she started to say something, but the doors of the elevator closed between them.

**Co-extensive with their Without,
there is a Within to things.**

Pierre Tielhard de Chardin

SAGEN WATCHED THE small boy who stood in the center of the room with a boot in each hand.

"Well," she said abruptly, "I suppose a bath is in order."

Elijah never felt shy or afraid, but his eyes were full of speculation as he looked up at her. He was fairly used to women as sitters. On Orion there were various Institute women who substituted at times for the three Council men who cared for him almost exclusively. But this one was different. She was so silent, almost glum. No games had been suggested. He had not been expected to show an interest in toys, or "stories," and although he was gratified by all this, he was very surprised. She had not answered any of his questions, however. She had not touched him once all evening. He had been allowed to climb up to the very top of the engineering computer banks, and to fall off without causing a hint of panic. Could she read his mind?

Elijah puzzled over this while the bather filled slowly and noisily. "Have you been looking at my PD?" he demanded.

"No."

He wriggled out of his uniform and leaped into the water with a tremendous splash, watching to see if she would flinch or smile.

She did neither.

Elijah always thought in terms of experiments. What would happen if he stepped completely out of character and suggested a game himself? Her amazement would be interesting, and at least it would be some kind of reaction.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

He waited until she was drying him.

"Don't you know any games?" he asked.

She stopped immediately and sat back, gazing at him from those strange, steady eyes. Then, with a grim smile and a deliberate motion, she picked up the talc container and dusted one hand. It was held up, powdery white, for his inspection.

"Can you see what is on my hand?" she asked.

Elijah turned aside smugly. A game at last. Then she was not so very different from all the others.

"It's talc," he said.

Again the tight smile. "Look closer."

He did so, moving in tentatively against her. But it was white powder across her palm no matter how close he peered. Elijah was puzzled, unsure of this game.

Sagen said, "Look at it closely, but not that way. You are using your body. That is not necessary. Focus your mind upon it. Make believe there are telescopes inside you. Think about turning something inside out. Invert and magnify. Use your mind. Your mind."

Obediently, he concentrated. He was aware of the inside of his head, and aware of the smear. They seemed to merge while he stood there. The smear seemed to move closer and closer until it was absorbed by his mind, and what he saw was a collection of enormous, craggy white mountains on a strange, pinkish land of diamond-shaped plateaus intersected by networks of deep ruts and valleys. Startled, he jerked back and the image dissolved. He was looking at her hand again, and her other hand was squeezing his shoulder.

"What did you see?" she demanded huskily.

"White m-mountains," he stammered.

She was satisfied.

As if to change the subject, Sagen gathered him up, bundled in the big towel. But while she had him in her arms, held up quite close to her stern, angular face, she said in a slow and even tone, "This is to be our game for a while, Elijah. You do not need to play it with anyone else."

"I won't," he promised happily. Then he asked, "Did you see the white mountains, too?"

"No."

"Why not?"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Because I can't." She carried him across the recreation area of his quarters and placed him on the bunk. He had to get into his sleeper unassisted, and while he was doing so, he said, "If you looked at everything that way, you'd be able to see all of everything."

Her mouth creased into an odd half-humor which left with the speed of a passing shadow.

"And why is that?"

Elijah pouted warily, meditating on this.

"I don't know yet."

**Bond unknown to me
Was given, that I should be . . .
A dedicated spirit.**

Wordsworth

THE PULSE OF the *Anriahd's* engines was faint throughout the ship as she dove steadily out of the Carina-Cygnus arm of the galaxy. On his way to the ship's labs, Oberon stopped near an air hatch and listened as a parent would listen with fondness to his child's song.

It was not a totally sterile existence except in terms of cleanliness, for the soundproofing was not complete. Psychologists had discovered that crews functioned better in the presence of sound. So the engines could be heard as a soft, faint throb in most parts of the ship.

Oberon realized that for the first time in many hours he was in no hurry and no one was waiting for him. He turned, frowning, from the grid over the hatch. A feeling of deep amazement often crept over him during these sparse moments of idleness and made him wonder about things which, for some reason, he had to keep answering for himself again and again. Much as he liked it, why was he here? Why did he like it? What had made him assume this responsibility?

Unlike most senior officers, he had not been signed over to the Institute at birth, although he had always attended Institute schools. So, he must have made a conscious decision to enter the Space Troop. He could never quite remember when this had happened, and, as usual, he tried to fill the gap by skimming through vague scenes and sensations that were locked away in his past.

He could remember being disturbed by the bland simplicity of home and family as compared to the Institute, where every moment of life was so complex. He had been one of those unfortunate children who are super-aware.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

It meant that he was acutely open to the conflicts around him. When he looked back, he could not remember exactly what things he had played with, how many family pets there had been, what foods he had liked best; instead, his memory was full of the voices and feelings of the people he had lived with, their confusion. He remembered the insult, when he was small, of not being taken seriously. He remembered, too, the satisfactions that came with figuring things out. It was fun to make sense of something. Perhaps this was why the Institute had been more real for him than anything else—it provided answers. Yet he had not gone into research, but into command. He was not a scientist, but a leader who was supposed to know what was best for the people of many worlds.

He was uneasy about this mission; he felt both opposed to it and rewarded by it. The whole thing was the product of rash overconfidence, he still believed, and his crew was too valuable a payload for any ship to carry.

For the first three weeks nothing happened worth recording. There were things going on, of course: minor breakthroughs, evolving friendships, a personality flare up or two in the labs, but you didn't become aware of them until you got to know your crew, Oberon reflected. And that process usually required more than the smooth monotony of routine flight. The first shore leave during a planetary stopover was needed to juggle personnel, shake them together as situations arose. Oberon was looking forward to Ayhill Seven, only one more week away, for this very reason.

Meanwhile, he had become as acquainted with his crew as time would allow. The first thing he did was promote Will Benson to transport officer; the young man was already qualified, so it was a simple matter of getting it done. His sister, Shyla, was pretty and quite a charmer, except for one unfortunate habit—if only she would stop making such a fuss about her brother's resemblance to Mascot Brandon.

As for the rest, he couldn't complain. First Officer Christie was a frank, friendly man, and an efficient worker, though somewhat high-strung. When he was not on duty at the helm monitorials or at work on the Capacian Code, he was playing vigorously with Elijah.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

The education coordinator, a stocky fellow named Muriat, was very happy about this, for he was always griping about Elijah's disinclination to play.

Sagen's attitude was another story. She was a strict, no-nonsense instructor whom the boy never saw except during his scheduled lessons on the engineering deck. No one saw much of her, including Oberon. Occasionally she appeared at the helm to check the replacement of some part, but she had hardly left engineering since departure. He recalled his one attempt at conversation.

She still treated him like a pupil, addressing her words to herself and the machines, as well as to him, answering his questions with questions.

"What have you been up to all this time, Sagen?" he had asked lightly.

"What have you heard?" was the reply.

He tried again. "What do you think of our mascot?"

"What am I supposed to think of our mascot?"

There was no point in persisting further. He had given up after that.

Oberon thought briefly of taking a stroll through engineering, but decided against it. Even as a student he had not enjoyed the feeling of being watched by Sagen. Instead, he headed for the nearest elevator and descended three decks to pay a call on the Dragon.

The doctor had shut himself away in his own private lab, where Oberon found him staring into a microviewer.

"Come on in, Obi." The Dragon put out one long leg and kicked a chair over to him, switching off his microviewer at the same time. His elongated body always seemed good-naturedly ill at ease in surroundings scaled to the average Terran's size. Stretching, with his hands clasped behind his head, he gazed at his friend with close scrutiny.

"You look as if gravity had increased fifty percent," he pointed out mildly. "What's on your mind?"

"You would, too, if you had all these universally important lives on your hands," Oberon grumbled.

"They are on my hands. You forget I'm the doctor in this crate." The Dragon smiled serenely. "Come on, Obi. Doesn't it make you feel better just knowing there wasn't one other captain in the Troop who wasn't green all over when the news of your assignment came out?"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"I'll remember that when we come up against our first Draco One scoutship," Oberon returned. "It just might help."

For a moment the Dragon was silent, his large hands resting loosely on his knees, his thoughts taking their usual time to form a slow-spoken reply. He always reminded Oberon of a film in slow motion, so studied and deliberate were all of his movements. Perhaps it was just that he was always inwardly afraid of startling the little people around him. "Oh, they're not interested in this mission," he said with languid assurance. "They're too busy scrapping with each other."

"Let's hope so." Oberon glanced at the microviewer. "What's the project?"

The Dragon waved a hand. "Oh, Nimmo Christie's brain waves," he said. "The Council was hoping I'd come up with something, but it's no use. Orions are different. They can't be controlled as well chemically, and they're all so damned cerebral it's no wonder their brains short-circuit now and then. Even their religion is based on the search for knowledge."

But Oberon knew all about Orion culture. "I begin to see why they paired him up with Elijah," he remarked musingly.

The Dragon shook his head, dismissing the idea. "I wouldn't say that Nimmo is any typical Orion in that respect—he's no fanatic. No, I think there's a psychological maneuver at work here."

"That sounds like something Paiselle would cook up," Oberon interjected.

"Yes, it was his idea, and I think I know why. Elijah is a well-adjusted child and very adaptable. Knowing a person with Nimmo's affliction wouldn't be any trauma, and it might be good for him. He'll learn that we can't do everything, can't reduce everything to math, chant a formula over it and have it all turn out just roses."

Oberon studied his friend covertly. There was none of the chafing tension he had sensed during the briefing session with Paiselle. He wished he could adjust to this mission as easily.

"Just what is his curriculum?" Oberon inquired.

"That's Muriat's department."

"Can't give me a general idea?"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Yes—and a rather biased opinion, if you'd like it." Oberon grinned. "Of course."

The Dragon settled back with a disgruntled expression. "It's an experimental one. I don't know that I entirely approve of it, but you can't argue with the Council. I doubt if God hurling thunderbolts would move them once they've made up their minds. They've never had to deal with an Elijah before."

"Research prep or rank prep?" Oberon questioned.

"It's neither. Or perhaps I should say it's a mixture of both. It's the social aspect that disturbs me. Elijah has never played with another child. He's been exposed to other children at various times, but he doesn't respond, doesn't show one particle of interest. Apparently, there's nothing he can learn from them." He sighed. "I'd have arranged it differently, but then, I'm no child psychologist—"

"You do pretty well with adults," Oberon inserted. "And you always knew what was best for me when I was a kid. I always felt you were the most steadfast thing in my life; you were sort of a comforting blend of parent and Institute in one—"

The Dragon was a little abashed by the deep pleasure this gave him. "Do you think we'll find these Capacians?" he asked quickly.

Oberon arose. "I most assuredly do not," he replied with a laugh. "But that is only my own rather biased opinion."

He paused at the door, looking back. "So, you don't think you're going to get anywhere with Orion epilepsy?"

The Dragon ripped the cassette out of the machine and flung it into a filing bin. It was answer enough.

**Why has not man a microscopic eye?
For this plain reason, man is not a fly.**

Pope

AT A TABLE in the mascot's quarters, Nimmo Christie's nervous fingers beat out a steady rhythm as he waited for Elijah to finish reading. The boy was perched, utterly absorbed, in his special high chair before the reader. All of a sudden, he reached out and switched it off.

"I'm done. Now we can talk."

"Play," Nimmo corrected, remembering his orders. Ever since departure, the education coordinator had been growling that Elijah did not lead a normal childhood. That was true enough, but then, Elijah was hardly a normal child.

Nimmo slid back a panel in the tabletop and raked out a collection of small, multicolored game cubes. His movements were awkward with the pleasant tension that being watched by his brainy little friend always produced. Idly he began to hitch them at the corners, forming a helix. Elijah gathered the rest into a pile and fed them to the growing structure one by one, alternating the colors systematically. He said, "Remember three days ago when you let me read your mind so that I could learn to operate the monitorial without a long harangue?"

Elijah had an ear for people's pet vocabulary words, and "harangue" was one of Nimmo's. The Orion nodded. "So?"

"So, may I get back in? I won't go in too far, but I like it. Nobody else ever lets me," the boy complained.

"Okay, okay." Nimmo surrendered with a chuckle.

Elijah went on handing him cubes as if nothing had occurred, but Nimmo was temporarily distracted by the strange, consuming awareness of something new inside his

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

head. He wasn't sure whether he should go on allowing this, but it was a fascinating experience. And he was so anxious to be friends with this little boy that he tended to let the child rule him. So far no one had said anything.

"Why are we looking for the Capacians?" Elijah asked abruptly.

"Why don't you just go ahead and read my mind?" Nimmo exclaimed.

"I can't. Your reasons are in too far and they're all mixed up," the youngster said accusingly, as if Nimmo should be perfectly aware of this.

The Orion shrugged. Then, on sudden inspiration, he sprang to his feet and began to mimic Commodore Paiselle, deepening his voice and nodding his head with quick, authoritative jerks. "We-ll, to find out where they are and whether they're part of a League like ours, whether our societies could be compatible. There are a lot of reasons—"

Elijah laughed and shouted, "That's good, Nimmo! Do Muriat!"

Nimmo puffed out his cheeks and dragged a hand through his hair in Muriat-style vexation. Elijah squealed with laughter and bounded around, holding his sides. The door hissed back, admitting the head and shoulders of Muriat himself. "You're getting him overexcited," he admonished. "And his next lessons have to be taped."

"Sorry."

When the door closed again, Nimmo picked up the helix, redirecting the boy's attention. He really did not wish to cross Muriat, or anybody else from the Education division.

"Why else?" Elijah persisted, serious now.

Nimmo rolled his eyes. "As I said, there are a lot of reasons. I suppose our engineers would like to have that formula for space drive. I'd like to learn their language so we can read that message they so uselessly sent us—"

"There's much more than that," Elijah stated.

"Yes," Nimmo conceded. "What we'd really like to know is whether they are able to define the universe in the terms of one natural law. A piece of knowledge like that would be quite a prize."

"But it's all in Ergang," Elijah protested.

"Not all of it. Not enough, little brother. Not who we

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

are, why we're here, where we are going. But don't you worry about that. You're too young to be thinking about that stuff. In a way, we're going off to find the Capacians for the same reason we climb mountains—because they're there. But we're really going after them because we don't know what life is all about and we think they do."

"Life is everything we know," Elijah said tenuously, as if he wished to be assured of it.

With a shock, Nimmo realized that Elijah was reading his mind aloud to him, putting to voice that undercurrent of doubt and fear basic to every man.

Life is everything we know.

It was not a statement, as Nimmo would have liked it to be, but a question.

"Yes, kiddo. Life is everything we know, both active and inert." He hunted for an illustration. These sessions with Elijah always followed the same course, and yet the child was not exactly a brain-picker. He very definitely drew his own conclusions about things.

"There is atomic motion in this table, which isn't what we term 'alive,' just as there is in our bodies," Nimmo continued. "According to our best basic theory, life is based on motion, and everything we know is based on motion."

"Except the dust," Elijah said flatly.

Nimmo started, but the youngster was now busy taking apart the helix, so he watched in silence for a while. It was such an ordinary Terran child's face—with Ayhillian suggestions—that shielded the towering genius inside. They said he was so unchildlike that toys did not appeal to him, and it was known that he never indulged in normal, childish fantasies. If he said something was there, it was there.

"I'm going to build a much more complex structure than yours," the boy mused. "But it will show that you can only get just so complex with a given number of blocks. Bet you can't give me a ratio for these." He distributed the cubes evenly over most of the tabletop and stood up on the chair to reach out farther.

"What dust?" Nimmo asked.

Elijah glanced up, a little perturbed at having his train of thought disrupted. "You know." But he had vacated Nimmo's head in favor of this new project.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"No, I do not know."

"The dust in the air."

Nimmo replied evenly, "There is no dust in any spacecraft. The air-filtering system prevents it."

Now Elijah looked confused. "But there is. I can see it whether it's light or dark. I can see it whenever I want to see it."

It was no game. Elijah really meant what he was saying.

"How do you see it?"

There were signs of a struggle in the child's deep frown and the introspective vagueness of his eyes as he tried to answer. It was almost as if some language barrier made an explanation impossible. After several false starts, he gave up with a sigh.

"I don't know, I guess. Anyway, it's a secret. I promised I wouldn't tell."

Nimmo relaxed, strangely pleased. Then it had to be a game. Dimly, he wondered who had been so successful in reducing Mascot Brandon to the scale of a normal child. He had not observed anyone else but himself taking the time to play with the boy. For one thing, Elijah did not exactly invite play. . . .

Elijah went on, chattily. "It's a very special thing when somebody lets me into their head, and so I'm going to show you something special of mine."

Tumbling down, he ran to a locker and pulled out a drawer. From between layers of playsuits and uniforms, he took out a photo-sphere and placed it ceremoniously in the Orion's hands. It contained a formal portrait of a blond man and woman sitting shoulder to shoulder, gazing stiffly at the viewer. They both wore governmental dress uniform, and they both displayed ambassador pendants. Nimmo had never met the Brandons, but they were well known for a few diplomatic achievements within the Draconian Empire. He had not been told that Elijah was their son.

"They're my parents," the youngster announced, eyeing Nimmo sharply.

Nimmo was a person of impulse. He stared, slack-jawed, at the light-skinned, light-haired couple in the sphere. "You're kidding," he murmured before he could stop himself. Emphatically, the child shook his head.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"No, I'm not. They are my parents."

Then Nimmo felt him zero in on his mind, and he tried, futilely, to snap out of his surprise. But the damage was done. Elijah let out a wail.

"It is because they don't look like me! It is!"

If Nimmo could have swallowed his feelings, he would have done so in a hurry, but he was thoroughly bewildered now, and dismayed because Elijah was crying.

"They don't look like me," he sobbed.

Nimmo stammered, "Please—you'd better get out of my head now. I'm sorry."

Obediently, Elijah withdrew and stood, rubbing his eyes fretfully. "They gave me away to the Institute because they didn't look like me. And they never come to see me because they don't love me, because I don't look like them."

Nimmo helplessly bumped down to one knee. What could he say? If anything, it was all true, and there was not anything he could do about it except pull the child in against his shoulder and awkwardly pat his back.

"Shall we go down to the lounge for a snack?" he suggested.

Elijah sniffed and rubbed one boot over the other. "I suppose so," he grumbled, and he wrapped his arms around the Orion's neck.

Between shifts the corridors were almost deserted, except for the eternal theoretical physicists. There were five of them aboard, the best in the League, and it seemed to Nimmo that they were always clustered in some part of the ship, a loud, hotly arguing group, sketching formulas on the smooth, plagloid bulkheads. Elijah, who could guess their topic of debate by a cursory glance at the formulas, could usually be left with them, entranced, on the agreement that he would return to the helm or his quarters when a conclusion—or, more likely, a standoff—was reached. But now Nimmo pulled him away. Muriat was getting very edgy about Elijah's lack of play, so they wouldn't remain long in the lounge today, either, he decided. A swim on rec deck would be more appropriate . . . or a game of gravity pool.

Shyla Benson was the only person there when they arrived, and this fact reinforced Nimmo's decision. She

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

and her brother, who had the afternoon navigation shift, were always staring at the child with fixed, incredulous eyes. It irked Nimmo to no end because, by this time, everyone knew about Elijah and everyone was, or should be, properly used to him. Nimmo hated their stares. He knew what it was like to be stared at. When people stared at him, his nervous, high-strung impulse was to do something violent.

Casually, he stepped between her and the child, then turned his back on her.

"Now, little brother, what would you like?"

Elijah looked at the array of buttons on the food dispenser. "Oh, I dunno. What's good?"

Nimmo smiled, shrugged and parroted, "Oh, I dunno . . ."

"Well, then, I'll find out!"

The presence leaped back into Nimmo's mind so fast that he nearly gasped. But he managed to restrain himself, for he did not want Shyla to know what Elijah was doing.

In an undertone he said, "Oh—I, uh, I think maybe you'd better not do that anymore, for a while—"

"That's all right. I'm just looking at food." Elijah's head was cocked to one side, appraising.

"You like the half-moon cookie best. I'll have that one."

Nimmo punched out the order and slid back the little door. Elijah removed the cookie with a smile, but just as he was about to take a bite, he stopped and held it off, staring at it intently. It was large, fat and crescent-shaped, with sparkles of sweetener all over it.

As the boy stood there silently, Nimmo was aware of the presence slipping out of his mind in a rush, as if Elijah had some need to summon every faculty of concentration. Nimmo saw a cloudy, puzzled look come over his face, and then the small fingers tightened and the cookie exploded and sifted in crumbs to the floor.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Nimmo exclaimed.

Elijah's mouth fell open with surprise.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Nimmo," he muttered, looking down at the crumbs. He seemed dazed.

"Do you want another one?" the Orion asked gently.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Elijah shook his head. "No. Let's go back to my quarters."

As he passed through Shyla's fixed gaze, he said, "Hello, Miss Benson."

She smiled excitedly. "Hello, Elijah."

With recreation time over, they turned to the next lesson. Muriat taped it, as usual, for the record, which would ultimately become part of Elijah's PD. Midway through it, Elijah took a sidetrip that was not picked up by the taping and went unnoticed by everyone else.

Discreetly, in one corner of his data tablet, he sketched a tiny crescent shape, as if he were taking down a very important note to be thought about in more detail later.

**What constitutes a child? Want of
instruction . . .**

Epictetus

AYHILL SEVEN APPEARED, rising slowly on the helm view-screen, a shining, ultramarine-blue globe with green washes and curling white atmosphere. As the focus sharpened, the green washes became one central strip of land, the one narrow continent of Ayhill that formed a near perfect ring around the planet. No wonder it was sometimes called "the belted world."

"What orbit sir?" Will Benson called to Oberon from the navigational unit behind him.

"Polar," Oberon replied. "Hold at twenty thousand miles."

Benson flashed a quick grin across the helm to his sister, who could hardly keep her attention from straying to the vivid picture on the screen. It could be that they had never visited their ancestral land, Oberon reflected, and they would be the first—and probably the only ones—to apply for shore leave here. He found himself mentally consenting in advance, anything to take their minds off Elijah.

Just then, Sagen's face appeared on the telecom screen beside his seat. Her hair was a gray cloud against a background of coldly pristine instrument panels, and she confronted him with such intensity that he almost backed away.

"Captain, would you please assume standard orbit at the rate of sublight, level one?"

Oberon gave her an obliging smile. "Of course, if you say so. Doing some work on the reaction tubes?"

The stern face before him nodded curtly. "Out of necessity. Your enterprising mascot has just crawled up reaction tube number three and into number two, dislodging

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

five of the power unit clips. On top of that, he's got himself snagged inside."

Oberon felt a prickle of alarm. Heads raised from consoles, staring toward him. He asked calmly, "Will you be able to get him out all right?"

"Oh, yes," Sagen said immediately. "I sent a technician up after him, and I cut off the power supply to numbers two and three. They won't be in any danger if number one is used—it will just get a little warm."

"How did he get in there in the first place? Where's Nimmo?" Oberon demanded, a slight dread building.

"Your guess is as good as mine." Sagen blanked off.

Oberon deliberated silently for a moment, then rose and headed for the elevator, passing the unmanned monitorials and banks of flashing buttons. Halfway there, he remembered something and, returning to the telecom, punched in the ship-wide channel.

"Attention, all decks. Oberon speaking. The Ayhill conference will convene in thirty minutes, in the projection room."

Snapping off the communication, he headed once more for the elevator. By the time he reached engineering, Elijah had been dislodged and sent to his next lesson, and Sagen had retreated behind the closed door of her office. He was relieved to find that Nimmo's absence was not due to a seizure; Elijah had wandered off while his guardian was ransacking the tape library for data on Ayhill Seven, and he had climbed into the reaction tube with the intention of examining the wiring. Something far from boredom or playfulness.

Oberon and his apologetic first officer went to the projection room together, ahead of the others, and Oberon realized that Nimmo was intensely anxious to tell him something, but he seemed uncertain of how to proceed.

Nimmo loaded and set the wallscreen console, his motions rapid and nervous.

"Elijah keeps talking about seeing dust!" he burst out at last.

Oberon felt a second tinge of relief. "It's probably just a game," he said.

The Orion's black eyes probed him. "Well, that's what I think." But his words were without conviction, and

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Oberon waited for him either to say what was bothering him or change the subject.

Nimmo changed the subject. "It's no wonder I couldn't find the tapes on Ayhill. Some idiot misfiled them. And I didn't get a chance to review them and choose the best segments to run for the conference—"

"I think it's better not to do any editing," Oberon said peremptorily. "Why should we look the other way?"

A distinct unease came over Nimmo.

"I guess the Whelps are pretty awful."

Oberon could remember his sickened reaction, as a much younger man, his ideals outraged. "You're new to this," he said. "I know how easy it is to take these things to heart, Mr. Christie. Just remember that most of the universe is quite a beautiful affair."

Nodding, and slightly embarrassed, Nimmo took a seat by the console.

"From what I've learned in the past about Ayhill, my being an epileptic should come in handy."

Oberon glanced at him sharply. "Oh, what do you mean?" He was pleased and relieved that his first officer could speak of this unabashedly.

Nimmo explained readily. "Any UFO data would be kept with all the rest of their official information—under close guard in a central repository."

"Oh, yes, the Vaults of Ayhill," Oberon inserted.

"In the main court of Dyor. They're not very willing to let anyone, even League people, in there to poke around. And about the only excuse for research that they'll accept is a medical one. If you're sick with something special, you can check in the Vaults for a cure, because all of their medical knowledge is stored there, too, well out of reach. They have some pretty strange ideas about knowledge."

Oberon smiled quickly. "I suppose that would seem almost insane to an Orion. Isn't your god, Bilan, a god of knowledge, author of the great quest for wisdom?"

The reply was a noncommittal one. "You're right. I don't necessarily worship him myself, Captain. But you know who does? Elijah."

This was unexpected, but Oberon was not greatly surprised. After all, the boy had been reared by the Orion branch of the Institute, and was subject, therefore, to the attitudes and tendencies of that world.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"What child really worships?" he remarked dismissingly. But the projection room was now filling with the crew, so Nimmo said nothing more.

The Bensons were there, applying for shore leave, as expected, along with one geologist and one botanist. No one else showed any desire to transport down. Oberon was surprised to see Sagen inconspicuously seated in a corner, but felt alarmed when Elijah strayed in. Instantly he saw that the Dragon shared his feeling.

Edwards ambled through milling personnel and murmured to Oberon, behind his hand, "I understand from Nimmo that Elijah has had a slight identity crisis lately. So you'd better send him out right now, before you start the viewings."

"He'll find out sooner or later," Oberon put in.

"Later is better. And he's too young to meet the Whelps. Sagen can take him. She's not involved in anything now; in fact, she shouldn't even be here. Besides"—he gave a wincing smile—"if I could prove what I'd like to prove, Elijah is at least fifty percent Ayhillian."

"I don't think that idea is anything to fool around with," Oberon warned, but the warning was lost. Oblivious, the Dragon was staring across the busy room at Sagen, who was, as usual, looking at no one. He started when he turned his attention back to Oberon and found the young captain gazing up at him alertly.

"What's the matter?" Oberon asked.

A muscle tensed beneath the gray arc of hair that hung over the Dragon's broad forehead. "Nothing. Nothing, Obi."

"Well, then, go ahead and ask her if she'll take charge of the boy for a while," Oberon directed. The Dragon hesitated, a strange expression shading his face. "Go on," Oberon repeated. Stiffly, the Dragon turned away, and Elijah was sent out with Sagen. He did not seem to mind.

Space Troop regulations required that all personnel wishing shore leave or scheduled for research leave on any planet confer with the senior officers before departing. Such a conference was necessary to organize the transportation, but it was usually not needed to review the culture and conditions of the planet. Every person with a space career was expected to be familiar with the laws and peoples of every League world. Ayhill was the exception. As

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

the least-visited planet in the known universe, it was a place the League would have preferred to forget, were it not for the fact that some of the most important raw materials used in the building of spacecraft were mined there. This had gained it membership in the League, which provided it with a local militia, to fend off Draconians, and coordinators to keep things running smoothly.

After they had discussed the objectives of the two scientists on research leave, Nimmo refreshed them on the culture, using the data tapes as notes.

"No space-age technology of their own except for some amazingly high advances in medicine. Economic status: they mine glastrium and ildorite for the League. Only a trickle of emigration to other League planets." He nodded cheerfully at Benson. "I guess you came from a drop in the trickle!"

"My grandfather," Benson replied happily.

"No League colonies." Nimmo switched off the reader. "It's not a popular planet because of the Whelps." He gave Oberon a bleak look and turned the discussion over to him.

"Thank you, Mr. Christie," Oberon said mildly. "Dragon, what can you tell us about the Whelps?"

The Dragon didn't need notes. It was part of his duty to know the appearance and basic physiology of every race in the League.

"The Whelps of Ayhill," Edwards began, "should serve as a warning to all of us. No specific medical study of them has ever been made because the Ayhillians keep them subservient and don't allow them to be investigated. But we have been told that some ancient Ayhillians invented a drug at one time and used it without the caution of previous tests. Grotesque mutants—a 'race' named the Whelps—were the result. They've been this way for centuries without change. The other half of the population—the Ayhillians who had nothing to do with the drug—uses them in the mines, but they're not good for much. Too awkwardly built and their limbs are too puny. This is what they look like."

All eyes turned to the projection room mainscreen, which lit up with a picture of a mineshaft and its unfortunate workers.

Shyla broke the silence with an exclamation of disgust.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Oh, they're—they're horrid!" she cried.

Oberon waited a moment before turning it off, looking around at the response. Some shifted in their chairs with a deep, very personal embarrassment that was interesting to observe, while others contained themselves with neutral faces. He had seen this reaction before in classrooms and lecture halls, and it was always the same.

The Dragon had been wise in sending Elijah away.

Oberon reached out and switched off the picture.

It was a while before Nimmo began to realize that somewhere in the course of things he had been overlooked. Before the mission began, he had received the itinerary and the usual sketchy résumés of his fellow crewmates, but no one had briefed him, as the other senior officers had been briefed, on the finer details of the mission, and the care and feeding of their particular mascot, despite the fact that he was to have charge of that mascot. Even big wheels like Paiselle were prone to the age-old inhibitions that people had about Orion epileptics. They were privately detested by all the optimists, which accounted for his being neglected.

If he had known ahead of time that Elijah was a biological dilemma, he would never have acted so shocked by that photo-sphere of the boy's parents. If he had known of all the efforts to train Elijah out of telepathy, he would never have permitted mind-reading, which allowed the boy to waste his valuable attention on the inside of someone else's head.

These things disturbed the Orion, but now was not the time to complain. He was in a small, jet-shaped shuttle with his captain on League business, headed for the planet Ayhill Seven.

"I guess you've never seen an Ayhillian mining complex before," Oberon spoke up as he piloted the craft away from the sleek hull of the *Anriahd*.

"No, sir. Only in the pictures on the tape."

"Never been here for any reason at all?"

"No, Captain, not for anything official, and Ayhill doesn't have a tourist line. But I've been to as many League worlds as possible," Nimmo continued eagerly. He named them in a rush, and Oberon gave a whistle of appreciation.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"That's better than I can say for myself, Mr. Christie."

There was a hissing noise as the shuttle entered the field of tiny particles that surrounded the planet. Oberon made some adjustments in the controls. He said, "I'm not aware of how much the Institute varies from planet to planet in its upbringing of children. But I imagine there must be some differences."

"There are," Nimmo asserted. "I've told you that Elijah worships Bilan." He moved nervously in his seat, squinting against the white glare of atmosphere.

"Yes, you did mention it."

"Well, somebody taught him the prayer, because I've heard him say it."

"Not you, then?" Oberon smiled.

Gravely, Nimmo shook his head. "Nope, not this Orion. Probably not any Orion. We don't give religious instruction to kids under the age of twelve because it's considered brainwashing. We wait till they reach twelve or thirteen, give them access to the subject through books and tapes, and let them make up their own minds. The majority of them accept Bilan. On Orion, where knowledge is so important, a god of knowledge just seems to make the most sense." He frowned and chewed his lip pensively.

Oberon shrugged. "The boy probably came across the prayer in a book and took a shine to it. You know how kids love to adopt a favorite rhyme or a popular ditty and wear it out—"

"This is different," Nimmo protested, and Oberon was surprised by the relentless concern in the Orion's voice. "He'll sit in the middle of the floor like some kind of guru and stare at something I can't see, and chant the thing over and over. It's scary. He mulls over each word for seconds at a time, and if I interrupt him, I get a subzero look."

"I haven't heard him say the prayer," Oberon said.

"You will," Nimmo assured him. He gave the ocular focus dial a sharp, nervous twist, and took some readings mechanically, his thoughts elsewhere. Oberon fought an impulse to double-check him.

"So, you think that's the wrong kind of fun for Elijah to be having?" Oberon considered.

"That's just it, Captain—it's not fun to him. Nothing is fun and only fun to Elijah. He has a reason for everything he does."

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Are you sure you aren't letting a personal bias enter into this?" Oberon questioned judiciously. "How do you feel about Bilan, yourself?"

Nimmo answered readily, "I can't say I don't believe in Bilan—I do. I really do." His head tilted speculatively. "I suppose I would rather call him God, along with you Terrans, and I prefer your idea of Him to ours. I've lived with Terrans for a long time now. Guess I think your philosophy of life is worth taking on."

"What's the difference?" Oberon found himself asking. He was interested, but apt to hold the topic at arm's length.

Nimmo shrugged. "It's not hard to explain. Orions seek after knowledge as a religious goal instead of a secular one, that's all. Bilan is a god of knowledge. His prime directive is to seek after insight and lots of facts. If you're a priest on Orion, you're spreading the word of Bilan, but if you're a scientist—well, you're doing the will of Bilan, and there's a big difference. Any scientist of ours gets more respect than any priest."

"I don't see that our worlds are so different in that category," Oberon remarked.

"But they are," Nimmo insisted. "Sure, all you may be able to see right now is a craze for knowledge—look at our mission. But at least on Earth it's more like fad compared to what it is on Orion. Your God is still called a god of love, and your history had its major conflicts between science and religion. On Earth, knowledge wasn't always considered the most important thing. You've got that remembrance to check your steam now and then."

Oberon decelerated as they hit atmosphere. He had set their landing coordinates for a certain densely forested section of the continental south, where the glastrium mines were located. They would land near one, take a look around and then fly on to the main court of Dyor, a short hundred miles away.

They came to rest on a rocky bank that overlooked the mine entrance. As they emerged, armed with small but deadly hand beamers, and glanced about, it looked like any other mining complex: a deep crater in the ground, dazzling with the igneous shine of newly exposed rock, great clumsy machines trundling to and from the entrance, with men in rough tunics swarming about.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

But their eyes were riveted on something else—the appearance here and there of groups of beings whose sickening pinkish exteriors reflected the morning light. They stood about as high as a man's waist and looked almost like upside-down pears, with spindly, dwarfed arms and legs. The joint of each limb bulged, and if Oberon and Nimmo could have looked closer, they would have seen that each hand bore five splayed blobs of flesh. There seemed to be no face at all, only a kind of a vent of a mouth, two holes for a nose and opaque, expressionless eyes.

"Whelps," Nimmo muttered.

The tragedy of the Whelps was not that they were a repulsive-looking species; every Space Trooper saw animal forms in the far reaches of the universe that seemed just as unsightly. The tragedy was that these had once been men.

There was a scuffling sound behind them and Nimmo whirled and leaped against Oberon in one motion, knocking him flat. "Look out!" he yelled. A small arrow pierced the air where Oberon had been standing and bounced off a wing of the shuttle. He picked it up, then coolly surveyed an undulating group of Whelps that had appeared suddenly from around the bluff.

Nimmo made threatening motions with his beamer. "Get away! Get back!" he ordered sharply, but they continued to move in toward the two men, their shapeless hands clutching small bows and arrows.

"Wait a moment, Nimmo." Jumping up, Oberon charged the nearest Whelp, and before it could mount an arrow it was lying on its back, kicking feebly. The others huddled together in fear and shuffled back, but by now two Ayhillians were racing up the bank, shouting. In minutes, the Whelps had scattered into the trees.

"That's right," the first man, a director, panted when he reached them. "Push them over if they threaten you. It's very hard for them to get up again." Planting a foot on the overturned Whelp, he rolled it unceremoniously down the slope.

As the director and his companion caught their breath, Oberon questioned them indignantly. "Since when have the Whelps become hostile?"

The director looked grim. "We're very sorry, Captain.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

They're hostile to everybody these days, especially strangers. Oh, the ones you see around Dyor are on their good behavior, but if you land in a place like this—" He shook his head. "You're asking for trouble. We can't allow people here because they get jabbed with arrows or scratched."

"Why are they allowed to have weapons?" Oberon demanded.

The director smiled humorlessly and exchanged a glance with the other man. "That's your doing—the doing of the League, I mean. You're willing enough to let us have our slaves, but you do insist that slaves be equipped with weapons where there are forests full of preying animals such as we have, unfortunately for us. It doesn't make mining a joy to have their mean little arrows flying at you all the time."

"Have you discussed this matter with the coordinator for Dyor?" Nimmo asked.

The director smiled again and gestured toward his friend, who said, "I am Borin, the coordinator for Dyor, at your service. I am here today to discuss this very same matter with the director. Welcome to Ayhill, gentlemen."

Oberon introduced himself and Nimmo, allowed the necessary time for polite exchanges, then said, "We are actually here for an audience with the keeper of the Vaults of Dyor. We've some research to carry out for the League, if it is permitted."

By now the director seemed anxious to return to the operations below, so he said, "That's your department, Borin. Nice meeting you, gentlemen. Take my advice and don't do any more sightseeing." And he strode off.

"Then you are also keeper of the Vaults?" Nimmo exclaimed skeptically.

"You are surprised," Borin pointed out placidly.

Nimmo fumbled. "I—I only meant—I didn't know that the keeper was also the coordinator."

An understanding and amused smile came over the coordinator's face and Oberon was relieved there were no signs of offense. Nimmo was showing his inexperience badly.

"There are some natives of Ayhill who are capable of handling many jobs at once," Borin instructed mildly.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Come, let me ride with you and I will see that you land in the right place at Dyor."

They followed the big man into the shuttle.

Gladly, Oberon shut the airlock on the mining scene, and they proceeded to the landing fields of the court of Dyor. From the air, no castle—in fact, no town—was visible. Ayhillians, natives of a densely mountainous world, had a love of caves that the passing of centuries could not erase. If there were no natural caves in an area, they blasted through a mountain, building in a framework of mixed glastrium, plaston and concrete as they went until a whole town could be neatly shelved inside.

All of Dyor was located inside a mountain range; the main court of the queen located within the tallest peak.

Once, among the strolling civilians, Oberon recognized a Space Troop uniform, and he wondered if the Bensons were enjoying themselves as much as they had expected.

Oberon looked at the stone drawers and slots full of documents. Then he questioned the priest who had entered the Vaults with Borin.

"And this is the only repository of medical knowledge on your planet?"

"It is," the priest, Vulpius, replied. "It is the sacred repository of all intelligence, especially of history."

"Sacred, and yet most Ayhillians aren't even allowed in here," Nimmo murmured. Followed by Borin's steady gaze, he poked around a bit. "Wouldn't it be funny if we actually did find a cure for epilepsy in here? You know this place's medical reputation."

Oberon was curious. Nimmo's affliction had qualified them to enter the Vaults, and they had been given permission to check the UFO files, as well—what there were of them. The whole thing had been easier than Oberon had expected, but now the temptation to find out more about this neglected planet slowly overcame him.

"Don't your doctors have access to these cures? I mean, don't they have copies of this information at their own disposal?" he inquired.

Vulpius looked uncomfortable and said nothing, but Borin shook his head sternly. "No. They are trained sufficiently to cure ordinary disease. If they get a very complicated case, they must come to the Vaults to read. But

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

they may not take anything away. This material is held sacred by us. These cures were discovered by our ancestors and, regrettably, many of the processes they speak of can no longer be performed."

"Why not?" Nimmo wondered.

"Because we did not inherit the equipment that they used, and the instructions for making such things were lost."

"Why don't you request equipment from the League, Borin? You're the coordinator," Oberon declared.

"We do not," Vulpius answered shortly and folded his arms inside the voluminous sleeves of his robe. By his expression, it seemed the conversation had gone far enough. Borin stood glumly subordinate, and Oberon instantly sensed the old feudal despotism that worked to keep a population in the dark about things that were considered dangerous in the hands of the people.

The distant boom of a gong distracted them and Vulpius said, "You must excuse me. My service is required at court. Help them find the information they desire, Borin, but see that they do not stay too long. Good day." His robes swished against the stone floor as he left.

For a while, Oberon flipped through stacks of medical notebooks and texts. Then he began to notice something about the dates on them and the material of which they were made.

"There's something odd here." He glanced at Borin.

Borin replied, "What do you mean, Captain?"

"I mean the development of your culture seems to have come to an end three centuries ago. Look, Nimmo—this is very high-grade vellum instead of wood-pulp paper; it's not a type that Ayhillians produce. If they did once produce it, why would they have stopped once they knew how?" He handed the material to his first officer. "Why did the evolution of their medical sciences end all at once? Why did they abandon the cities and take to the caves? Borin, can you explain this?"

There was a growing look of pleasure and anticipation on the coordinator's face. "Yes, I can," he said. "And I will. To begin with, we never lived in the cities."

Oberon smiled. He had sensed from the first that this man would cooperate, given the right circumstances.

"I am pleased that you are interested in our history."

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Borin's voice dropped to an undertone. "For many years I have wished for the chance to tell some League officer like you, Captain, about the terrible thing that happened to my world. It is time the truth was known by the Council. As long as it is kept carefully by them, and no word of it is allowed to come to the people of this planet, then I do not mind telling you whatever you want to know. You see, Captain Oberon, I am different from all of the other officials here at Dyor, and even the queen. I *know* what is stored here in the Vaults."

Oberon replaced a handful of files and said to Nimmo, "I suppose we could come back to this. I am really interested to hear what our friend Borin has to say."

Nimmo grinned. "I'm game!"

"Then come with me into the anteroom." Borin motioned behind them. "There are tables and chairs there for those who wish to study." His rugged face was now alight with enthusiasm.

They followed him into a room that was hung with ancient lanterns and sat down at one of the old wood tables.

"Our past cannot remain secret to the Council much longer, I am sure," he related. "Your scientists have been pressuring our queen for a closer look at the Whelps, and someday she will give in. Once they look closer, they will discover the truth, that the brain of a Whelp is much more highly evolved than ours, and is capable of more. They are restricted by their bodies and dullness of perception, the results of the mistake they made three centuries ago, when they were the supreme race on this planet. Back then we Ayhillians were mere cave dwellers, as we still are, at heart. We were unable to compete with them in any way."

Nimmo was frankly incredulous. "Then the Whelps are the ones who left this info in the Vaults, not you—not your ancestors?"

Borin nodded serenely. "That is right. Vulpius and the beliefs of the people are wrong, but that is just as well. You see, our people have been trained by past rulers to think of the Vaults as their inheritance, and to think of the Whelps as one of the lowest and most cursed life forms on this planet. To be told that the Vaults came from the Whelps would be a blow to the morale of the most lowly Ayhillian."

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"What happened? Why did the Whelps create the Vaults?" Oberon asked. "Rumor says it was some drug that mutilated them."

"That is true," said Borin. "Although the people are kept ignorant of who the Whelps once were, they do know that they were once more like ourselves, and a very vague account of the drug has been passed on from generation to generation. That is why my people are unwilling to experiment with medicine any longer, and why no new cures are ever added to the Vaults. If they knew the whole story, they would be even more unwilling to further themselves."

"What is the whole story?" Oberon encouraged.

Borin took a long breath and went on. "The last recorded messages left by the Whelps, when they were in the throes of the horrors caused by the drug, say that a chemical method of learning was being sought. It was a way to give one's memory one-hundred-percent retention from birth up. It was during a time of great questioning, when all cautions and standards were being re-examined and most tossed aside. It was a time of supreme confidence in the race, and in science. The drug they came up with was not adequately tested. Its formulas were right, and that is all the scientists cared for. At a given date a great celebration was held in which all grown persons of their race drank it and it was administered to all infants and children. We were only the cave and forest dwellers. We were not considered worthy of it." His jaw tightened, and he stared grimly past them as he reconstructed the event. "It worked fastest on the infants, changing them into hopeless, bloated things with puny arms and legs. The adults changed more gradually, but slowly their fingers spread and became almost useless, their skulls softened and widened, their bodies lost shape. There was mass frenzy. The cities were destroyed. Thousands committed murder and suicide. Children born after the drug had been taken emerged from the womb already formed like the Whelps you see now.

"Our people fled from the north, where most of this superior race lived, and became southern dwellers. But as the years went by, the Whelps migrated to our warm climate and became our slaves."

Nimmo sat with his fingers restlessly drumming the ta-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

bletop. His features had taken on a disheartened blankness. Oberon himself was sickened to the core, unable to imagine even remotely the terror and misery of a people watching their children born monsters, seeing themselves rot and disintegrate before their eyes, utterly helpless to stop, to run away, to turn today back into yesterday. . . .

"So they codified all the branches of science and turned them over to you?" he surmised.

"Not exactly," replied Borin. "In their last moments of normal human capacity, the most educated searched madly for a cure, a formula perhaps overlooked before, which might prove an antidote. In so doing, they gathered all the basics of every branch of knowledge, intending to save themselves. But they never found the cure. And now it is too late. The damage is too extensive."

For a moment the three men sat in silence. Then Oberon said, "Borin, why are you so willing to tell us all this?"

A smile lurked on the heavily placid face as the coordinator glanced from him to Nimmo. "You," he said to Nimmo, "are of Orion, a place where the gaining of knowledge is every person's life work." He then transferred his steady gaze to Oberon. "You are of Earth, the seat of the League, the home of the Institute. This thing called the Institute—it sends men out in all directions in space to gain knowledge, and they travel at very great speeds. They also gain knowledge at great speeds."

The unfluctuating stare and the somber implications of what was being said made Oberon uncomfortable and restlessly aware of the dampness and stale air of their surroundings. He felt an oppressiveness akin to being buried alive. For some reason this made him recall his first experience with the mission itinerary, and once again he shuddered under the same heightened awareness of something familiar in this unexpected situation, of a significance larger than his mind could comprehend, of an undiscovered part of himself that belonged in this whole mire of events that he did not understand or approve of.

Borin was regarding him thoughtfully. "I believe you starship captains must prepare a report, a 'final' report to deliver to the Council at the end of every mission," he said.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Yes, the term summation—it's part of the job," Oberon explained.

"If you would include this account in your report," Borin entreated, "it would save my world from an investigation that would be careless in keeping its findings quiet—you understand?"

"Of course. There would be indiscretions if they attempted it," Oberon said. "Commodore Paiselle would see to it that your desire to keep these things secret was respected."

Borin sighed heavily. "We Ayhillians are stubborn creatures," he said. "If my people knew the whole truth, we would never progress as your race has done because all experimentation of any kind would be suppressed, even by force. That is how my people are. They despise the Whelps. If they are ever to rise out of backwardness—as the Whelps did before their great mistake—they must never know of this."

"Thank you, Borin," Oberon said, rising. "Thank you very much for filling us in. When I get back to Earth, I'll have to meet with Commodore Paiselle to discuss the mission, and I'll see to it that some kind of written contract to that effect is sent you." He glanced down at his brooding first officer and gave him a thump. "Nimmo, we'd better be about our business and on our way."

So they turned back to their search.

In what Borin called the UFO files, nothing was uncovered that remotely suggested Capacian visitation. The Ayhillians—those that had become the Whelps—had begun to record strange sightings many centuries ago, and had continued up until the year of the terrible disaster, which left Ayhill's recent history unaccounted for. There were not very many sightings, a scant three thousand in all. On permission from Borin, Oberon had them imprinted and kept the copies for a detailed computer scan, although to the skimming eye they seemed hardly more than the usual combination of illusion, fantasy and strange cloud formations. There were no photographs in the files.

He had not expected much of official importance to come from Ayhill Seven, but he was really disappointed to find that there was no mention of convulsive disease, "fits" or seizures anywhere in the medical logs. If Nimmo had been counting on anything, he didn't show it.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

As the shuttle rose out of the atmosphere they were silent, each absorbed in his own thoughts, but when they approached the blunt stern of the *Anriahd*, Nimmo suddenly spoke up.

"I've been thinking," he said. "I've got to break that code—I just have this feeling that it's very important. I'm scared to death that if we don't break it before we get there, we'll be sorry, or in danger of some kind. Know what I mean?"

Oberon nodded. "But we're still a long way from Telphon 281," he answered with a smile. "You've some time yet before you need to feel rushed."

As the gigantic hatch to the transport deck swung back, he saw that the other shuttle had returned. He guided his own into its central bay, waited until the area had pressurized, then emerged and accosted a deck hand.

"When did they get back?" he asked.

"About an hour ago, sir. Weren't gone very long."

Then came a loud squeal of childish laughter and the sound of running feet. Elijah, dashing across the deck from the observation corridor, tackled Nimmo excitedly.

"Did you have a good time on Ayhill?" he shouted, pounding his friend.

"Hey there, little brother!" Nimmo grabbed the small hands, and Elijah, superexcited, walked up his front and turned through his arms in a somersault. There was much laughter from the deck crew, until Muriat rushed up to them, puffing and panting.

"Sir! Glad to see you're back. He's supposed to have a lesson now, but all he wanted to do was wait for Mr. Christie. And look at him," the man almost wailed. "Over-excited again."

"Did you find anything? Any Capacian ships?" Elijah was demanding.

"Not this time," Nimmo began, but then he jerked in an odd manner and gave the child in his arms a shake. "No, no. You've gotta stay out for a while. Out for a while—I mean that!"

Oberon didn't know what this was all about, except that Elijah was now serious again, and a little downcast as he was given over to Muriat's custody.

"Captain." There was a touch on his arm and he turned to face a young woman.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Dr. Edwards wants you to report to the infirmary immediately—if you don't mind."

"Oh, very well. Thank you." He looked her up and down, identified her as a lab technician and hurried toward an exit, wondering what the Dragon had cooked up now.

Let a man seek things the most minute.

Pascal

WHEN OBERON ENTERED the infirmary he was referred to the private lab, where the Dragon sat folded double in a chair, his elbows on his knees as he stared into a microviewer.

“Everybody healthy?” Oberon asked jovially as he walked in. Ignoring him, the Dragon swung around in his slow, methodical way and began to talk business.

“I haven’t been wasting my time while you were down there,” he said. “I got hold of those Ayhill data tapes and had a closer look at the people and culture—it’s been years since I last visited Ayhill and I wanted a refresher before I got carried away on what could turn out to be a wild goose chase. It was a shock, Obi. I don’t mean the Whelps, either. I mean the normal people. Will and Shyla Bensons, and Elijah Brandons everywhere. In one sequence that I ran through, a miner was coming home, picking up his two small ones and giving each a kiss. What I saw him pick up were two Elijahs.”

Oberon leaned against the bulkhead, feeling that if he didn’t sit down the Dragon might cut the lecture short and let him get some helm time in before dinner. “Yes, I got the same feeling while I was down there,” he admitted.

The Dragon was almost animated. His fist thumped the table with every other word as he declared, “Obi, that child is either an Ayhillian or has a lot of Ayhillian blood. Brandon is not his father, and I’m going to prove it. I don’t care what the Council says.”

With a dismal sigh, Oberon wandered to the row of microviewers and stared idly at a screen. “How are you planning to go about it, Dragon?”

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"You're looking right at the first step. That's a blood smear, but not a routine one. I checked up on Ayhillian blood plasma analysis. As a race they do have slight differences from us. The cellular makeup of their blood plasma is not quite the same as ours. It's not a difference that matters on a medical scale; any Ayhillian can receive a transfusion from a Terran of the same blood type perfectly safely—"

"Hold on," said Oberon. "Don't you think the Council would know if Elijah had this difference in his blood?"

"Not necessarily. It's a difference you've got to hunt for. Any study of Elijah's blood has been only for routine typing and checkups—nothing more detailed than that, according to his PD."

"So, what have you found?" Oberon asked, dreading the reply.

The Dragon folded his hands. "Elijah's blood plasma is 42.031 percent Ayhillian. That's an accurate count, Obi. He has exactly 42.031 percent of the Ayhillian Factor. I'm talking about a tissue variant that's found in strong or weak concentrations according to the racial background of the person. A pure-blooded Ayhillian has a much higher percentage than that, of course. But no other blood that we know of has it at all, certainly not Terran blood."

Oberon was silent.

The Dragon continued gruffly, "I've happened on the strangest coincidence. I took a sample from young Benson to compare with Elijah's. We have the Benson ancestry at our fingertips, and I wanted to see if I could set up a ratio and plot an approximate background for Elijah. I discovered that Will has a concentration of 42.031 percent—exactly the same as Elijah's. That's quite a coincidence." He hesitated a moment, then said, "I've been hit by something, but I don't know what's hit me."

Oberon thought for a moment. There was all this talk about Benson's childhood resemblance to Elijah. Benson, of course, could not be the boy's father; the ridiculous thought had occurred to Oberon, but he knew it was impossible. And now the blood evidence cleared him completely. If Benson had a son by a Terran woman, the child's blood would be all the more diluted. The Ayhillian

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

percentage in the offspring would be less than the father's, not the same.

He continued to stare at the screen helplessly. "Any theories about why Benson and Brandon have the same percentage?"

"No," the Dragon said flatly. "The odds against such a thing are staggering." He added, though without much conviction, "It must be just a coincidence. I can't imagine what else it would be."

Oberon's thoughts were running in circles. "You can't blame the Council for refusing to investigate," he reasoned, but his voice carried an edge of tension. "It's too delicate a matter. Paiselle explained all that to me. So, you've as good as proved that Brandon isn't the boy's father. We know Gareth Brandon hasn't a drop of Ayhillian blood in him. What I'm now wondering is why bother to go on? Are you going to take this information to the Council and rub all their faces in it? What difference does it make?"

The Dragon held up his hands. "No, no, no, Obi! Whatever I find will be between Paiselle and myself—and you, naturally. It's up to the commodore whether the Council should have the facts. That's the way it should be."

Oberon was somewhat relieved. "And what—what is the point of all this, anyway, I mean from your point of view as a doctor?" He knew the answer perfectly well; he was just stalling for time now, trying to come up with some way of talking the Dragon out of the whole thing.

Edwards was highly amused. "Oh, Obi! This has shocked you more than I thought. Can't you see that this child's brain is a mystery we'd like to unlock? Can't you see that knowing his true parentage would be a great clue toward solving that mystery? His brain—it has to come from somewhere—there's got to be some explanation. The Brandons give us nothing to go on; the clue has got to lie in Elijah's real father."

He flung out his long arms in a sudden, unusual gesture of emphasis. "There are mentality ratings for his parents and grandparents in the boy's PD. Do you know what the Saidahl Jump is, Obi?"

Oberon nodded and recited a rough equivalent of the textbook definition: "A certain erratic brain-wave pattern always evident in one or both parents of a child whose

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

mental rating at birth is above . . . I forget the number—”

“In other words, a child who is above the accepted genius level,” the Dragon concluded. “And it doesn’t necessarily mean that the parent is brilliant. The child himself may not register the Jump, in fact, seldom does, for geniuses seldom go on to have children who are geniuses. What I wanted to tell you, Obi, is that neither of Elijah’s parents registers the Jump.”

“I was expecting that,” Oberon said with another sigh. “Paiselle didn’t go into this at all, but he probably did not want to get me too interested in Elijah’s biological discrepancies.”

“Discrepancies they are,” the Dragon stressed heartily. “My conclusion is that Elijah’s real father—probably a half-Ayhillian somewhere in this League of ours—must register the Saidahl Jump. And who knows what else his brain waves show? I’d sure like to have a look at them!”

Oberon muttered, “Of course, the only evidence the Council would accept—the only legal evidence—would be the Heredity Factor test, the one that they refuse to endorse.”

“Exactly,” said the Dragon. “That’s another way of going about it. If I had a blood smear from Gareth Brandon, I could prove he isn’t even distantly related to that child.”

But there was no way the Dragon could obtain that, and Oberon was glad. This was one research project that he had decided to oppose. He hated to play politics along with Paiselle and the rest of the Council but he foresaw nothing but trouble if the Dragon came up with results. The Brandons were very important people to the League at this time. They were working effectively with Draconian counterparts, trying to offset the many disagreements between the Draconian Empire and the League. Their positions should not be compromised by scandal. And the Council would make that mistake; Oberon knew it too well. Priority always went to tearing down the mystery, pillaging its secret and feasting on the truth. The men of the Council had held out this far; he had to give them credit for that. But with the Dragon’s evidence shining from their reading screens, could they still resist?

Oberon straightened up with resolve. “Dragon, I’m ordering you to abandon this line of research.”

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

The gray eyes bulged at him incredulously. "What?" the Dragon exclaimed, sitting upright.

"You heard what I said, Dr. Edwards. You are to stop what you are doing and cancel all plans for carrying this project through. That is an order."

The Dragon planted his feet on the floor with a thump and stood up, glaring down at his friend, seven feet of Draconian fury.

"Are you out of your mind, Obi? This is a hypermentality we're dealing with, something about as rare as the Midas Touch. It's a thing you just don't accept with no questions asked!"

Oberon retorted harshly, "You may continue to question, Doctor, but not about his parentage. Is that understood?"

The Dragon flung out his arms in protest, but just then there was a commotion in the infirmary and Muriat burst in, his red, perspiring features a bit more harassed than usual. Elijah was close behind him, panting from the effort of keeping up.

Muriat thrust a handful of vellum at the Dragon. "Dr. Edwards! Captain, sir!" he gasped. "Just look at these."

The Dragon surveyed the sheets with a vacant smile. "Yes, very nice," he said absently, and Oberon looked over his arm.

He saw a collection of mathematically precise line designs, obviously products of the spiropen, a toy centuries old, but still as popular as when it was first invented. You took a disc, stuck a stylus or pen through one of its holes, fitted its corrugated edge against a second disc which was held down firmly on the vellum as you moved the first around it. The result was a precise design in loops and spirals. Oberon could remember playing with one when he was a boy, and he wondered what Muriat's excitement was all about. Any child of normal coordination could work the spiropen.

"What's the matter, Muriat?" he demanded.

"The matter, sir?" Muriat spluttered. He pointed down at the child, whose wondering dark eyes were moving from person to person. "He didn't use the spiropen to make these, sir!"

Oberon felt his impatience building up. "Then what did he use?"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Nothing, sir, not anything at all! I swear it's the truth—I watched him myself." He did not wait for their disbelief, but turned to look behind him for Elijah. "Elijah, tell them why you decided not to use the spiropen."

The little boy explained simply, "Well, the spiropen is okay, but I don't need to use the discs to draw things like that. If you know where to go, you don't need them."

There was silence and Elijah began to look worried. "Is it all right not to use the discs?" he asked.

Muriat gave a hysterical guffaw. "Certainly. Certainly, son. Everybody's a little surprised, that's all. It would take almost perfect awareness of little things like distance and surface tension, and just about perfect coordination between brain and fingers to do something like this. So far, son, only a machine can do it. Gentlemen, do I make myself clear?"

"Quite clear," grunted the Dragon when Oberon had nothing to say. "Elijah, let's see if you can draw me a design."

"Okay." The boy climbed up on a lab stool at the counter, reached for a stylus and flipped over one of his drawings. Then he glanced spryly at the Dragon. "Would you like circles, stars or loops?"

The Dragon sighed. "It doesn't matter."

Oberon watched, entranced as the child held the stylus over the vellum and moved it rapidly, surely, in a precise, star-like pattern. When he finished the pattern he took the point off the sheet and applied it again, superimposing a new design on top of the first. At last the Dragon stopped him kindly. "That's fine, my boy. Now, let's see, can you draw me a series of concentric circles?"

This was done with alacrity and Muriat stared down, horrified. "Perfect circles. This kid isn't human."

"It's *easy*," Elijah insisted while the Dragon collected the drawings and gave them back to Muriat.

"Get these imprinted," he said. "And Elijah, you had better go to your quarters and play for a while."

"All right. I'm making something," Elijah announced.

Halfway to the door, Muriat stopped. "A model? A nice model of a starship?" he suggested hopefully.

Elijah gave his tutor a cold stare and hesitated before answering. "Yes, it's a model," he said slowly. He waited until Muriat turned to leave, then made a face at his re-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

treating back, glanced at Oberon and the Dragon for approval, and pranced through the exit, giggling.

Edwards resumed his glare, and asked hopelessly, "Still standing firm?"

"Still standing firm," Oberon said.

Nothing can satisfy but what confounds.

Edward Young

ON OBSERVATION DECK, Oberon halted before the star-studded black depth. Beyond the visiplat, which stretched almost from deck to ceiling, the center of the galaxy was a jewel-like cluster. The deck lights were out for the simulated night, but a different, whiter light poured in from the galaxy center, dividing the area between a kind of dull fluorescence and the blackest shadows imaginable.

The night shift was on duty at the helm now, and Oberon was free for a few hours of sleep, but he always liked to pause here before going to his quarters. There was something about the glittering swirl that filled him with peace.

Yet, as he gazed thoughtfully into it, he was deeply aware of its subtle violence. Every one of the pinpricks of light was throwing off some four and a half million tons of energy every second, many whirled planet systems around them, some sustained at least one planet where the daily violence of humanoid life was running its course. Still, from here it always seemed so peaceful and silently benign.

As he gazed on the scene, Oberon reviewed the day. This stopover certainly had not brought them any revelations about the Capacians, but there were many worlds to visit yet. The only thing he could say about Ayhill Seven was that it had more or less introduced him to his first officer. He had found Nimmo a more serious man than his usual antics with Elijah would suggest. He was certainly anxious to please; Oberon could read that in his looks and hurried, nervous cooperation. But whether or

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

not he could fulfill Paiselle's expectations remained yet to be seen.

One thing Nimmo had said stuck with him in particular.

I've got to break that code—I just have this feeling that it's very important.

He, too, shared that conviction, and, strangely, it was even more intense when he gazed out at the brilliant star-field.

He knew there was a lot more to this mission than he was presently aware of. Paiselle had not told him everything. There were people aboard the *Anriahd* who knew more than Oberon about their business with the Capacians, but that was to be expected. His job was mainly to pilot their ship and to safeguard their lives.

And this knowledge of his lack of knowledge brought him to another question. Why was he so adamantly against the Dragon's new research? Was he, perhaps, a little afraid of what he might find? Why? Did he perhaps feel, in the light of present evidence, that there was something going on here that no one ever should know about or understand? Why should he feel so disturbed?

As for the mission—at first he hadn't known what kind of a stand to take concerning the Capacian quest, whether to be for or against it. He still didn't know. But was that really so important? Orders were orders; he was still the captain of the *Anriahd*.

But it was important to him.

He started and jumped aside, suddenly aware of movement in the darkness beside him.

It was Elijah.

How he had managed to stand by unnoticed for all this time, Oberon could not imagine, but here he was, moving up with the light of the galaxy shining on his nose and cheeks.

Oberon couldn't unstiffen. The boy had startled him so completely that he was just a little angry.

"What are you doing here?" he asked with impatience.

The tiny form paused, uncertain, half in and half out of the blackness.

"Watching the stars," came the reply at last. Then Elijah asked him politely, with the candor of childhood, "Are you watching them, too, so that you can know them—every one?" His voice was not the shrill treble of most

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

youngsters except when he was excited. His was low and pausing, and it made you want to listen.

"That would be quite a task," Oberon said.

Confidingly, Elijah answered, "I think I can know them all—all of them in the whole universe. Maybe I already do, but I'm still too little to know what I know."

Oberon was silent.

The tranquil, childish tone went on relentlessly. "I want to understand them, too. But you have to—to see them in a special way first. You know what I mean?"

"I'm not so sure," Oberon replied. At the moment he was not sure of anything except a harried feeling that this was something important and should be taped or memorized and jotted down later for his notes. But before he could decide what to do, Elijah spoke up again. "Dr. Edwards calls you Obi. Is it all right if I call you Captain Obi?"

Oberon hesitated. Back in his own mascot days such familiarity had not been permitted, certainly not between himself and his captain. But upbringing changed style from generation to generation. Also, certain regulations could be waived on a special mission like this. *Keep your crew as informal as possible*, Paiselle had advised; *they're a hand-picked lot, anyhow, and the relaxation of a few formalities can't possibly spoil them. Encourage first names. Let them wear civilian clothing if they want. So much of the mission is just routine flight.*

"Very well. That's all right with me," he consented. "Hadn't you better find Nimmo now? It's late, past your bedtime."

"He's at the refectory now. He said I could come up here and wait till he's done."

Silently, Oberon looked down at the boy, wondering what to say next. His career had not offered him much experience with children. Occasionally there were children at banquets. There were his own teen-aged cousins, though he never saw much of them, and there was the kid sister of that girl he'd been seeing on Rimos when the *Anriahd* assignment came along.

When he looked back, he could remember feeling rather neutral, but never absolutely uncomfortable, about the kids he had known. Elijah made him distinctly uneasy, and he had from the first time they met.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Consequently, Oberon felt guilty, which didn't help him overcome his problem; in fact, it made it worse. But he wanted to get along with this child, and, he thought, Paiselle would have to give him credit for really trying now and then.

"Would you like me to walk down with you?" he offered.

This time Elijah wasn't in touch. "Nimmo said he'd come for me," he said. Children his age were so particular about their loyalties.

Oberon shrugged. "All right."

He ambled past the rest of the starry view and stepped into the elevator at the end of the deck. Then there was the sound of running feet and Elijah hurtled in beside him just as the doors closed.

"I changed my mind," he said. "Nimmo's late, anyhow."

The sphering thus begot . . .

Dante

ELIJAH'S DOMAIN WAS the mascot's quarters, which meant that it was slightly larger than the senior officers' quarters and was divided into a sleeping area and a recreation area. The cabinets were all labeled and filled with educational debris. Oberon noticed the usual collection of multisensory kits, tactile experience objects and other "experience labs" found in every Institute classroom. An extravagance—that was his opinion—a lot of multi-shaped, multi-textured bits of trash. He could not remember having learned any useful lessons from them as a child, except that swallowing one of them caused all kinds of excitement.

Smiling at the remembrance, he looked around while Elijah got ready for bed. There weren't very many toys scattered about, only some spinning tops that you stacked with a magnetic lifter, a rocking "horse" that bore no resemblance to a horse and a neglected stuffed animal or two.

In one corner some cutters and scraps of vellum lay in a pile on the floor, so Oberon wandered over, curious to see what his mascot had been making. A structure among the scraps had caught his eye, a structure so familiar that he was instantly alerted. He bent down and picked it up.

It was two spheres joined. But what startled Oberon was the shape and meaning of them, for their surfaces had been warped to form a Mobius twist at the point where they were joined. Together, they formed a double Mobius sphere. Oberon noticed that a line had been drawn carefully around and through them to demonstrate that the combination of the two produced the Mobius effect.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Elijah," Oberon called out, keeping his voice indifferent, "did you make this?"

Elijah had thrown off his clothes and was romping, naked, on the bunk. There were red scallops around his middle where the waistband of his uniform was tight. The rest of him looked white and vulnerable.

"Yes!" he shouted, his voice broken by the bouncing.

"All by yourself?"

"Yes, sir!"

Elijah had done what Ergang had accomplished by accident two centuries ago with an ancient mathematical paradox called the Mobius Strip. The Strip itself was a one-sided surface, formed by taking a strip of paper and joining the ends after giving it half a twist. In playing around one day with this piece of topology, Ergang had, on a whim, constructed what he called a "model" of the universe: a double Mobius sphere. Something told him that there was a formula related to this construction, and then, as he looked at the model, he realized something else. At the center, where the twist lay, there were four holes. It so happened that on the desk, nearby, was an outline of another problem which had pestered science for centuries—the unsolved unified field theory. The long sought-after solution to this problem was, basically, a way to relate four disparate forces of nature: gravity, electromagnetism, the strong force binding the nuclei of atoms and the weak force that induced their disintegration. In a flash the mathematician saw the direction which would ultimately carry him to the answer. Four basic attributes of nature, seemingly without a common denominator. Four "holes" located at the twist, at the heart of the space warp. The answer lay in the twist, in the warp which was common not just to the overall shape of the universe, but to every dimension of existence.

Of course, Ergang's space warp mathematics, which became the backbone of hyperlight mechanics, was discussed at length in the first chapters of the *Cosmology*, and, of course, Elijah had read and thoroughly understood all of it. But the double Mobius sphere itself had been, for Ergang, a mere stepping stone to enlightenment, the key clue to the space warp, perhaps, but not necessary as part of the final draft found in the *Cosmology*. In fact, there was no mention at all of the double Mobius sphere in the

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

mathematics of the *Cosmology*, or anywhere else in the book.

It seemed inconceivable that Elijah could backtrack so accurately along that line of thought. How could he become cognizant of what had tipped Ergang off, especially when the event had been a total accident, the result of playful tampering in a field not thought to be that important to his particular cosmic quest?

Several other realizations hit Oberon at once.

This was the first time in Elijah's short life that he had ever been allowed any time to himself, time to be idle, to dream or play. On board ship, with a mission schedule, he had these hours of free time like anybody else. But during them he was not idle, nor did he dream or play. Oberon knew this as he looked down at the child's carefully thought-out inquiry, at the strips of neatly cut vellum, at the first clumsy attempts that had been cast aside, one which someone, probably Nimmo, had obviously stepped on.

He heard the echo of Paiselle's voice. *His readings run right off the graph. We don't know what he is. . . .*

Perhaps the precision-drawing talent had already been discovered and was mentioned somewhere in Elijah's PD. Perhaps the Dragon was not turning up anything new with the blood smear evidence—except that odd bit concerning Benson—for it was possible that Paiselle had already had the boy investigated that far and had merely suppressed the information.

But surely this was new. This was certainly beyond anyone's wildest anticipations, even frightening.

It was far more important than anything else.

The *Anriahd* was on military alert.

Oberon stared ahead at the silver-blue, bullet-shaped Draconian scoutship that hung against the limitless black of space. At last he leaned back in the command seat and said to Nimmo, "Give us the next larger magnification."

Nimmo punched a button and the viewing screen snapped up a closer look at the shiny hull.

"Draco Two," Oberon muttered.

"They've taken a parallel course, sir," Nimmo reported, his voice rough with tension. "They're hanging off to starboard at exactly 2,640 feet. Half a mile."

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

At least it was a scoutship, not a warcraft, but even scoutships were fully armed with torpedo banks as well as long-range meteor and asteroid blasters.

"Any luck?" Oberon asked Shyla, who was striving to break the contact barrier that had been set up by the enemy ship. Her fingers pried levers and twisted dials.

"No, sir. They won't answer."

Oberon murmured under his breath, "They will when they want to." There was no need to ask what a Draco II scoutship was doing way out here when every armed vessel of any kind was needed at home. Obviously, they intended an aggression. Oberon considered three possibilities. The Draconians were interested in either spying on a mission that was by no means a secret one in the first place, in a ransom kidnapping of one or several of its invaluable members or in plundering their fuel. He felt the odds pointed toward the last.

It was easy to eliminate the first two. The Draconian spy system consisted of monitoring intra-ship communications for a time; they weren't sophisticated enough to get at the computers where the itinerary was logged. There wasn't much they could learn that way. It didn't matter so much that the *Anriahd* was a prime target for ransom. The Draconians, especially those of Draco II, literally hated to be near an outworlder, and they had to be pretty desperate before they would try it. They had kidnapped only once, years ago in a political maneuver, or Oberon would not have considered this possibility at all.

But plundering a League ship's fuel and leaving it drifting in space with no power hardly pricked a Draconian conscience. Fuel was the prime objective. Ever since Draco II had declared war on Draco I, both worlds had been twisting Council arms in an attempt to set up trade with the League. What they needed was a new supply of the raw materials necessary for warship fuel. Both Draco I and Draco II had to ration their ships stringently, which kept the fighting a sporadic war game decades old, since neither side could afford to muster up a decisive, full-scale attack. They both wished to trade for these raw materials, but the League itself could afford to supply only one other world, and it certainly could not risk favoring one Draconian world over the other. As a re-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

sult, a certain amount of heckling from both sides of the Draconian Empire had to be tolerated.

Oberon's thoughts were interrupted by a buzz from the telecom. There was Sagen's face, impervious as usual.

"I guess I needn't tell you what they are after," she said. It was her way of informing him that engineering was standing by.

"You needn't." With an apologetic smile, he blanked her off. It was important to keep his own communication channels open at this moment.

"Maintain course," he instructed the helm unnecessarily. "Where's Elijah?" he asked Nimmo.

"Taking a nap, Captain. I made him—he was up late with some computer problem, and he started to get cranky around—"

"You're treating him like a baby," Oberon snapped. "He should be up here."

"Up here—now?" Nimmo's eyes widened.

"Yes. This is experience, isn't it? When you and I were mascots, we had to help man torpedo stations."

"Captain," Shyla spoke up, adjusting her headset, "they're coming in on ship to ship."

"Switch to visual," he ordered.

She did so, and the face of Antec, high commander of the fleet of Draco II, appeared on the screen. Sitting with his hands folded before him, his eyes still and steady, he looked like a harsher version of the Dragon. Long-faced, long-cheekboned, he gazed out of the screen at Oberon with an expression that was familiar in every aspect except one. When he smiled there were no teeth to be seen.

And, like the Dragon, he seemed to speak from the back of his throat.

"Captain Oberon, we have met before."

"We have," Oberon confirmed, rising from his seat.

Antec eyed the helm behind him, examined the people who gazed up at his image. "I speak to you from the scoutship *Triad*. We of Draco Two extend our greetings."

"We accept your greetings. Now, dispense with the etiquette game, Antec, and get to the point. What do you want?"

"Game, Captain? I have not come here for any game." The steel-gray eyes again surveyed the helm. "Where is

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

your cabin boy, your mascot—or whatever it is you call these privileged cubs?”

“The child happens to be asleep,” Oberon phrased.

Antec’s eyebrows raised a trifle. “Child? You call the boy a child? Did you know, Captain, that I have killed hundreds of boys in my career? Did you expect to temper me by calling the boy a child?”

“Did you intend to kill this one?” Oberon queried smoothly.

A faint flicker of surprise escaped the controlled expression. Then Antec put his head back and laughed, displaying only gums. “You Terrans are sentimental imbeciles,” he said, then regained his air of cool insolence. “Has this mascot ever seen the inside of a Draco Two scoutship?”

“As a matter of fact, he has,” Oberon lied, for what it was worth. He had miscalculated. This Draconian thought he was about to kidnap—to take advantage of League “sentimentality” over children—in order to gain the trade he wanted. But he was overlooking the fact that his own people had certain sentiments also.

“Then I suggest that he have another opportunity, and now is the perfect time for us both,” Antec dictated.

“Suppose I refuse to cooperate?” Oberon replied.

“Then we shall have to open fire on you without delay. I don’t suppose you would wish any harm to come to your prized crew?”

“If you open fire, you will be destroyed.”

“It is a risk we are prepared to take.” Antec went on imperiously: “Just to make you feel better, Captain, we are perfectly willing to send over a man as hostage while we borrow your cub. I assure you, the experience is intended merely as educational. And now you had better prepare to hook up ship-to-ship umbilical. We don’t like to be kept waiting.”

“Not so fast—” Oberon countered. “You’ll send over two men. No mascot of mine goes off my ship alone.”

There was a moment of alarmed hesitation while Antec studied this maneuver. But he was unable to discern any trick.

“Two for two. Reasonable, Captain. I can spare the man if you can. We’ll be moving in.” He blanked off.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Oberon wheeled to confront Nimmo. "Get Elijah. Get him to transport right away."

Nimmo's mouth fell open, but he did not hesitate to obey. He rushed to the elevator and Oberon thumped the button for the Dragon's lab. "Dragon! Edwards, are you there?"

Edwards' voice responded, slow, time-taking. "I'm in the middle of something, Obi. What's the matter?"

"Drop it. Report to the transport deck immediately. You will be met there by Nimmo, Elijah and myself in approximately six minutes."

The Dragon must have tuned in a monitoring screen, for Oberon heard him give a sharp whistle of surprise. "Right away, Captain."

Then he opened the ship-wide channel.

"Attention, all decks. This is Oberon speaking. Security will report to all stations. In exactly ten minutes you are to seal off all sections. Leave open a route from the helm to transport deck only. Condition is still alert."

**The controlling Intelligence
understands its own nature,
and what it does, and whereon
it works.**

Marcus Aurelius

IN HIS QUARTERS Elijah was not asleep. His mind was too busy. Lying fully clothed on top of his sleeping suit, which he was supposed to have put on, he fingered a fuzzy stuffed animal that someone had placed there. Picking it up, he chewed idly on the plastic eye for a moment, then tossed it aside.

Something drifts in the universe, he thought, something reasonable, anti-entropic. It starts life out somewhere as aimless blobs and clumps of molecules and makes it develop and grow up until it, too, becomes reasonable. So reason is both cause and effect in the universe.

And so there must be one reason for everything—

The door hissed open suddenly and Nimmo entered at a run. Panting raggedly, he grinned at the wide-awake, staring child.

"Time to get up! You're still dressed—good boy!"

"You said you'd get mad if I didn't put on my sleep suit," Elijah grumbled, stretching.

But Nimmo was hunting all over for the boots, which the boy had flung, as usual, in opposite corners. "Guess what, little brother? We're going to visit a Draconian ship!" he cried, hunting under a table.

Elijah sat upright, round-eyed. "A Draconian ship? You mean there's one out there right now?" he demanded.

"Sure is. Oh, we're going to visit a Draconian ship, a Draconian ship, a Draconian ship," Nimmo sang hoarsely, grabbing up one boot, then spotting the other. He fumbled badly in putting them on the small feet.

"Wrong feet," Elijah announced. Off they came again.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

He studied his friend suspiciously and inquired, "Is that okay, Nimmo? Is everything all right?"

"Everything's just fine!" The Orion swung the child to his shoulder and hurried out.

In the excitement, Elijah forgot what he had been thinking about. Not that he wouldn't remember it again later. Every day he forgot lots of things and remembered them again later. That was his age, they told him.

For some reason it was not Nimmo who walked through the accordion-pleated umbilical with him, but the Dragon. They did not have to wear spacesuits to walk it. It folded out from the transport area of one ship to connect with that of another ship for the purpose of transferring passengers; it was pressurized and contained an artificial gravity field. But the most wonderful thing about it was that you could see through it. The universe wrapped you fully in its glittering expanse. Below you, above you, all around you were the stars, and you seemed to be taking a stroll among them.

But it was only a fifty-foot stroll. When they reached the hull of the scoutship, the Dragon calmly helped Elijah over the rim of the airlock and held his hand as they stepped in among the Draconians.

Clashing reds and oranges were painted in sweeps on the bulkheads. The ship breathed something hot and sour at the boy, and the faces that crowded up high above him were violent with something he had never before experienced. He saw a likeness between the Dragon's face and these faces, and yet a difference that filled him with deep fright.

Even the beamers that were held leveled at them did not frighten him as much as this difference that he could not understand.

The Dragon, also, wore his beamer strapped at his side, but when an officer stepped forward to disarm him he whipped it out and held it on them with a broad, teeth-displaying grin. Nobody fired. Instead, an offended shrinking changed the whole bearing of the men, and their leader gazed at the Dragon with mingled astonishment and rage.

The Dragon continued to smile broadly. "Yes, gentlemen, it is I. You might not believe the viewing screen,

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

but you can make no mistake now. If you lay a hand on the boy, you will have no choice but to kill *me*. And if you fire upon the *Anriahd*, you may also kill me. Am I understood, gentlemen?"

The sweat of the large palm made his hand slippery, though Elijah clung with all his might. He was clinging, also with all his being, to something back in the *Anriahd* that he had not been aware of before. But this thing made sense to him now: a fulfillment where here there was a lack, a conviction where here there was none, an integral correctness where here there was some terrible mistake.

There was no tour. Elijah and the Dragon were returned to the *Anriahd* unharmed and Oberon sent back the two hostages, who had turned out to be prisoners of war from Draco I, rather than members of the scoutship crew. As soon as the umbilical was retracted, the Draconians departed. Of course they were enraged, but they were also, if Oberon judged his opponents correctly, highly relieved. They had just come close to committing the worst felony of their world, one for which there was no acceptable excuse.

Though driven by hatred of all other races, able to slaughter hundreds of Draco I civilians, and anyone else who got in the way, a man of Draco II could never kill another man of his own world. Murder was virtually unknown on Draco II, yet they were the most vicious fighters in the known universe. The lives of their kinsmen were sacred to them; it was a belief as much a part of them as the gene that made them tall.

Most people assumed that the tall, languid, kindly Dragon had come from Draco I. Oberon was one of the few who knew the truth about him, a truth which could come in so handy in an encounter like this.

The Dragon had been born on Draco II.

"How did you spot them?" Nimmo urged. "Draconians all look pretty much alike to me. How did you know they were prisoners of war?"

Oberon was sitting at a lounge table, gazing at a small computer screen. The object of his study was a small display of greenish, glowing symbols, arranged in the form of a paragraph.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Looks indecipherable to me," he chuckled, glancing up at his first officer. "The Draconians? It takes a while to catch on, but the Draco Ones are slightly shorter, on the average, and their heads always tend to be rounder than those of the Draco Twos."

Back in his Institute days, before the Draconians had become an active menace, the curriculum had not required an officer to be able to distinguish between them. The Draconians were simply two races that wished to have nothing to do with the League. Back then it was highly unusual for a starship crew to catch even a glimpse of them.

But out of sheer personal interest, generated mainly by having the Dragon as a friend, Oberon had made a study of these people for a senior term thesis. And now it was an accomplishment that made him a little proud when he compared his knowledge with that of others of his rank.

"Haven't you ever noticed how long in the head the Dragon is? I used to call him 'skinny head' when I was a kid." He was in a good mood, spirited even, because the danger had been cut in half. The presence of Dr. Andrew Edwards was reliable insurance against any more interference from Draco II. Draco I was another matter, but Oberon was not going to worry about them until he saw them. They were never quite as fire-breathing as the Draco II's; if he had a choice of foe, he would select Draco I without hesitation.

He looked again at the screen. Nimmo had channeled in the Capacian Code to show his captain what they were up against.

"Are you any closer to solving this thing?"

"No, sir," Nimmo declared, unashamed. After all, it had stumped the computers. He went on, muttering half to himself, "It's as if whoever invented this kind of writing could see farther than we could dream of seeing. What I mean is that the mind behind this thing must have been able to see combinations or configurations in nature that would never occur to us. It's so totally different."

Oberon nodded, although the idea made him vaguely uncomfortable. "Yes, I see what you mean."

Just then Muriat passed through and made a sign to Nimmo. The Orion arose regretfully. "Well, gotta go.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Elijah's got-a break now, and I've standing orders to play with him, as you know."

"How did he take the Draconian business?" Oberon asked, recalling what Paiselle had said about the boy's adaptability.

"Fine. Didn't seem to phase him much, except that he was awfully glad to get back to the *Anriahd*. Hasn't had much to say about it." He turned to leave, then turned back. "It amazes me. It always just amazes me. Did you know that he's doing level-three advanced calculation already?"

"No, I'm not that aware of what he's been studying," Oberon admitted.

"Well, it looks as if there won't be anything left to teach him—at least not in the field of math."

And that reminded Oberon of something. In fact, he was shocked that, in a week's time, he had forgotten all about it.

"Wait," he said. "Don't go yet. You're familiar with Elijah's whole curriculum, including everything that he's had up till now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Has he ever read a biography of Josef Ergang, to your knowledge?"

Nimmo shook his head. "Absolutely not. All of his reading matter, including his extracurricular stuff, is on record. Poor kid. Wait till he gets to his teens and wants to start reading *Rocket Girl*. . . . I suppose they'll want to log that, too. No, I don't recall seeing anything *about* Ergang on the list. The *Cosmology* is."

"That's out," Oberon said. "Have you ever mentioned to Elijah the way Ergang stumbled onto the first lead that took him on to hyperlight mechanics?"

For a moment Nimmo looked lost. "First lead? Oh, you don't mean that Mobius Strip thing—"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean. Then you haven't ever mentioned it to him yourself?"

"Heck, no, Captain. I'd almost forgotten all about that. It's not all that important at this point, anyway. Why?"

"Would Muriat have told him?"

"Muriat?" Nimmo scoffed. "He'd call that wasting time. He's strictly schedule—wait a minute. Sagen might have told him. It's her field. But why do you—"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Never mind. Forget it. Sagen probably did tell him." But Oberon had made up his mind that he must find out for sure. He arose on sudden impulse.

"You stay here—work on the code or something. I think I'd like to spend some time with Elijah myself."

Nimmo looked pleased. "Why, that's great, Captain. Sure!"

***Look beneath the surface; let not the
several quality of a thing nor its
worth escape thee.***

Marcus Aurelius

IN THE MASCOT'S quarters, Elijah was not in evidence. As Oberon wandered about, he realized that there were more toys than usual. They were not scattered around in the usual haphazard manner of children, but placed in neat aggregations here and there on the floor, and the distance between each aggregation seemed, to his eye, consistent. Among them were several clear plastoid spheres from the education section, and Elijah had drawn crescents on these with a crayon. In one corner a sphere was lying in two pieces, sawed through with a refectory knife.

He confiscated the knife with a smile.

Maintenance had disposed of the crude Mobius model along with the rest of the vellum scraps days ago. But Elijah didn't seem to miss it, and, as far as Oberon knew, he hadn't even asked what had become of it. Apparently, it had served its purpose.

As he clicked the knife into its case and turned to go, Elijah crawled out from under the bunk, giggling. When he saw that it was Oberon, his eyebrows contracted slightly.

"Oh, I thought you were Nimmo."

Oberon chuckled. "Well, you really know how to make a man feel welcome, don't you?" He wondered what else to say, whether to ask right away about Sagen or to forget it and leave. The boy did not seem to have been very sobered by his brush with the Draconians. It would be wise to mention that in the term summation. At the thought, he felt suddenly moved to tackle his notes, and he turned to go. But another glance at the silently wait-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

ing child caused him to stop abruptly, annoyed with himself. He was fooling himself, searching for reasons to leave, to avoid establishing some kind of rapport with his mascot.

"What are you doing with all the spheres?" he remarked.

Elijah scrambled to his feet and walked up to him, full of the answer. "It's one of my favorite shapes," he explained. "Spheres make up things, like atoms and cells. You know what?"

"What?" Oberon replied with wary anticipation.

"If you could see in all directions at once, you would be living inside a ball, and even if you were really inside a square and could see in all directions at once, the square would look like a ball from the inside."

It was an interesting thought, but not one that Oberon normally spent much time pondering. He began to wonder how Elijah had found this out.

"Where did you learn this?"

The child gazed up at him with unwinking regard and shrugged. "Nowhere. I found out."

"How?"

"Well—if you look in all directions at once, that's what happens."

It did not seem that he was going to answer the question. But then he tugged the captain's hand, and that signified a change of subject.

"I have some questions about those Draconians. So, you see, I'm glad you came."

"Oh—" Oberon felt better, but the damage had been done. Gone was his contentment of the past three hours. Now he only wanted to be anywhere but here, even if he had to wait until he could ask Sagen herself about the Mobius business. Talking to Elijah always seemed to leave him totally unsettled.

"Sit down, Captain Obi." The little boy escorted him to a chair at the table and climbed up on the table's edge nearby, where he perched himself and swung his play-scuffed boots in eager rhythm.

Dead-serious, businesslike, he faced his captain.

"Why are the Draconians fighting each other? Why do they hate our bodies? Why did they want to hurt me?"

Oberon took a deep breath and tried to answer these

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

earth-shaking questions as simply as possible. He had studied the Draconian system of warfare back in his junior officer years. The Council still debated it in session after session. There were hundreds of tapes in circulation on Draconian psychology and racial prejudice, all attempting to understand their revulsion of League races—and League teeth.

It should be the simplest matter in the world to explain to this child why he, in particular, was so jealously guarded.

But this starship captain, ablest man in the Troop to communicate with any brand of alien, found that he could not.

"Sometimes men get involved with a cause that is bad. Then they must do more and more bad things—" he began lamely.

"You're not answering me!" Elijah protested indignantly. Then he screwed shut his eyes, opened them again and looked hard at nothing. His face was still, the room was still; all Oberon could see in the child before him was vacancy, absolute desertion, as if the whole consciousness had fled and was somewhere else.

Oberon stiffened. Was the boy trying to read his mind? No, you definitely could feel it when a telepath was working on you, and he felt nothing different inside his head. Then what was this child doing?

"Elijah."

Not an eyelash twitched.

"Elijah, what are you doing?" He reached out and touched the small shoulder, and suddenly, unexpectedly, he recalled pushing over a Whelp, how the flesh had given sickeningly against his hands. A shudder went through him and he felt sweat bead above his lip. His hand withdrew, but the boy was now looking straight at him, back again and faintly troubled.

"What's wrong, Captain Obi?"

"Wrong? Nothing. What were you doing?"

"Looking at the dust."

"What dust?"

"The dust. Nimmo's going to give me a test."

"What kind of test?"

"To find out what I'm seeing. To find out what the dust is."

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Do you know?"

"Uh-huh. But I promised not to tell." The tilted dark eyes were filling with sparkle, and Elijah wriggled and clapped his hands to his mouth.

Oberon decided to get off the subject as quickly as possible and back into one that he could deal with. He turned on the table computer and channeled in Draco data. He showed the boy the location of the Draconian galaxy and the position of the systems of Draco I and Draco II. Their respective stars were twenty thousand light-years apart, and of the entire galaxy, they were the only ones that supported humanoid life. There were other inhabitable planets, but because of the constant civil strife, colonization was hazardous and had come to a standstill.

Elijah then looked at frames of life on Draco I, the mosque-like homes and barren, blocky military complexes, civilians—all tall and tooth-concealing—and the farms and forests. There was one picture of Emperor Marek V. It was a close-up of a lean, strong man, richly attired but looking out at his viewer with an expression of weary intelligence.

"I like him," Elijah declared.

Oberon nodded. "Yes, Marek's all right." He was feeling more comfortable now. His mascot was exhibiting traits that meant something special to him. From the slant of his questions as they ran through the data tapes, it seemed there might be a captaincy in his future. But that could not be determined for a long time yet.

"Elijah, has anyone ever told you about how Ergang discovered hyperlight drive?"

Elijah shook his head. "No. How did he?"

"Hasn't Sagen told you about what happened one day when he was playing around with topology?"

Elijah looked very interested. "No. What happened?"

Oberon stared past the boy. Finally he answered vaguely, "It's just that it's an interesting story. Ask her sometime."

Man has needed neither microscope nor electronic analysis in order to suspect that he lives surrounded by and resting on dust.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

ASIDE FROM ALLOWING himself the nickname of "Dragon," Edwards seldom made any reference to his ancestry or his feelings about it. His alienness did not seem to weigh heavily on his mind. He had immersed himself in his profession instead of his plight, determined to accept the world that had accepted him.

It was not likely that he would discuss yesterday's encounter with the Draconian Scoutship, despite the fact that he had never come into personal contact with his own race before. But Oberon had decided to make himself available to his friend, just in case. Any insight concerning the Dragon was an insight concerning all of his race. He was, for the League, an excellent and necessary reminder that the enemy was humanity, also, and could adapt to different ways, circumstances permitting.

During his next free hour, Oberon went down to the Dragon's lab.

He had just reached the door when Nimmo came panting up. "Sir—"

"Find something on the code?" Oberon inquired, surprised by his urgency.

"No, sir. I meant to ask you about sending a dicto."

Oberon laughed. "You don't need to ask my permission to send a dicto, Mr. Christie."

"I know. But I want it to go off on this evening's dicto-wave for Algernon Six—that's our next stop. I need to know if it's all right to discuss Elijah with a friend of mine I'd like to see there."

Oberon hesitated and Nimmo hurried on to explain. "His name is George Philip Lenard. Sound familiar?"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

He's third coordinator of the colony and a pretty well-known philologist. Teaches the ancient language elective at the colony branch of the Institute."

"Yes, I've heard the name."

"Well, sir, we'll be working in the same building where his office is, and I'd like Elijah to meet him. I'd like Phil to know about the little guy ahead of time so that he'll be there to talk to him."

"About what? I mean, what are you going to tell him about Elijah?" It was not that he felt he should deny permission—a mascot was supposed to be meeting people—but he was quite curious.

Nimmo stood biting his lip, uncertain. "I really don't know yet, sir. It depends on what I find out about this dust game he keeps playing. I've processed a microscale vision test for him and he's taking it right now—"

"Microscale?" Oberon exclaimed. The human eye couldn't possibly discern measurements that small.

Nimmo shrugged. "He's been seeing something that we don't see—I'm certain of that!"

Oberon saw that the man was completely serious, and he nodded. "All right. Go ahead. I think it's just a game, but maybe my attitude is unscientific."

The lab door shot open and Edwards ducked out, scowling. "Must you gentlemen converse at *my* door? There must be a hundred other doors in this ship."

Nimmo departed and Oberon grinned up at his friend.

"Got a moment to talk?"

The Dragon gave him an ungentle shove. "No. Go away, Obi. I'm busy," he said irritably and the door slid shut, but it closed on Oberon, who was halfway through. He wrestled himself free and followed the Dragon to his desk.

"What are you being so Draconian about? Your relatives rub off on you?"

The Dragon apologized by kicking a chair to his friend in the usual way. "I'm sorry, Obi. I guess my blood relatives shook me up a little yesterday."

"Is that all?" Oberon asked, concerned. It took a lot to unnerve the Dragon.

Edwards sank into his chair and leaned wearily on one hand. "No. I can't sleep right now. My work."

"Your work? Everybody's healthy," Oberon said, and

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

he looked around at the many-shelved cabinets filled with boxed and bottled wonders. He couldn't resist adding, "Take something."

The Dragon shook his head. He wore an abstracted look that Oberon had learned to be wary of. But now there was a haggardness and sharp lines etched by some kind of intellectual shock.

"No, that's not it. I meant to tell you sooner, but there hasn't been time. I've learned a few more things about our mascot."

Oberon groaned. "Such as?"

The Dragon's fingers twisted and clenched. "To put it to you simply, he hasn't got a human brain."

"What kind of brain has he got?"

"I don't know. And don't look at me that way, Obi. I know these things disturb you—they disturb me—but it's my job to come up with some answers."

"All you seem to do is come up with questions," Oberon contended. "Why are you finding this out? Why hasn't his brain been checked into before? You can't make me believe, Dragon, that you're the only one who investigates these things."

"I'm not," the Dragon reflected. "In the opinion of the Institute, his brain has been thoroughly scanned. They took his neural analysis at birth, and from time to time they take other readings for the purpose of the records, but that's all. It hasn't occurred to them to imprint his brain on the theory that it's not a human one. He seems perfectly human in his other physical aspects."

"Then why did it occur to you?" Oberon persisted.

The Dragon shifted and looked away. For a moment he seemed entirely at a loss. "I don't know. I don't know if I can explain it in so many words. It's something that's come over me just since I've been around him." His eyes, a deep, serious gray, and unusually bloodshot, stared past Oberon with concentration. He spoke haltingly, his voice muted by the distance of his thoughts. "It also has to do with my feelings when I first read through the itinerary. No, let me rephrase that—when I first saw the itinerary." He stopped abruptly and compressed his lips, awaiting Oberon's response without looking at him.

Oberon was too deeply stunned by this admission to reply. He was satisfied and yet wildly unnerved. So the

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

hunch was not peculiar to himself; this man, also, sensed things he could not express. The revelation made his own pre-departure experience with the itinerary even more alarming because of the fact that it had been shared. He sensed the web of the unknown crystalizing just below the grasp of his total consciousness. It was the disturbing presence of something felt but unseen.

"Let me tell you briefly what I've done and what I've found out," the Dragon continued. "I had the lab computer compile imprints of every variation of humanoid brain known to us—I knew they'd all be similar even before I started, but my objective was not to miss the slightest, tiniest detail in some particular brain that I might be able to connect with Elijah's. The point is that he simply hasn't got a human brain. And—laugh if you want to—I checked out animal brains just for the sake of absolute totality. Elijah's brain does not exist anywhere in the known universe." He stared, thunderstruck, at his friend. "For instance, Obi, he's got these hexagonal cells in the higher areas of the frontal lobes. Yes, they're absolutely shaped like hexagons, perfect hexagons. His brain has to be one of two things. Either it is an absolute and complete mutation, or it's something else—something that we have had no experience of."

"I go for your second theory," Oberon put in.

"Why?"

But Oberon could not explain his dread. He couldn't tell the Dragon about thinking many nights ago on observation deck that there was something at work here that no one could understand. He would have mentioned the Mobius incident, but he still could not be sure of that until he had double-checked with Sagen. So he defended himself as best he could. "I don't think a mutation would be so thorough," he groped. "How often, just tell me, how often is a brain mutation that complete? Every single cell new and unheard of? Even hopelessly retarded children are born with recognizably human brains. Ergang was a mutation, if you will, but his gray matter was still gray matter!"

The Dragon shook his head helplessly. "You know, Obi, the idea occurred to me that there might be something similar between Ergang's brain and Elijah's, since they both classify as hypermentalities—but no common

denominator exists. They haven't the slightest thing in common other than being contained in a human skull." He went on: "I see your point, but I personally lean to the first assumption—that Elijah is a particularly complete mutant. Remember, he was born on a starship orbiting Orion. Mrs. Brandon had been on that starship for two months before she gave birth. Now, we know that in outer space we are subject to a wider variety of cosmic rays than what can reach us through a planet's atmosphere. We still don't have data on a lot of what may be hitting us all the time out here, and we do know that in rare, rare cases, a single cosmic particle can cause a grave mutation in an organism, cause something in its development to change drastically. If the organism in this case was the fetus, and the mutation had to do with its brain, then there you have a very plausible theory for Elijah."

"Yes, but what about the rest of him?" Oberon stressed.

The Dragon merely sighed and Oberon ribbed him lightly. "Well, if you can prove that Elijah's brain is just a mutation, then his true parentage can't be so important, after all—"

"On the contrary," the Dragon snapped. "It is just as important as ever, for the very reason you just brought up—the rest of him. So, as soon as you lift the ban, I intend to go on with my work."

Oberon decided to leave him on a conciliatory note. "I'll think about it," he said as he rose, but the Dragon took hold of him and pulled him back down.

"Sit still. I'm not through with you yet. Listen to this. There are a lot of accessory nerves branching out from Elijah's main optical nerve—I don't know what they are for; I haven't had time to study them yet, but, Obi, from their type and orientation, I have a clue. There is a possibility—or, should I say, a certainty?—that Elijah has some kind of a—a perception that we don't have in our five senses. A sixth sense, or, no, a *seventh* sense, since he's already a telepath, which I suppose I should count as the sixth. It could be an extrasensory light perception of some kind, but I really can't theorize yet—"

"He says he sees dust in the air—"

The Dragon gave a violent start. "What dust?" he asked sharply.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"I don't know," Oberon said. "According to Nimmo, he's been playing some sort of seeing-dust game for weeks. Nimmo's giving him a resolution test of some kind to determine what—"

"I think I'd better call Nimmo down here," the Dragon said, rising and loping over to the telecom. "You go along. I'm sure you've got things to do."

Obediently, Oberon got up and turned to go. Staring at the white, blank door ahead of him, he began to feel a sudden excitement. It mounted, bringing on a fine sweat, a racing pulse. Confused, he stopped, wondering if he were sick. Surely what the Dragon had just said did not affect him with this strange ecstasy, an ecstasy tinged with alarm. What were his senses trying to tell him?

Before his fixed gaze, the door opened. Nimmo stepped in with a slight stagger and Oberon heard the Dragon's quick intake of breath and heard him exclaim, "Nimmo! I was just about to call you. What is it? What's the matter?"

Nimmo was white. His smile was a struggling grimace. When he answered, his voice was strained with emotion.

"I found out," he murmured.

The Dragon jerked forward. "Yes? You found out—"

"What he's seeing." Nimmo drew a long breath and replied, "The computer has answered our questions, Doctor. He is seeing something. It's something he doesn't call by its right name. He just calls it the dust—"

"Cosmic dust of some kind?" Oberon put in. His voice was unduly tight. He felt that he had to speak.

"No, Captain," Nimmo answered.

Oberon saw that his first officer was deeply and visibly moved, that something earnest and reverent burned behind his wide black eyes.

"Elijah is seeing ether."

There was silence and then Nimmo repeated softly, "Ether. You know, Ergang—he—he did discover a new ether."

Oberon nodded stiffly. He felt an absurd desire to laugh and a miserable qualm of fright. But he also felt the placating inner voice of common sense telling him to wait, examine carefully this thing that made no sense at all.

Nimmo began to talk wildly. "He can see everything, everything right on down the scale: electrons, atoms—"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

everything! He can see them all with his naked eye, all of them. But it's the ether he's been talking about."

Oberon's mind flashed back to a newsreel he had seen years ago in some classroom, an old newsreel taken of the first interview with Ergang after his discovery of the stuff that he termed "the new ether." Again, he could see Ergang, an old man with glowing but strangely peaceful eyes, as he descended from a shuttle and merged with a crowd of reporters. Oberon could not remember what specific questions they asked him, only the excited babble of their voices, to which the old scientist made only one reply. It was a quote from the Bible, caught in the warped soundtrack of the newsreel, to be rerun a million times, wondered about and questioned a million times.

"Of dust ye are made and unto dust ye shall return."

This Being is in all things, and throughout all; and all derive existence from it and through it.

Anselm

THE COUNCIL ROOM was empty save for three men and a thick nimbus of pipe smoke. The Dragon smoked a pipe about as often as he talked about himself, but in the past hour and a half, he had relit at least a dozen times, unable, for some reason, to keep it going.

They wasted a lot of that time coming to three very simple conclusions. Paiselle was not to be notified right away. It would cause a serious drain on the ship's power to put a call through to Earth at this point, and they had not yet reached Algernon Six, where the first relay satellite was located. To compromise their power so soon after Draconian aggression would be foolhardy, as well as against regulations.

No one else aboard the *Anriahd*, save senior officers, was to know. It was not necessary for them to know, anyway, and Nimmo agreed not to mention it in the dicto to Lenard. Like the Dragon, he had been suspecting that Elijah had some sort of extrasensory visual perception, but he had not discussed his suspicions with anyone; there was no point in that until the computer had verified them.

At the Dragon's insistence there were to be no more tests made on the boy—not until he could find out, with the data he had already acquired, exactly what could go amiss with human development to produce microscopic vision. The phenomenon would require a lot of study, but it must not be too swiftly paced for the sake of the child's emotional integrity.

On this point the Dragon elaborated further. Obviously, Elijah was not very communicative about the ether, or

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

any of the other things he could see. There had to be a reason for that, because he was, at times, a virtual chatterbox about the things that interested him. Therefore, the Dragon warned, a serious mental block might be the kind of damage done by too much attention, by overreaction. They must force themselves to handle this delicately, accepting Elijah's statements when they came, but not demanding any of him, treating the whole matter as a perfectly natural thing. He knew that Paiselle would recommend such a course.

Oberon's excitement had rapidly diminished. He was conscious only of a wish to escape this meeting, to go somewhere alone and think. He was aware of the fact that there had not been time yet for them to think about it enough. The news had been broken and then they had come here.

What should they do?

What did the whole thing mean?

**Shall the dust give thanks
unto Thee? Or shall it
declare thy truth?**

Psalm 30

IN ENGINEERING, THE lights were out except for faint patches of flickering color made by hundreds of buttons and dials. The long banks of mammoth computers and power units gave off a deep, throbbing hum, so Sagen did not hear anyone come in. She looked up suddenly from her monitorial hood to find Elijah standing in the office doorway, gazing at her gravely, his fists full of vellum sheets. She turned up the lights and looked beyond him. There was no one else.

"Yes?" came the husky inquiry.

Restless beneath her stare, the small boy squirmed a little closer, but not too close. One boot rubbed the other nervously. Then he said, "I wanted to show you something."

"Yes?"

He thrust out a handful of vellum covered with formulas—hastily scrawled partial derivatives and determinants.

She received them and looked them over. "Is this where you are in your chemistry?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, that's mine. That's a better way of calculating the electronic energy of a molecule. That's a better way than the method in the chapter tape I'm learning now. Don't you think it's better?"

Sagen eyed the paper and eyed the boy. "Yes, but you haven't come up with anything new," she said, handing it back. "This is the method that you will be studying next—it was invented as a more efficient means of doing the same thing. But it *has* been invented." She watched him. "You haven't been given the next tape yet?"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"No. I keep telling Muriat that I'm done with this chapter, but he won't let me have the next one yet." Elijah was not disheartened by the fact that his work was not original. In fact, he seemed relieved. "I knew there had to be a better way," he muttered, creasing the vellum and stuffing it into the pocket of his playsuit.

But he still waited, and so did Sagen. At last she asked, "Why didn't you take this up to the chemistry or physics section? Why did you come to me?"

"I don't know."

She tried again, penetratingly. "There wasn't any special reason?"

He mumbled, "No-o." He turned and walked to the door, then turned back. "There are—there are a lot of things—a lot of things that I don't know—" He broke off.

Sagen smiled slightly and replied, "Shame on you."

**The miracles of genius always rest
on profound convictions which
refuse to be analyzed.**

Emerson

ON OBSERVATION DECK, Oberon placed his hands on the visiplate and leaned on them, gazing out at the receding galaxy.

He had tried to relax by taking helm duty from Benson, but a violent headache knocked him down. Alone in his quarters, he lay for a while in helpless surrender, and at last came up here, where the cool wash of starlight eased him somewhat. The ache lessened, and his thoughts reasserted themselves.

Elijah could see into the microcosmos at will.

That was the plain fact. He and everyone else involved might as well get over being astounded and accept this, learn how to live with it. But what bothered him the most was that Elijah was seeing something that no one else knew anything about. Atoms and their constituents were fairly well understood. But no one really knew what the ether was.

Ergang had been strangely close-mouthed about it. The fact that he had mathematically identified the very substance of the time and space warp did not propel him onward to further explorations. He had been satisfied in merely knowing that it existed. Somewhere in the second book of the *Cosmology*, he had even said that it was incomprehensible, and therefore man should be content with knowing only that it was there. To define it precisely was a feat that he chose not to attempt.

Oberon recalled how his own professors had always excused this, saying that a detailed understanding of the ether had not been found necessary to a basic understand-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

ing of hyperlight mechanics, which was Ergang's primary gift to the world. Ergang, according to them, was simply refusing to waste time.

The ether's existence answered many questions, but the ether as an entity had been left alone—as far as anybody knew.

Oberon's mind backtracked sharply. He had just thought of the ether as an entity—exactly the term Ergang was supposed to have used whenever he was pressed into speaking about it. He had used the term as if speaking of a *being*, which had a mind and a will of its own. But that attitude was thought to be the mental aberration of a very old man—for Ergang was very old before he could be pressed into referring to it at all, outside of his writings.

Pacing the deck, Oberon pondered this fact. Ergang had been old when he discovered the ether, older still when he began to call it an entity, but he had also, at the same time, been publishing some of his most astounding mathematical tracts. How could one accuse the old physicist of senility at one moment and gasp at his mathematical prowess at the next? No, Ergang was mentally sound, and working industriously right up to the day his heart failed him.

What would his advice have been concerning a human being like Elijah? Perhaps that could be guessed at if the man had said more about the ether.

Leaning again on the visiplat, Oberon tried to turn his consideration to what lay ahead, to what the Capacians would make of Elijah. But, strangely, he could not think about this. Where his imagination might deal with these superior unknowns, setting up theoretical situations, theoretical people and conflicts, there was only a void. While he could not seem to wonder about them as he usually wondered about things, he sensed something ahead of him, awaiting him. If this were the Capacians, then they had a persuading omnipresence, a ubiquity. It was as if, in some strange way, they extended everywhere at once, and knew everything that was going on. Then it seemed that the entire cosmos was a trail straight to them, except that it was no narrow strip, no one route, but its surfaces extended outward and through all places, joining every-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

where, seeking and finding their destination everywhere.

Officially, he sought the Capacians. Now, in an unconscious commitment of his total being, he began to seek them.

Gradually, as he stood there, he became aware of some half-hiding, insufficiently revealed truth. He felt as if someone were trying to tell him something, and that he could not listen.

Then, in an instant, this truth broke out and rushed to fill his mind. His head snapped back as if on the rebound, and he whirled and dashed down the corridor and into the helm. Disregarding the startled stares from the night shift, he leaped to the telecom and tried again and again to arouse Nimmo in his quarters. At last the sleepy Orion face appeared, yellow hair tousled, black brows knitting.

"Nimmo! Who made Elijah promise not to tell?"

"Wha—what are you talking about?" Nimmo mumbled. Then something in his face awakened. "Wait a minute—"

"Who was it? Who made Elijah promise not to tell?"

The Orion stared, wide-eyed. "I—I don't know—"

"Meet me in Elijah's quarters right away."

"But he's asleep—"

"Never mind that. This is important." He blanked off.

They reached the mascot's quarters at about the same time. Nimmo, in his rumpled sleeping suit, entered ahead of Oberon and set the door on open so the dim corridor light would stream in.

Oberon went to where his tiny mascot lay curled in the bunk, leaned over him until he could feel the warm breath on his face, then spoke gently.

"Elijah."

The child gave a snort and flopped slightly under the blanket.

"Elijah."

"Wha-a-t."

"Elijah, who made you promise not to tell about the dust? Who was it? Will you tell me?"

The dark, sleepy eyes regarded him without expression.

Oberon gave him a little shake. "Who was it, Elijah?"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

You must tell me—that's an order. Who made you promise not to tell?"

Elijah stirred again, sighed.

He murmured, "It was Sagen."

*All chance, direction, which
thou canst not see.*

Alexander Pope

CAPTAIN OBERON WAS friendly enough, but a bit introverted, Shyla Benson decided. He good-naturedly kept you at a distance.

Something would have to be done about this, she thought. How could any single, self-respecting female ignore **such a man**? He was very good-looking, in his own restrained manner, and those serious dark eyes and that carefully measured smile just had to hide a lot of exciting personality. But over and above all this, his reputation had very exciting proportions.

He called Dr. Edwards "Dragon" and let Dr. Edwards call him "Obi." She and the other women she talked to agreed that this said so much about him.

She cornered him on the day that he was busy signing shore-leave requests for Algernon Six at the projection room table.

"I brought you some coffee, Captain."

"Oh, thank you very much."

She sat down near him with her own cup and sipped, watching while he sorted the forms into their separate categories.

"Are you going down for shore leave or business as usual?" she asked with sparkle.

"Business as usual, I'm afraid, Miss Benson." He smiled at her and swallowed some coffee. "Ah—perfect! You are truly in touch with the coffee machine."

She giggled and then asked, "Where do you think a girl should go for some fun on Algernon Six?"

He considered absentmindedly, half of his attention focused on his work and on the many other things that were probably heavy on the mind of a starship captain. "There

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

are a lot of parks in the city where we land. And it's right on the sea, so there's a beach, probably boats to rent. Of course, you can always go to a restaurant if you can stand the colony table manners. I've always found it quite an experience to eat down there."

She sighed. "I'm afraid I don't know my way around very well."

"Your brother can provide you with a city map—that's part of his job."

"I'm afraid I'm not very good at map-reading," she complained. "I'd get along better with a guide."

Oberon glanced at her like a man just awakening. Expressionless, he studied her for a moment, then asked suddenly, "I understand, Miss Benson, that you think your brother looks a lot like Elijah Brandon?"

She started. All of the talk she had planned evaporated. "Well, yes," she said. Then she explained eagerly, "But it's not that Elijah looks like Will now—he looks exactly the way Will did when he was seven or eight years old. It's amazing, Captain, it really is. You see, I'm four years older than my brother and I remember what he was like even better than he does. Elijah is small for his age, exactly the same as Will was. Elijah even talks the way he did—I mean the sound of his voice is the same. The only thing that's different is that Will was always clumsy and uncoordinated, and Elijah isn't. Elijah doesn't move or walk at all the way Will did. Other than that, well, they could have been twins—except for their brains, of course." She giggled again and watched him hopefully. "I know you don't know how to take this. I don't know how to take it, either. Maybe it would have been better if Will and I had just kept our mouths shut and let it go as a strange coincidence. I know it seems, well, like bragging or something the way we talk about it all the time. But it's so amazing. Captain, I wish you'd take a look at Will's PD sometime and see for yourself."

"I will if I have the time," Oberon conceded affably. He arose. "Miss Benson, it's been nice talking to you, but I have what's called a million things to do. Thanks for the coffee."

"Oh, you're welcome, Captain. I know you think I'm a boring sensationalist."

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

He grinned over his shoulder as he left. "Not at all, Miss Benson. Sensational, yes; boring, no."

Yes, he was the perfect starship captain.

A slightly self-congratulatory smile crossed her face until she realized she still didn't have a guide for Algernon Six.

**There are truths which are not
for all men, nor for all times.**

Voltaire

AT ALGERNON SIX the ship was due for her first minor overhaul. There was the business of calling ahead when they entered transmission range to confirm the docking reservation at the solar base, there was the matter of clearing all personnel for shore leave or research leave and, lastly, the monumental business of reviewing supplies. The *Anriahd*'s orders were to lay in new supplies at each Earth colony, even though she was far from running out of anything. The lengthy part of the mission still lay ahead, and there were no Earth colonies in Telphon 281, so every available space had to be filled.

As soon as they entered radio and sensor range of the Algernon system, the telecoms buzzed all day long with every channel crowded.

Oberon's mind was full of these official priorities. He had not been able to consult Sagen. Forcibly, he pushed Elijah and the ether matter into the background until he was able to forget about them both for long periods of time. But every now and then he would start up from his reports to find himself reliving his last visit to the Dragon's lab. Once he was with Nimmo when this happened, and to his irritation, they fell into the subject.

"Captain, you need a break," Nimmo recommended. "How about if I arrange for us to have lunch with Phil when we go down?"

"Phil?" Oberon looked up blankly from the desk in his quarters. "Oh, yes—your friend Lenard. I don't think so, Nimmo. I've decided not to go down this time. You know how to take care of the UFO business. I always like to stick around for these overhauls."

Nimmo rocked on his feet, smugly amused. "Uh-huh.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Well, I can understand that on any other mission, but you've got Dr. Sagen this time, and I just happen to know that she hasn't signed up for leave, so you can put her in charge of the overhaul. What d'ya say?"

"I suppose I could do that," Oberon admitted. He wondered when he'd get used to this high-caliber crew.

"Phil was my roommate for two years at the Orion Institute. He was a transfer student there." Nimmo began to swing an arm nervously. He was so abrupt and restless at times that he seemed to Oberon like a man who was constantly experiencing electrical shocks. But epilepsy was electrical. Perhaps that's what caused these pulsations of nervous energy. None of the Dragon's carefully researched prescriptions seemed to tranquilize the man for any length of time.

Oberon leaned back in his chair and gave Nimmo his attention. "I did wonder how you got to know him."

"He was a transfer. He didn't want to room with me when he found out about me, but they never can please everybody. Not that he had anything against epileptics—he just thought that he couldn't handle it. But he could, and did. And he was nice about it. We got to be very good friends. We used to play squash, handball—all that sort of thing."

"If he's athletic, he should have gone into the Space Troop," Oberon commented.

"Trouble is that the most athletic part of him is his mind," Nimmo said. "Phil is one of those people who can talk about absolutely anything and still have a lot more on reserve inside him that you can't get at. He was always bigger and stronger than I was, than any of the other students were. And he was way ahead of them in another way that I could never put my finger on. But maybe you will when you meet him. The thing is, Captain, I think maybe he can tell us something about Elijah—if he will. He's a little shy, too. You'll see. But maybe he won't be when he's talked to my little pal for a while."

"Something about Elijah," Oberon mused. "I'd like to know exactly what you mean by that."

Nimmo shrugged. "I'm not sure what I mean myself. But I know that when this man talks to my little pal, something has got to click. As I said before, there's no limit to Phil—except that he pretends to think there is.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

The bad thing for him is that there simply isn't enough time in this life for him to learn all he wants to learn, or teach all he could teach. But he manages just fine. That's why I think he should know about Elijah and the ether—especially the ether. We ought to find out what he thinks. It would be the most valuable thing we could do on Algernon Six."

Oberon shook his head. "I think it had better remain classified information, Nimmo." But he found that inwardly he was beginning to argue with himself. He was beginning to be curious about this philologist. "This man—he isn't by any chance a hypermentality?"

"No more than you and I!" Nimmo laughed. "Phil never would tell me what his ratings are. 'Modest' was all he would ever say."

Oberon smiled. "I guess that's what I would answer, too. A way of saying nothing since you could be modestly average, modestly sub-average or modestly a genius."

Nimmo gazed at him earnestly. "Captain, I wish you'd reconsider and let me send him an updated dicto on Elijah. I can tell you something else, too. Philip Lenard's name was on the original roster of crew selected for this mission. But he turned it down because his appointment as Third Coordinator of Algernon Six came along at the same time and he chose it instead. Guess he didn't want to go off and leave his wife and kids for two years. But my point is that if it weren't for that little fluke, he'd probably know all about this, anyway."

"There are a lot of people aboard this ship who don't know about it," Oberon countered, but he was surprised by this news, and he had forgotten that Lenard was a coordinator. They handled official confidences all the time. On a sudden change of mind, he glanced up at his first officer. "Nimmo, I think perhaps you should send your friend Lenard an official confidence. It wouldn't hurt to have another opinion in this matter, especially one that's worth something."

Nimmo beamed. "Thank you, sir!" He dashed off, presumably to send the dicto right away. The ship would reach Algernon Six in eight days.

Oberon was surprised at himself. It was a little rash, a bit of a gamble, to confide in this man when even Paiselle had not been notified yet. But he found himself wishing

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

constantly for that other opinion, that outside opinion, on his mascot's microscopic eye. He realized that he wanted desperately to talk to someone about this matter, but he had not yet found that particular person aboard the *Anriahd* and he tended to feel that such a person could not exist on the ship. Everybody here was too involved with Elijah. Muriat's whole world was Elijah's education. For the Dragon, all roads led to the chemical and physical discrepancies of Elijah's body, and Nimmo's heart was warped with love for the boy. And Sagen? Only she remained a question mark.

Oberon had tried several times to drop in on her, but he always found her either in the middle of a "class" with Elijah, or in the middle of her work with the technicians. Their off-hours did not coincide, and with Algernon Six coming up, duty time could not be used for social calls. Oberon tried questioning the boy again, casually, about her, but Elijah said only, "It was to be our game for a while, but I forgot and did it other times."

This only confused him further. When did Sagen ever have a chance to play games with Elijah? In the first place, he could not imagine her playing any kind of a game with anyone. And she certainly was not the spirited, grandmotherly type who liked to keep secrets with little boys.

There were several questions he meant to ask her: how she had discovered Elijah's ability and why she had not informed either him or the Dragon. And he still did not know whether she had ever mentioned Ergang's Mobius accident to the boy.

But the big question, the clangor at the bottom of his soul, the thing that continually drummed in the back of his mind, was something he intended to find out from either Lenard or someone else rational and worth conferring with, someone outside. Why did he start up in a cold sweat whenever he thought of Elijah seeing the ether? As he sat here thinking of the boy, the ether, the mission and Sagen—what made his hands grow clammy as they rested on the desk?

Elijah had been assigned some mathematical formulas. For twenty minutes he worked industriously, sitting cross-legged in a chair, not once raising his head. At last he

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

slid off and ran to Nimmo with his work. Nimmo pushed out from the table, took the data tablet on his knee and compared it with the answer template. "All correct!" he announced. "You're disgustingly accurate, as usual, little brother. Ever think I might get tired of right answers?"

"I'll give you a break and do them all wrong for you next time," Elijah offered.

"Muriat would never survive it," Nimmo said, looking mournful.

Elijah's face puckered gleefully. "He survived something yesterday."

"What?"

Elijah pointed to a gap in his front teeth. "My tooth came out. The Dragon said to put it under my pillow so the tooth fairy would get it, and when I told Muriat, he said he'd like to go somewhere alone and cry." Elijah exploded with a noise like air escaping from a balloon and screeched with laughter, clutching Nimmo's arm. The Orion wrestled him up to his lap, but after a few moments of vigorous tussle, the little boy settled down on the floor with his plasticubes.

This particular set contained cubes that were no bigger than a man's thumbnail. These Elijah always played with the most—if it could be called play—arranging them in patterns on the floor rather than building things with them. Gradually, Nimmo had noticed that he always made the same pattern. It was a peculiar pattern, too, consisting of four separate segments, almost like a lettering of some kind.

Nimmo leaned on his elbows and peered down. "What is that you're always making?"

Elijah looked up dreamily from his squatting position, his hands full of cubes. "It's my name."

"Oh!" Nimmo chuckled. "Making up your own language? I used to do that when I was a kid—maybe you'll grow up to be a cryptologist, like me, or a philologist. You'll be meeting one in a few days."

Elijah surveyed the pattern, then dismantled it with a sweep of his hand and started over again. Since he no longer seemed to be in a roughhousing mood, Nimmo got up and ambled around the room, looking for some toy that might interest him, too. Thirty-six was not too old to enjoy some of the playthings they made for kids these days.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

On the table was a scrap of vellum with crescents drawn on it. Nimmo picked it up, frowning. He had noticed them littered about the ship in unexpected places. Elijah would draw one, carry it around with him for a while, then leave it somewhere when he got tired of it. The captain had noticed them, too, and had often wondered aloud why the boy would prefer a simple crescent over the elaborate designs he could create with no effort at all.

"Hey, want to draw some designs for a while?"

"No-o-o." The pattern was finished, knocked apart, begun again.

Nimmo sighed. Although he would never admit it to anyone, he enjoyed helping the boy color them in. The walls of his own quarters were hung with dozens of them.

Elijah looked up suddenly, his infinite attention focused on something deep within himself. His little face worked tensely, as if he had many questions that wanted to be asked all at once. But Elijah decided that they could all be asked in one sentence. "Why can't we know more?"

"Specify, kiddo. Why can't who know more about what?" Nimmo replied, crouching beside him.

Elijah played along with him patiently. "Why can't all of us know more about everything?" he persisted.

"I don't know." Nimmo shrugged.

Elijah gazed at him steadily. "Neither do I," he said.

Algernon Six was large for an Earth-type planet, and her oceans housed six continents. Five of them were beautifully wild and uninhabited, but the sixth supported an affluent Earth colony, population nine million, with its economy based on being a routine stop-off for League starships. The main city, Oberon's destination, was located on the western shore.

It was nine A.M., ship's time, when the *Anriahd* glided into orbit. She orbited for an hour, then docked on a docking arm of the solar base to begin the overhaul and refueling procedure. Sagen had consented to supervise operations, so Oberon left her looking very misplaced in the helm command seat and migrated with a group of his crew to the transport deck for shore dispatch.

Transport was a scene of noise and confusion. Algernon technicians were swarming aboard from the docking arm

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

hatch with supplies and equipment. Their foreman was conferring in loud tones with young Benson, who appeared to be listening with only half his attention. He was staring, in his customary dazed manner, at Elijah, who was waiting with Nimmo for their captain to join them.

"Benson!" Oberon hailed him as soon as the foreman had departed.

The young man gave a violent start. "Sir?"

"Is the command shuttle prepared?"

"Yes, sir. She's all ready to go."

Oberon entered the shuttle with Nimmo and Elijah and waited for the flight deck to clear and depressurize. He refused to be at all interested in his mascot's resemblance to the infant past of his junior transport officer. Nothing was proved by it. If the Dragon were able to prove that Elijah had an Ayhillian father, then it was possible that he and Benson were distantly related through some branch of Benson's family. If that were exposed, it would give the Bensons something a little more tangible to brag about, but that was all.

Transit time was thirty minutes. They flew over a short stretch of city and landed on the shore shuttlefield, on the track nearest the long, shimmering white beach.

A storm was blowing in from the sea. As they stepped out of the shuttle, the air around them seemed gray, although the sun still shone in patches here and there. A sharp mist fell on their faces. The wind seemed to be blowing in all directions at once.

Oberon filled his lungs with the fresh, salty air. It was the most wonderful sensation he had experienced in a long time. Evidently, Elijah felt it, too, for he took off in blind delight and ran toward the crashing waves. Nimmo dashed after him, shouting, and Oberon began to look around, hopefully, expectantly.

What was he seeking? Room, space . . . a place where city domes did not stretch for miles, the domes changing color with the weather. A place without tubed transport systems and swiveling sensor screens, a few square miles of nature that were not sectioned and trimmed and cultivated. You couldn't find such a place on Earth now except in the unlivable tropics or the frozen poles.

But here, on a planet like this, there was everything to satisfy that longing. As he looked around at the uncluttered

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

shore and sea, he could well understand the attraction of Earth colonies.

The tall office complex where they were awaited by League officials rose high and white, well back from the shore. Oberon began to amble toward it, quickening his pace to keep up with Elijah and Nimmo, who were slinging wet sand at each other farther down the beach.

When they arrived, passes were issued to them and they were directed to the orbital survey department, where records of UFOs were kept. But Nimmo had other directions to give Elijah.

"How would you like to do something all by yourself?" he asked the excited child.

"Yes, yes!" Elijah cried.

Nimmo showed him a wall map of the building. "Dr. Lenard has office number 421 on the fourth floor. He should be in now. You go up on this elevator and tell him that I sent you up to stay there until we get done in orbital survey; he's expecting you. If he's not there, you come back down and wait here at the information desk till we come for you. Okay?"

"Okay!" Elijah shouted and scampered into the elevator.

Nimmo watched him go pensively. "You know, Captain, this is probably the first time in his life he's ever done anything without supervision," he said. "He should have more times like this. He's never even gone fishing. Someday, somewhere, I'm going to take that kid fishing."

"I'm sure he'd like that very much," Oberon replied.

Du bist Elias.

IT WASN'T THE waiting presence of a small, black-haired boy that alerted Philip Lenard. It was the fact that a navy-blue stripe ran down the front of the child's shirt and that his trousers ended just below the knee in shiny, close-fitting boots—a Space Troop uniform.

He looked again at the little boy, who stood quietly just within the door. Then he pushed aside the pile of notes before him. A dim recollection began to break through his mental text, rising past prefixes and suffixes and word roots to the top of his consciousness.

With a sudden twist of a well-muscled torso, he reared back in his chair and stared at the wall calendar. Then he snapped his fingers loudly.

"That's right!" he exclaimed. "I'm supposed to have lunch with Nimmo Christie today!"

The little boy smiled at him and nodded eagerly.

"And I know who you are," Lenard said, switching off a reader, throwing aside his stylus. "You are Elias."

"Elijah," Elijah corrected soberly. "Mascot Elijah Brandon."

Lenard rubbed his face thoughtfully. "Oh, yes, that's right—Elijah. I guess I've been too immersed in the German lately."

"German?" the youngster questioned.

"That's right. An old language of Earth. But you must be from Ayhill."

Elijah shook his head, his grin widening. "No, I'm a citizen of Orion, and, anyway, I'm not Ayhillian, I'm Terran by blood, so I ought to know about the German."

"Oh, yes. Mmm . . ." Shuffling notes, batching them together, Lenard tried desperately to remember what Nimmo

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

had said in the dicto about this mascot—amazingly young for a mascot! Oh, yes . . . hypermentality. There was another dicto from him lying in its cassette on top of Ergang's *Cosmology*, but Lenard simply hadn't had time to listen to it yet.

"What are these?" The little boy moved up against him in a friendly way, interested in the desktop morass. He seemed an amiable child, with an alert, open face.

"RRDE's," Lenard explained. "Requests for Replacement of Damaged Equipment—I'll be glad to see the end of them. Now, where's our mutual friend, Nimmo?"

"He's coming up later," Elijah said, examining the notes and reports. "He and Captain Obi are checking the UFO files. They told me to wait up here with you."

The boy and the philologist surveyed each other for a moment. Then Elijah's eyes took in the rest of the office. It was a fairly large room with an adjoining lab, a telescope in one corner, a case of ancient books and a plastoid couch against one wall.

Lenard was studying Elijah keenly. He had never met a hypermentality of any age, and he had often thought that talking to an Ergang would be a challenge he would enjoy. But had Nimmo been joking in the dicto? He remembered that his high-strung friend had a habit of good-natured exaggeration.

"How old are you, Elijah?"

"Seven and six months and nine days."

Lenard was startled, but he bounced back. "What are they teaching you up there on the—the—"

"*Anriahd*," Elijah supplied. "Astrophysics, level G, Advanced Calculation, History of Science, General Language Design, League Cultures, Chemistry Eight and Hyperlight Mechanics."

"I see." Well, live and learn.

But Lenard was still not entirely convinced. The roommate of his Institute days had also been a very good practical joker. Everything Elijah had said so far could be memorized and parroted.

"Come on over here and sit down for a while." He arose and went to settle on the couch and Elijah climbed up, readily, beside him.

"I'm glad they let me come up here," the boy an-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

nounced, "because now I can ask you some questions about phil—philology."

Lenard smiled, but he shook his head, his pale eyes twinkling. "Why would you be interested in philology? You're only a mascot yet, and that's a senior elective."

"Well, I won't know if it's interesting until I ask you about it, will I?" Elijah protested. "Is it interesting?"

Still twinkling, Lenard shook his head again. "No. Now suppose—for a big change—suppose I ask you some questions?"

"Okay!" Elijah sat back on his heels, alight with anticipation. This was a novelty, indeed. "What kind of questions?"

"Well, you've been given quite a dose of science, it seems. What do you have to say about scientific inquiry? What do you think of it?"

The little boy radiated pleasure. He had never been asked a question like this before; in fact, he had not yet expected anyone to ask him such a thing.

"It's good!" he exclaimed. "It unifies us."

"I see. How?"

Elijah answered, "Well, a scientist has to depend on the ones who came before him and inquired before he did—he has to depend on what they found out. Then others have to check him, and he has to check with them. That's good. It's a unifying thing, which makes it good."

"Do you think they always have to depend on what others have found?"

Elijah hesitated, frowning. "Not—not every single time."

Lenard watched him. "Go on."

"If you see something in a way that nobody else ever has—because you might see it in a way that nobody else could see it—then you've got to go at it all by yourself," the child finished. It was an incredibly lonely statement, and built on an awareness further-reaching and more profound than any Lenard had ever detected in a human being before. In silence, he gazed at the boy, one arm on the back of the couch and a finger thoughtfully against his lips. There was no need to question Nimmo's dicto, which was running through his mind in full clarity now. Elijah had just established himself. There had been no exaggeration. He could be abstract. Then he didn't merely mem-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

orize facts that were taught him, as most children did, but could lump them together to form a philosophy of his own.

Yes, that was what Nimmo had said. Lenard felt a sudden urge to listen to that other dicto immediately, but he was rooted to the spot, as if he dreaded that this challenge would vanish if he moved away.

"Do you ever see anything that nobody else sees?" he asked lightly.

"Sure I do!" Elijah cried, waving his fist in the air in a manner that made Lenard laugh outright. "But I have to become very conscious to do it. I have to escape from time, apartness, all limits and all distractions to do it. Invert and magnify."

Lenard was jolted out of his laugh.

"And then I can see the dust," Elijah said.

The philologist waited.

"At least, that's what I call it. And maybe everybody really knows about it, but not in the same way I do."

"You're also a telepath, aren't you?" Lenard asked quickly.

Elijah nodded. Lenard glanced toward his desk. What had begun as a faint alarm was now a full suspicion. But he was so incredulous at even having such a suspicion that for the moment all he could think about was his astonishment.

"Yes, that would make sense. I can see how that would make sense," he muttered.

At last he rose and went to get the cassette and unwind the earpiece from its berth in the telecom console.

"Excuse me just one moment. I think I should listen to this dicto before we resume our talk. You see, I haven't done my homework."

Elijah sprang down and went to examine the telescope while Lenard listened privately, through the earpiece, to Nimmo's voice.

Soon there was nothing more but the thin whine that signified the end of the tape. But Lenard just stood there. He would not have realized it if the noise bored a hole in his head. Finally, he removed the earpiece and went back to sit down, his ears ringing.

When he spoke to Elijah now, his tone of voice had changed. It had a tenderly cautious sound, yet his clear, inquisitive eyes were brilliantly alive.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Nimmo tells me you've been seeing ether, Elijah."

The boy left the telescope and joined him again. With parted lips, he looked speculatively at this new friend, who was so willing to talk to him about this very special thing.

"Yes," he said. "It's ether. It's a very special thing that I can see it, isn't it?"

Gravely, Lenard nodded. "Yes, it certainly is."

The little boy gestured upward with his head. "*They* aren't supposed to ask me questions about it."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Of course I am," Elijah said scornfully. "When people have been asking you a lot of questions about what you've been doing and then suddenly they stop, you know they've decided not to ask you anything more."

The way he said this made Lenard feel quite stupid. He swallowed the feeling.

"Do you think they want me to ask you the questions?"

Elijah looked at him with wisdom beyond his years. "It would seem so."

"How long have you been seeing it?" Lenard asked.

"For two months and six days." Suddenly the child moved closer, until his little face was so near that Lenard could feel his breath and clearly read an expression that was slightly troubled, slightly uncertain.

Slowly, Elijah tried to express what was bothering him.

"I don't know what makes me feel this way . . . I don't know, but I feel sort of . . . sort of—"

Lenard prompted him. "Go on. Tell me."

"I feel as if maybe you have seen it sometime, too," Elijah finished in a rush.

Again Lenard could only remain silent for a moment, bewildered by a sudden tumult of feelings and thoughts that he could hardly unscramble. Elijah had just touched an understanding that lay deep inside him, as it lay deep inside every man of intelligence, seldom emerging in words or even in thoughts, but only vaguely in a conviction that there was more within things than could ever be found. Yet that moreness was something alive and imminent, just within reach, but just out of reach.

Unsure of how to reply, he said softly, "In a way I guess you could say that I have *sensed* it, yes."

The implications of Ergang were filing through his mind

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

now, and the ether became luminous in the dark unknown of the fundamental.

"There's a big doubleness about it, isn't there?" Elijah went on. "It makes up matter like you and me and tables and air. And the other thing it makes is thought. Both kinds of things are matter. But all of the things except thought are made of imperfect matter. Thought is made of matter that's so pure that it can't be detected by us imperfects and our imperfect ways. So we've never called it matter at all but said it had to be something else, only there isn't anything else." He repeated emphatically, "Thought is pure, and all other things are imperfect."

"You say it's pure. Then why can't we solve all our mysteries by just looking within ourselves?" Lenard interposed.

"Because we're imperfect! We're imperfect!" Elijah insisted, flinging out his small arms. "Everything is there, but we aren't conscious *enough* yet." He went on before Lenard could question him further on that point. "And we have evolution, where things try to become more and more perfect, but in this way, they are trying to become more conscious, and more like a thought, because that's the highest thing. Don't you always say that a being that has a more complex consciousness than something else is more highly evolved than that other being? And the ether—the ether—"

Elijah wrinkled his nose, frustrated by his monumental effort to explain something for which there was no vocabulary. Finally, he continued: "And the ether itself is more like one of our thoughts than like any of our substances. That's why you come closer to it when you think a certain way and feel a certain way than when you try to break down plain old matter with tools."

"Then you are saying that it can never be understood," Lenard said, although Elijah was shaking his head vigorously, "because thought has always been inaccessible for close study. We can break down and study the forces connected with, as you would say, things like you and me and tables and air. But never can we break down a thought and define it, or, essentially, consciousness in general, and, going from there, the soul. Right?"

Elijah nodded. "People have always thought that thought was exceptional," he said. "But it's just the same

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

stuff as everything else, only better. So when I grow up I'm going to tell you what thought really is, because by then I'll know how to do it."

Lenard proceeded coolly and carefully. "But doesn't seeing the ether tell you that there are some levels of being that we can't possibly understand, that can have no meaning in our reality?"

"Oh, no!" Elijah exclaimed. "There aren't any levels of being that we can't understand. The universe is really very simple."

Lenard laughed. "Aren't you being a little too optimistic?"

"No, I'm not. When you're too optimistic, you don't really know. But I *know!*" The little boy gazed at him sincerely.

"You know this because of the way the ether is?"

He nodded.

"Can you describe the ether to me?" Lenard asked quickly.

The child's head jerked back a little and he gave a quick sigh. Absolutely still, he sat there with his eyes downcast and his hands between his knees. Lenard scarcely breathed while the seconds of silence went by.

At last Elijah looked up, his face serene, and chanted tonelessly, as if talking to himself, "It's one and the same thing everywhere. It exists through itself and for all, which is itself. It's the basic nature of all. It's motionless itself, but it gives motion. It's timeless itself, but it gives time."

He stopped there and looked at his companion as if there were nothing more that needed to be said. So eloquent was the satisfied look, so certain was it of Lenard's understanding, that Lenard had to turn away in shame. He was still unsure, or perhaps he was just so stunned that he thought he must be unsure of the meaning of Elijah's words. Inside, he knew perfectly well that he would wake up at night with the truth roaring in his ears, but the sheer wonder of it kept him from verifying that truth right now while he had the chance.

Instead, he asked, "But, then, does anything exist *outside* of this universe that you know?"

"That *we* know—I mean that *we will* know," Elijah amended. "No. There is only the ether."

"Then you don't think there is more than one universe?"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"I know there isn't. There's only one. There is no need for more than one."

"What do you mean by no need?"

Elijah shrugged. "I just know that. I'd have to think a lot longer and look around more before I could explain."

"But you *could* explain?"

"Oh, yes."

Lenard gazed at him, fascinated. How could this be? Could this mind really exist in the body of the small child beside him? But it did, and he was not dreaming.

"You see," the youngster began again, cuddling closer to Lenard in his friendly, childish manner, "the thought of the ether is the center of the universe. And I guess we are all a lot like that thing because each of us thinks of himself as the center of the universe."

"Because we look from the inside out," Lenard supplied.

"That's right," Elijah said. He gave a little sigh of contentment and said nothing more.

But Lenard was not ready to end the conversation.

"And where does all this fit into the continuum?"

Elijah livened up again instantly. In fact, he stared at Lenard with mouth agape and eyes sparkling. "That's another thing," he began eagerly. "Everybody I know wants to close up the circle in the universe—you know, the circle of relationships. Sort of the old idea of the unified field, only more general. How do we make both ends meet? The macrocosmos and the microcosmos go in opposite directions, but where do they come together again? Well, I know where. I can see where. It's in the ether, and I don't know exactly how to explain, but I can try this way. We always take apart matter and look at its parts and say, 'See this? It's important to us. It builds us. It's important to us.' But when you get down to ether, it's different. With the ether, it's a matter of *our* importance to *it*."

"That's very metaphysical," Lenard remarked.

"But it's still true. It makes us, but we also make it." He made a circular motion with his finger. "It's like that old saying: the 'thought which makes the thing which contains the thought.' And from there you get everything. In a way that's Mobius because you always go back to where you started from, and everything has a twist."

"Ergang's accident," Lenard muttered.

"What? What is that, anyway?"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

He explained briefly and Elijah bounced up and down with excitement. "I knew it!" he shouted. "I knew it was in Ergang—I mean the basics. He says a lot of it, but he just doesn't say everything."

"He couldn't see the ether," Lenard replied. "That gives you quite an advantage."

Elijah nodded gravely.

***I am inclined to look at everything
as resulting from designed laws,
with the details . . . left to the
working out of what we may call
chance.***

Darwin

OBERON TOOK A much longer time in orbital survey than he had expected to; the secretaries kept locating new material in a recently installed filing system that was not very well organized. They even unearthed some excellent photographs of Capacian ships. Apparently there had been, in past years, quite a lot of UFO traffic on Algernon Six. However, as with Earth, no Capacian ships had been spotted for about seven years.

He was dismayed to find that an hour and a half had elapsed, but Nimmo was elated. "That means Phil has been having quite a chat with my little pal!" the Orion sang out as the elevator whisked them up to the fourth floor. Oberon had the UFO material in a folder securely under one arm.

When the doors parted, he saw that Elijah and Philip Lenard were approaching from the other end of the hall.

"Phil!" Nimmo called out and dashed exuberantly to meet him. He had been right about his friend being athletic. The coordinator stood over six feet tall, was broad shouldered and blond, and held himself straight-backed and confident.

Elijah was trotting at his side, beaming up at him. Obviously he liked this big, golden man.

Lenard greeted his old friend warmly; there was a lot of laughing and thumping of backs for a moment. Then Nimmo said, "I'd like you to meet my commanding officer, Captain Daniel Oberon."

They shook hands. Oberon said, "Well, Dr. Lenard, how do you feel after talking over the problems of the world with Elijah?"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Lenard laughed. "Scared half out of my skull!" he said, ruffling the boy's hair.

Since they had another hour to kill before lunch, they ended up back in the elevator, headed for the ground floor, where there was a large outdoor patio. During the last hour the storm had skirted the city and was no longer in evidence.

"How've you been?" Lenard asked Nimmo as they found a table and chairs in the sunlight.

"Fine, just fine."

"Unscrambled any good codes lately?"

"No-o. No."

Lenard kept glancing at Oberon, until Oberon became aware that this man was bursting to tell him something, but there seemed to be some difficulty. Either he was merely shy, as Nimmo had said, or else he did not want to say whatever it was in front of Elijah. He also kept glancing at a nearby time panel.

"My kids are due at any moment," he said. "They get three hours in the middle of the day—some lunch break!"

"They didn't have that back in our school days," Oberon put in. "I hear you and Nimmo were roommates."

But Lenard was waving toward a traffitube outlet. "There they are." Two children, a boy and a girl, came running up the lawn, clad in the traditional red-and-blue schoolsuits. He intercepted them and turned them to face the Space Troop men. "This is Kerry and this is John. Captain Oberon, First Officer Christie, and Mascot Elijah—uh—"

"Brandon," Elijah supplied in a whisper and ducked quickly behind Nimmo's chair.

Kerry had noticed him with interest. "Can the little boy come and play, Daddy?"

"Certainly!" Nimmo spoke up instead, but now Elijah was pressing up against him desperately, his eyes imploring.

"No, please, no, Nimmo. No, ple-e-ase!"

But Nimmo was firm. "Go play. Think how happy it'll make Muriat. We'll call you when it's time to leave."

John had fetched a ball from inside the vestibule, and he and Kerry ran off, with Elijah following reluctantly.

"They'll stay in sight," Lenard said. He sat down again

and turned his inquisitive eyes on Oberon. "That's quite a mascot you've got there—"

"Isn't he something!" Nimmo interrupted. "Already asking questions like 'Why can't we know more?' and 'Why are we looking for the Capacians?' And he's only seven. I kinda thought you two would get along!"

Lenard smiled appreciatively at his friend, then turned again to Oberon. "He says he's been seeing ether for two months and six days. How did he get started?"

Oberon was shocked. Then Elijah had been seeing his "dust" ever since the mission began. "We don't really know," he admitted with some embarrassment. "The first one to find out about it was the ship's engineer, Dr. Katherine Sagen, but I haven't been able to pin her down yet. I take it you've been asking Elijah some questions?" He went on to explain about the Dragon's attitude, but Lenard's thoughts seemed to be suddenly elsewhere.

Frowning, he murmured, "Sagen . . . Sagen . . . I'm sure that name is familiar. Oh, yes, didn't she invent the Pathing Device? Yes, I think I met her once at a convention somewhere."

"What did you think of her?" Oberon inquired casually.

Lenard chuckled. "Well, actually I was a little afraid of her!"

"The captain knows what you mean!" Nimmo teased and they laughed, but Lenard was still trying to remember something.

"It seems to me that she impressed me very much at the time—but I can't recall why," he mused. Then he dismissed the matter with a shrug.

The children ran by, kicking the ball. Elijah appeared to be having a good time. Then suddenly he tripped and tumbled into a momentary formlessness of flashing arms and legs. But he lay there giggling, relaxed, his legs crossed as they had fallen and his arms outflung. When the others dashed by, he jumped up again and ran after them.

Nimmo was watching them, a grin on his face, but Oberon's eyes were intent on the philologist.

He began formally: "Dr. Lenard, I feel that you ought to know why I decided to extend this matter to you. To put it very bluntly, this is quite an unusual situation, and one which should be handled by unusual people. You

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

were asked to be a senior officer on this mission; that puts you in that category."

Lenard blushed and looked down at his shoes. "I still wonder if I did the right thing when I turned that down."

Oberon smiled. "As far as my own personal convenience goes, you did," he said. "I have felt a need—a vital need—for an outside opinion on this problem, but my own terrors are beside the point. The point is that it would be best for someone who is not aboard the *Anriahd* to ask Elijah the questions he should be asked."

"Terrors . . ." Lenard studied the man before him with keen attention.

"Yes—terrors," Oberon said. "There is something frightening here, I think, and I would like to know what it is." He could hardly believe that he had said that, when he couldn't even admit that much to the Dragon. He would not look at Nimmo, but kept his gaze on Lenard and didn't drop it when Lenard scrutinized him for a long moment, as if trying to make up his mind about something.

As Lenard looked at the captain of the *Anriahd*, he felt a strong kinship with him that he had never felt with any other human being. It was clear to him from that statement alone that Oberon had a particularly rare intelligence, a way of looking at things that was further-seeing and more thoroughly seeing than that of other people. Lenard had always suspected that he, too, had this kind of intelligence, but he had not been positive until now, when he could so clearly recognize it in another man.

It had not made him a great name in philosophy or metaphysics and never would, because Lenard was not talented in expressing what he felt to those who didn't have his gift. And he realized unhappily that no exclusive rapport would come about now, between himself and Oberon here at this table, because of his own eternally interfering shyness. He had not felt shy alone with Elijah. He would have been fine if he and Oberon were alone. But, unfortunately, Nimmo Christie, though a friend of long standing, did not and never could quite see things the way he did, so poor Nimmo's otherworldly presence was just enough to bring that freezing sensation up through his pores.

As best he could, he tried to tell Oberon what the ether

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

really was. What might have been blurted out in a single sentence was spread through the space of an hour.

"You have on your hands a child who can look at the universe and accurately sense what it is all about—I mean he can sense not only its physics, but also its psychology," he began. "Elijah and I have done . . . a lot of talking about the ether." He stopped, got his bearings. "It seems to me that there are certain laws you learn, certain standards, and the older you get, the more you are apt to regard them as absolute, and the more you must try not to, simply because it often turns out that your most vague, innermost, half-formed feelings about things have more truth in them than the laws you learn. Elijah is—what should I say?—a very special case of being able to get at what's inside. He is terribly close to the ultimate insight, and only because he can turn inward better than we can, and he's found out that thought has it all."

At this point Nimmo looked lost, but Oberon's mind was doing a hasty inventory through all the things he had learned about the boy since the beginning of the mission. He replied, "Elijah said to me once that he thought he was too little to know what he knows."

Lenard nodded. "He contends that we are made of imperfect matter; therefore, we cannot explore our thoughts fully—we cannot find and read the truths of the cosmos that are contained in our subconscious. We will not be able to do this until we develop, through evolution, more senses than we now have. Elijah *has* more senses, other senses, and it turns out that these are telepathic ones. Essentially, he can read the mind of the universe."

All of the laws and standards that Oberon had been taught were ebbing fast. "That's a rather humbling idea," he muttered.

"A rather humbling reality," Lenard asserted. "When you realize how long we have neglected this something else in the building blocks of the cosmos, this other dimension we call consciousness . . . then we run right up against a medium we call ether, and we don't put two and two together. Here you have it as Elijah sees it: essentially, consciousness is a form of matter. The ultimate consciousness is the form that Josef Ergang named ether, the 'new ether.' Gentlemen, we need not search any further."

"But it's just an idea," Nimmo interrupted, his face

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

bleak with concern. From his vantage point as Elijah's guardian and chief companion, it all seemed too vast an importance for his little friend to carry.

But Lenard replied to Oberon, as if Oberon had been the one who had spoken. "It's more than that. It's tangible—I mean Elijah can make it tangible. The supporting technology that Ergang needed in order to explore the ether is just what Elijah has—the ability to see it. The big stumbling block has always been the absence, the total lack, of the visualizable. When you consider that everything has been futile up till now—"

"But Elijah can see the stuff," Oberon repeated. "And I suppose that sooner or later he's going to find out a way to show it to everybody."

"You're absolutely right." Then Lenard repeated Elijah's description of the ether, for every word of it was vivid in his mind. "It exists through itself, and for all, which is itself. Motionless itself, it gives motion. Timeless itself, it gives time. That's abstract, very abstract, if you will. But it also has a certain mathematical flavor about it, and it suggests structure, unity. It's more than Ergang ever said, and still it's only a beginning for Elijah. He recognizes a definite message drifting in the cosmos that is anti-entropic. It seems to want to get life started in an orderly way when it would also seem that life universally tends toward disorder, disintegration. Elijah tells me that this basic creative force, or whatever you wish to call it, is within us rather than external to us. And that brings me to what he has to say about something else—something called indeterminacy."

Oberon winced, but Lenard gave a laugh. "That's all right. It's not as heavy as you think. Look, I'll be very general." He explained carefully: "On our level, common sense tells us that whenever an object is influenced—pushed around—there has to be some kind of physical force responsible for that influence. But an electron is really just a probability with no fixed position, so no such thing as a physical force is necessarily *required* to determine its action. Something else does, and it is something that science has been trying to put a finger on for centuries without success. Elijah thinks he knows what it is, and he says it all comes down again to the ether. At this level—the atomic level—we have always accepted

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

this thing that the layman calls chance and the scientist calls indeterminacy. In a given set of probabilities, one of them occurs, but there has never seemed any way of explaining this except by calling it chance. Well, Elijah says that there is not chance at this level, but an actual determination of which probability among the many will happen. He associates this with the ether. Motionless itself, it gives motion. What he has yet to tell us is how."

Oberon listened to all this with his feelings put aside, as if to make room entirely for the full meaning of what he was being told. But when Lenard stopped he felt his terrors expanding, as if something were slowly exploding inside him. He was aware of many things at once: of the three children playing on the grass, of Nimmo still watching Elijah with amusement that was a little jealous, of the important folder that lay on the table beside him. But one thing impressed him more than anything else. The man who talked to him showed no fear. He could not understand that. He felt that they were very much alike, himself and Lenard. What gap was here?

Lenard was glancing at the time panel again.

"The refectory closes in half an hour. We'd better go if we want some food," he said. Then he called, "Kids! Kids!"

Again he looked at Oberon, his clear eyes always inquisitive, as if he had been asking questions the whole time, instead of giving out answers. "I hope I've told you everything."

Elijah rushed up to them, breathless, flushed. "Do we have to stop now, Nimmo? Do we have to?"

Nimmo laughed. "Had fun, didn't you?"

Kerry, meanwhile, was whispering loudly in her father's ear. "Are you sure he's a mascot? He doesn't know *anything!*"

When the meal was over, Oberon found that their time was up. So Lenard told his children to wait for him in his office while he walked his guests back along the shore path.

The sun was high in the sky and their eyes squinted against the glare of sea and beach and the glinting of the shuttlefield beyond.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Look! Look at all the pretty white stones!" Elijah whooped.

Lenard scooped one up, surveyed it for a minute, then held it high above his golden head, squinting up at it. Purples, blues and pinks passed one into the other.

He handed it to Elijah. "There you are—a souvenir of Algernon Six."

It was time to say good-bye.

"Great seeing you," Nimmo said. They wrung hands firmly.

"Come back again soon, Nimmo." Lenard bent down to Elijah. "And you, too, my little friend."

Elijah nodded solemnly, and he and his Orion companion started toward the shuttlefield, but Lenard's arm detained Oberon.

"Wait. I just have to say one more thing." He paused, his mind working fast, desperate to communicate. He urged, "Sometimes I feel that common sense and logic aren't there at all—that they really are, if you will, something we make up to defend us from our fears. We are strange creatures; we love knowledge, but we also fear it. Common sense—it keeps us looking courageous on the outside. It reduces everybody's point of view to conformity. It's like a sugar coating over something you might not want to accept. Don't go by it. What can I say—try to get away from making sense out of something? I don't know exactly how to express this . . . but the feeling is here in me, and I think it must be in you, too, or else I'm just—just wrong, stranded on an illusion."

Oberon did not want to go. Everything in him fought against leaving this man now, for he still wasn't satisfied. There wasn't time enough ever, it seemed, for two people to think and talk together, to discuss and settle the most important things.

All he could do was say, "You're not stranded on an illusion, my friend." He gripped Lenard's shoulder, shook his hand, smiled.

"Thank you."

"That's all right."

Oberon turned to go, but above the roar of surf and ocean breeze Lenard called after him. "The end of the road is in sight," he said.

Oberon went back to the shuttle, his heart racing.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Lenard returned quickly to his office, chased his kids into the hall and, standing at the window, waited for the shuttle to depart.

As he watched, a terrible temptation came over him, one which was a physical tugging and pulling at his whole soul. He wanted to go with them. For an instant his imagination forsook all else that was dear and important to him. What mattered, really, but Elijah? What was a wife, children, a single man's life in time? Everybody who had any reason for living was only waiting for the moment of truth that lay ahead, so near.

Lenard had been gripping the sill, his whole body wire-tight. Slowly he looked down at his whitened knuckles and a fierce shame flooded through him, bringing with it irony and a kind of basic relief. There was one place left inside him that could never be entirely committed to that urge. That place was filled and alerted by a sudden call.

"Daddy!"

Lenard turned away and went to find his children.

On transport deck Dr. Edwards awaited the returning shuttles from Algernon Six. Technicians reported for duty and fanned out across the deck to prepare the shuttle ports, a routine which usually did not call for supervision from the chief engineer.

Sagen's presence came as a cold squeeze on his senses. When he turned abruptly and saw her, she was looking straight at him. She glanced away almost immediately.

The Dragon ducked through the control room entrance and then stopped himself with an effort of will, staring at her through a fog of uncertainty. He alternately tensed and weakened, then drew in a long breath to steady himself. It had been so many years since the Beta Colony assignment. Back then, like right now at this moment, she had barely existed on the periphery of his hopes, and he still felt crazily as if he did not dare to acknowledge her, even though nothing had ever happened between them.

He had seen her for the first time on this mission in the projection-room conference before Ayhill Seven, but there had not been the faintest trace of recognition in her looks or brief words, not even when he had spoken to her. She was as cold and changeless as rock.

Woodenly, he moved to follow the serenely retreating

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

form until he caught up with her at the control banks.

"Kate," he said softly.

She flipped a switch without replying. On a screen nearby the three returning shuttles shimmered into view through the haze of atmosphere.

"It's been a long time, Kate," continued the gentle undertone from above her head. "Would it—would it greatly inconvenience you if I stopped by for a visit now and then? We've—some old times to talk about."

"Do you not find your work sufficiently absorbing, Doctor?" She moved past banked screens and panels to the exit, pausing here and there to make some slight adjustment. He remained, stooping, at her side, until she brushed past him and through the exit, leaving him alone.

The noise of the incoming shuttles distracted him at last. He waited until the deck pressurized after their entry, then went out with Benson and the others. Personnel swarmed by, refreshed, their individual tasks completed. Nimmo passed him, also, with Elijah riding on his shoulders.

"Obi—" the Dragon called out.

But the captain drifted by without seeing or hearing him.

An unusual sight on the deck—one bulletin board attracted the attention of everyone who passed between the helm and the rest of the ship. Shyla and Will Benson happened to spot it when traffic was light, and there was no one else present to see the shocked recognition that burst across the young transport officer's face.

"Hey, sis—what are—where did these come from?" His features almost touched the photographs as he scanned them intensely.

"That's the UFO material from Algernon Six," Shyla explained. "The captain tacked them up hours ago. They're all of Capacian ships. Aren't they good?"

Benson continued to study them with agitation. He had turned pale.

"What's the matter?" Shyla murmured, staring at her brother.

"These—these are really good! These are the best I've ever seen! There are details here that have never been recorded before—at least not in any pictures I've ever

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

been shown!" he expostulated, but there was an odd pitch of frenzy in his voice, as if he were trying desperately to explain something.

"Sis, do you remember that field trip we made to Vicarus when we were kids in the elementary forms?"

"When you fell down the hill? Yes."

"Do you remember the alert they sent out because I saw a ship that was unaccounted for?"

Gradually, Shyla understood him and her eyes widened. "But it was just a survey ship you saw—"

He shook his head violently. "No, it wasn't. I've never seen any pictures of Capacian ships as good as these. Sis, it was one of these I saw."

"Are you sure?" she gasped.

"Of course I'm sure. I'm so sure that I'm scared now, because they did something to me and I still can't remember what. But I can remember the light—the terrible light. It was like fire! See how this ship seems to glitter, even in the photograph? Well, it looked just like that. I had to cover my eyes. And remember when they questioned me afterward? That's the shape, with no fuel pods, no portholes."

Shyla was struggling to remember the circumstances. "They did question you," she said slowly. "And the questioning was done at the control center—and it was taped! Will, it would be in your PD!"

He nodded excitedly, but underneath he was afraid. The Capacians. He could recall now that they had made a hole in the back of his hand, a tiny, neat, fast-healing puncture. What could they have wanted with him, an anonymous Ayhillian child, one who would grow up to be an inconsequential junior officer in the Space Troop? What had they done to him?

"We'll look at your PD!" his sister cried. "Maybe there's something more that we don't remember! Maybe we can figure out what happened." She was running away from him, down the corridor toward an elevator.

Puzzled and alarmed, he turned automatically and followed her.

***For what can anyone look for when there
is nothing to which he can still go on?***

Plotinus

OBERON LAY FACE down on his bunk. His body was absolutely still; not even his fingers moved. But his mind was so turbulent that it was all he could do to hold himself down. Rest would not come.

Ether. Ergang's "new" ether. This was being perceived by a human being. Would anyone else know what that meant?

It meant violent change. It meant that the philosophy of mankind could be shaken overnight to its deepest cosmic roots, depending on what Elijah revealed. Depending on what he revealed, the world for all walks of life in all parts of the League could be plunged into obsolescence. It meant crisis everywhere, in everything. A sudden, vast ripping aside of mystery—who would need the Capacians? Financial crisis—who would need any more space missions? Who would need the Institute? Worst of all, it meant the violent emotional reaction of a whole world on the rebound from a severe intellectual shock.

If anything could end the world suddenly, short of a supernova, that certainly could.

Was he the only one who was terrified? Shouldn't he be terrified?

He thought of Lenard standing there and saying so coolly, "The end of the road is in sight."

Lenard knew. It had been there in his eyes, that knowing, but it hadn't seemed to disturb him. Or was he sweating it out at last, now that there had been time enough to let the full implication sink in?

If indeed the end of the road was in sight, then Elijah Brandon possessed the ability to answer all questions, every one of them.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Could he imagine life without questions? Oberon tried and could not. Statistically speaking, he was a very well-educated man, one who had been given all the advantages that existed in the field of learning. He had been taught by great men to revere other great men of the past and present. Yet when he thought back, it seemed that so much of the time and effort of the great men he had known was spent on formlessness, shapelessness, lack of substance—in one word, the abstract. Because they asked why they lived, where life was going, why it had begun, they were great. Because they wondered about things that transcended rationalization, their theories were considered, their books read, their biographies written, and they left behind them a gigantic incentive for others to go on in their place.

If this incentive no longer existed, it would extinguish great men.

Possibility is bait for greatness, he thought. Uncertainty is the relish of life. What would life be like without these two things?

Could his philosophy be so far wrong? Or did men like Lenard have no philosophy at all? Were they just puppets, operating as they were conditioned and expected to operate? But that could not be. The people on this ship were great men, great women. *They* had been chosen to ask the Capacians the very same questions that had established philosophy.

Again he thought back over the history of the ether, and Ergang's ornery halfwayness concerning it. Leave such men to their profound insights, Oberon had always believed. They are capable of handling the full meaning of what they have discovered.

But he could not help feeling that something like the ether was not for all men to know, when even Josef Ergang had refused to touch it.

But there was something else that was frightening him.

Oberon flopped over on his back and stared morosely up at the softly lit ceiling. There was something else that he could not define, a feeling that had no shape and substance—an abstract waiting to become tangible. It had been his real motive in consulting Philip Lenard—to find out what *else* he was afraid of, but Lenard had not clarified anything else for him except the ether matter.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Really, these fears he was experiencing now had been troubling him ever since the day Nimmo found out that Elijah could see the ether. They had merely expanded, as his knowledge of the ether had expanded.

Still, there was something else.

Rising stiffly, he went to wash his face and stared wryly at the dissipated caricature in the mirror. His knees were buckling with fatigue. Exhaustion made his stomach sour and his body heavy and unreal, but sleep was impossible, and he was not hungry, either. All these grim thoughts—perhaps they were just signs that the demands of this particular captaincy were slowly telling on his stamina. Perhaps all he needed was diversion, some time at the monitorials or browsing in the tape library.

He washed his face, shook off his thoughts and reported to the helm.

He never got there. As he passed the projection room, certain muted noises brought him to a halt. Curious, he decided to investigate. It sounded like the typical soundtrack of a PD. Who would the Dragon be reviewing now?

The door slid open, revealing a sight that stopped him cold.

On the screen was Elijah Brandon—it could not be anyone else—at about two years of age, pushing a child's go-cart across an Institute floor.

His gaze was riveted on the viewing seats and hot anger surged through him.

"Benson!"

Young Benson and his sister whirled with startled faces.

This was the final aggravation. "Who gave you permission to review Mascot Brandon's PD?" Oberon demanded hotly. It was an established rule that only senior officers had license to scan the PD capsules of their crewmates.

Shyla gave a nervous giggle and popped a hand over her mouth as her brother explained, "Sir, you don't understand. This isn't Brandon's PD—it's my own."

"What?" Oberon glanced back at the screen, his anger ebbing, confusion filling in. This time he saw plainly that it was not Elijah—and yet it was. It was Elijah in the wrong time and place, with all the wrong people.

It was now Elijah at the age of three, wearing civilian

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

clothes that he could never have worn, running from person to person in a strange family group, with a little girl of about six romping along beside him.

Benson pushed a button, the tape flashed forward and there was Elijah at ten, sitting in a classroom with a lot of other children, all clad in uniform red-and-blue. But he was doing something that he would never do; he was playing enthusiastically with a toy robot on his desk.

"Go back, Will," Shyla directed. "It was before this."

They did not actually ignore Oberon, but kept glancing at him while they worked the tricky mechanism, as if silently entreating him not to interfere just yet.

But Oberon was too baffled and amazed to think of interfering now. He was fascinated by what he was seeing on the screen.

"There! There it is!" They both strained forward in their seats.

On the screen, the little boy—Will Benson at eight—was sitting on the examining table in some kind of infirmary. The arm of a perplexed medic supported his back, and a pretty, middle-aged woman, wearing the garb of an Institute instructor, hovered anxiously nearby.

Two officials were questioning the boy, who appeared drowsy and confused, as if just awakened from a drugged sleep.

"What did it look like, sonny?"

"It was . . . bright. Bright. It hurt my eyes," the boy whined. He was fretful, close to tears.

"Can't you describe it better than that?"

"No, I can't remember. Oh, it didn't have any fuel pods. No portholes . . . it sounded like a choir singing."

That was all that came over clearly. There was sporadic talk, garbled on the soundtrack. Abruptly, the picture changed to a series of shots of Benson, still the same age, running up and down in a gymnasium with some other boys.

"What's this all about?" Oberon questioned when Benson stopped the tape.

"We don't exactly know ourselves, Captain." Shyla smiled helplessly. "We were just trying to find a little extra data on something that happened to Will when he was a child."

"I see." Oberon knew that his face did not betray a

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

single vestige of his shock. It had been trained not to, just as he had been trained not to give in to the impulse that might have sent him running, whooping, to the Dragon with the news. Here was something of profound importance—he sensed it thoroughly. It was a development that might help to solve the mystery of Elijah. In what way he could not guess, but it was certain to end up another closely guarded, confidential matter. The priority now was to keep the Bensons innocent of all this. They must not become any more alerted than they already were.

So he gave them a casual smile and remarked to Shyla, “I’m sorry I didn’t pay more attention to your tale, Miss Benson. You’re certainly right about your brother resembling our mascot.”

“Oh, that’s all right, Captain. It’s just a strange coincidence, I guess.”

Will reached out to remove the cassette from its slot, but Oberon said, “Never mind that, Benson. I’ll take care of it later.”

Shyla arose with a knowing smile and a toss of the head. “Go ahead, Captain. Have a look at some more of it if you want to see your mascot grow up before your eyes.”

And that was exactly what he was about to see, Oberon truly believed.

The Bensons left to go to lunch.

As soon as they were gone, he went to the telecom and buzzed the Dragon’s lab. “Dragon! Can you step down to the projection room for a little while? There’s something here you ought to see.”

*His disgrace is to be called boy,
But his glory is to subdue men.*

Shakespeare

OBERON LEFT THE Dragon glued to the projection room screen and reported for duty quite late. An hour later he was summoned, urgently, to Edwards' lab.

There the Dragon oscillated in slow motion between two screens of his research console. The slow, hulking movements of his tall body could not disguise his excitement. The gray hair hung in strands over eyes which gleamed feverishly.

"Look at these, Obi! Just look at these!"

On each screen was a computerized diagram containing groups of letters and number-symbols that Oberon could dimly remember from biology tapes.

"What are they?"

"The DNA codes of Will Benson and Elijah Brandon." The Dragon talked almost rapidly. "I've still got samples of their blood on file from the last investigation I made—the Ayhillian factor, remember? So I did a DNA scan on both of them—after seeing Benson's PD, I just had to—and Obi, it's the final analysis; it's all that's needed. Their genetic codes match each other perfectly. Obi, Benson and Brandon are exactly the same person."

There was a long, tense silence. The two men looked at each other, and at the screens.

"But that's impossible," Oberon said tonelessly.

The Dragon slapped the countertop with his hand. "I'm tired of hearing about how impossible things are!" he declared. "Elijah's physical characteristics are impossible. It's really impossible for him to have the brain he has. Now this is impossible. Obi, it's time we stopped talking

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

about how impossible things are and started deciding on how they just might *be* possible.”

“All right, then. How is this possible?”

The Dragon stated, “Elijah Brandon has to be a clone.”

Oberon found himself laughing half-hysterically. “A clone!” He did not know what he had been expecting, but he hadn’t expected this. He stumbled to his feet, laughing, inexplicably beyond control.

A sudden, violent blow slammed him into the bulkhead, and the breath left his body in a painful wrench. Unbelieving, he tried to stare at his chief medic, but he saw only spinning lights, his shoulder numb where the Dragon had hit him. Floundering between shock and understanding, Oberon shook his head to clear it and reached out toward his friend. The extended arm was seized in a jarring grip. He was pulled in against the indifferent fiber of the lab coat and was held, his head and neck uncomfortably pinned in the Dragon’s arms so that he could not look up and see his expression.

After a moment the Dragon spoke. “I’m sorry, Obi,” he said listlessly.

Oberon extricated himself and moved to a chair. The Dragon had merely caught him with the back of his hand, but his strength, that of a seven-foot Draconian, was always unexpected. He stood there slouching, chagrined and breathing hard.

“I’m sorry, Obi,” he repeated doggedly. “But this isn’t funny and I’m not joking. Elijah has to be a clone.”

Oberon recovered himself quickly. “But he can’t be. They certainly don’t have the same brain.”

The Dragon dropped to a stool. “I know. That’s what I don’t understand. Elijah’s genes—the same genes as Benson’s, remember—call for a brain exactly like Benson’s. But the fact is that he hasn’t got that brain. So I referred to the imprint that I made before of Elijah’s brain and I had the computer scan the DNA code of its cells. Normally, the DNA is the same in all of a body’s cells except the sex cells, but not with Elijah. He has one genetic code in the cells of his body and another code in the cells of his brain.”

“So he won’t pass on the characteristics of his brain to any offspring, will he?” Oberon mused, rubbing his shoul-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

der absently. "If the rest of his cells contain the DNA for a brain like Benson's, then that is what his offspring will get." He stared at his friend. "Then Elijah's brain doesn't even belong in his head! It couldn't have developed there naturally."

"No, it could not have," the Dragon declared heavily. He waited a moment, as if to give Oberon more time to reflect on the fact. Then he said, "I think he has a Capacian brain inside his skull."

"That can't be proved," Oberon returned mildly. By now he was past being shocked by anything.

"No, it cannot—certainly not until we find the Capacians themselves and make a few accusations. But I've got a definite reason for my theory, and it's a reason that you might even accept as proof. When you called me on the PD matter, I didn't go through the whole tape—that would have taken too long. I simply backtracked a little along the section the Bensons had just been viewing. It dealt with something rather mysterious that happened to Will when he was eight years old. I couldn't get much from the tape, so I read the auxiliary text for further information. It seems his class went to Vicarus for a field trip and he strayed away from the group. He was found half-conscious at the bottom of a fairly steep incline, but he had been drugged—at least it appeared that way—not struck on the head. He was able to report having seen a strange ship, and the text says he insisted he had been inside it—"

"Yes, yes. I saw that segment, too," Oberon said. "But I didn't read the text. Go on." He listened eagerly as the Dragon continued.

"Well, something had been done to him. He had been drugged in an untraceable way, and there was a small, neat puncture on the back of his hand, not a likely injury for someone who has fallen down a hill. He *had* fallen, but the slope was grassy, and he sustained no bruises or abrasions. The officials at the Vicarus control center tried to find out more about the ship, but there were no survey ships on duty in the area, and the boy simply couldn't remember very much about it except two important items—it had no fuel pods or portholes. And it glowed. Only Capacian ships look like that. The boy couldn't have

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

made it up. Except in unusual cases like Elijah's, you aren't told any details about the Capacians until you're a senior in the Institute. But that's not all I have to report. Listen to this. I hunted up Benson at the refectory just now for a little chat—nothing more than passing the time of day. In the course of things, I mentioned the incident and he got all excited. He said that he had just seen the photos you posted and realized for the first time that he had, in fact, been involved with a Capacian ship—”

“Those are the most excellent pictures we've had yet,” Oberon admitted.

“He went on to say that he had almost forgotten about it until he saw those pictures. He intends to tell you about it, too, but he wanted to talk it over with Shyla first. So, you see, that's why they were looking at his PD. They wanted to see if there was any other information on record that might shed some new light on the whole thing.”

Oberon was silent for a moment. He thought of their mission, of the photographs, of the little hypermentality on his way to the Capacians. “Well, the puzzle seems to be falling together,” he said. But he still couldn't guess what the final picture would be.

“Do you think Benson will figure this out?” he asked warily.

“No, I don't think there's any danger of that. He probably doesn't even know what cloning is.”

Oberon knew. But then his curriculum had been much broader than Benson's.

Cloning was the art of producing duplicate life forms. To clone was to produce a genetically identical copy of any organism you wished to replicate. An individual cell, of any type, was taken from the original organism, placed in a certain kind of nutritive medium, then stimulated until it began to divide, form clusters and then differentiate into other types of cells until, ultimately, a full-scale replica of the original organism was created. Through decades, League scientists had applied the method in only one direction. They often cloned the primitive life forms and small animals they needed for lab experiments, rather than endanger species by constantly removing them from their natural environment.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

But the cloning method used by the Capacians in producing Elijah was one that League scientists had never pursued for many reasons, most of them ethical. It followed the same basic pattern as that of the lab animals, but it was, of course, much more complicated because a much more complicated life form was involved.

It was already clear that the Capacians had chosen Benson as the model for their project, and had collected his skin cells—a puncture large enough to be noticed would mean that they had taken quite a few. They must have had some adequate way of preserving them until the next stage in the game. That had come years later when, somehow, the Capacians removed one of Mrs. Brandon's egg cells and destroyed its central, gene-containing core—its nucleus. Then the nucleus from one of Will Benson's skin cells had been inserted in its place. This egg cell, with its impostor-nucleus, was then placed in whatever nutritive medium the Capacians had devised for the process, and caused to divide, and so forth. In six days' time it would have been ready for implantation—a fetus in progress. Somehow it had ended up inside Mrs. Brandon.

“But the brain . . . how could they accomplish that—they did endow him with a Capacian brain?” Oberon wondered. He stared past his brooding chief medic, compelled to study the gleaming DNA codes, although they told him nothing.

The Dragon shook his head. “I don't know. I presume they have some method of grafting a different brain into the developing fetus—after cleanly removing the one that was already there. But whatever they did, it's pretty intimate cell business—fantastically intimate . . . some technique of microsurgery beyond my wildest dreams. Why, if we could do things like that—we wouldn't have epileptics like Nimmo, or any other problems.”

“Maybe we'd have a set of completely different problems,” Oberon commented, scratching his head. “Are you sure Benson won't find out about this? I don't want it all over the ship—not yet, anyway.”

“Well, I certainly don't intend to tell him,” the Dragon said. “This whole business is best kept classified information, until the Council decides how it should be handled,

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

or the Capacians decide for us. In the meantime, we will have to make up our own minds about how to handle it—”

“I don’t like what you said about the Capacians deciding for us,” Oberon countered with sudden vehemence. “They will decide nothing for us. This may have been their doing originally, but as far as I can see, they’ve turned their little project over to us. Their influence will not be magnified, especially since they seem to go along with the idea. They didn’t ask us to bring their boy for a visit.”

“That’s true. At least it seems that way to us,” the Dragon said.

“What do you mean by that?”

But it was a superfluous question. The Dragon replied, “Do we really know what is going on, Obi? Do we really know what we are getting into?”

“No, we do not.”

“Then anything is possible. Anything is possible.”

The Dragon stared ahead silently for a moment, then changed the subject. “Of course, this whole thing opens up intriguing new fields of study for me—if I were free to pursue them. For instance, where do you draw the line between Benson’s nervous system and Elijah’s brain? That’s something I’d really like to find out.”

“You won’t do it on my order.”

The Dragon took on a patient, resigned expression. “Sometimes I wish you were a medical man, Obi.”

But, doubts and terrors aside, Oberon was wondering about Elijah with a mixture of pity and awe. What would it feel like to be a clone? If someday Elijah were told about this, would he feel that he had any parents? What would his attitude toward Benson be? Toward his creators? What kind of identity would he have?

But, then, perhaps Elijah would never be informed. That would be entirely up to the Council.

As far as this mission was concerned, had anything really been changed?

Oberon gave a vague wave of his hand. “After all, Dragon, what difference does it all really make?”

The Dragon looked at him impatiently. “A lot if you attribute his precision drawing and microscopic eyes to a Capacian brain,” he said.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"We don't know that for sure," Oberon stressed imploringly. "We don't know that for sure!" But a question was running through his mind in endless repetition.

Then, why had the Capacians cloned Elijah?

***Though this truth is inexplicable,
it demands belief.***

Anselm

THE DRAGON HAD neatly explained one of the most puzzling mysteries aboard the *Anriahd*—why Elijah Brandon resembled Will Benson so closely. The resemblance was not perfect, of course. There was still the unexplained substitution of the alien brain, with a different DNA code in its cells. In all probability, the boy did have a Capacian brain, but Oberon could not accept that yet. It simply could not be verified.

But the other minor differences in their physiques were due to the fact that Elijah and Will Benson had been carried in different wombs and had grown up in radically different environments.

For the next few days following his council with the Dragon, Oberon spent most of his free time in the projection room studying Benson's PD, fascinated by what he saw and by what it meant.

In particular, he watched whatever glimpses he could get of the Bensons' parents, for they, not the Brandons, were Elijah's true parents, his genetic source. Oberon simply couldn't get over this fact. This heavysset, half-Ayhillian man was Elijah's father. This short, plump, twinkly eyed woman was his mother. Shyla was his genetic sister, and he would grow up into another copy of Will Benson—an almost-perfect copy.

Oberon went about his duties tense and preoccupied. He did not make mistakes in his calculations, or forget to order course adjustments and monitorial reports. He found that he could concentrate on these things with half his mind, while the ether matter, the cloning matter and the Capacian matter consumed the rest of him.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Three days later he suddenly found himself wandering, as if in a trance, through the entrance to engineering. It was as if he had maneuvered in a daze, and for a second he did not really know where he was. Dismayed at his state of mind, he searched the bulkhead for a time panel, trying to recollect where he had been going and why. This was no way to run a starship.

But he was somewhat relieved when he saw that he was off duty. Then he remembered. Sagen. Of course, Sagen.

He looked around. There were several technicians on top of the mammoth power units, fulfilling the monthly duty of lubrication, but it was not anything that Sagen had to supervise. She was, as usual, sitting bent over her work, in her office on his right.

Oberon went to the open door and peered in, hoping to arouse her attention without speaking. Her office was undecorated and bare except for the essentials of work. Her starport was closed off.

He waited, but she did not look up. At last he cleared his throat and said, "Sagen."

Her head snapped up and she replied in her husky voice, "Yes?"

"I need to talk to you."

Her gaze met his and it seemed as if something had turned on a light behind her eyes. He could almost hear the switch. She regarded him steadily for a moment, then resumed her work. As she spoke to him, she made tiny computations on a tape dummy she was preparing for the ship's log. His presence did not interfere.

"I've been expecting you," she said. There was a moment of silence. Then she asked, "Do you really think that you have to talk to me?"

It seemed a strange thing to ask. He stood wondering, gave an uncertain nod and finally said in a resolute voice, "Yes. I have a few questions to ask you." He stepped off the sensor mat and the door closed behind him.

She still did not invite him to sit, so he boldly hauled over a chair and sat down so close that his knees were almost touching her. He found himself gazing intently at the gray cloud of hair, at the craggy, but fully womanish profile that had never offered the slightest hint of the person behind it.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Sagen had a peculiar lack of expression. He could remember her, back in his Institute days, silently questing from student to student as they bent industriously, slaving almost, over their work. He could recall that, whenever a feeling of any sort crept into her face, something inside her always neutralized it, as if a fist had reached up and closed upon it.

He drew back slightly when she glanced up again, expressionless, yet stiffly attentive.

"I suppose you've been reviewing your philosophy of life very carefully these last few weeks?" she inquired matter-of-factly.

Alerted, he gave a guarded reply. "I didn't come to you to talk about philosophy."

"Really, Daniel? Very well. Say what you intend to say, and we shall see what we end up talking about."

This was annoying, yet not entirely uncalled for, and that perplexed him. Finally, he cast forbearance aside and said shortly, "Sagen, what's going on around here? Sometimes I feel like the victim of some chronic practical joke—"

"Sit down," she directed, for he was standing again. She flung her stylus aside and then said in a more tranquil voice, "Yes, I suppose you do feel that way at times."

Oberon decided to begin at the beginning, if it was the beginning.

"Why did you tell Elijah to keep the ether a secret?"

"Do you think it's entirely a good thing that he is seeing it?" she returned coolly.

"I'm not asking you that!" he almost shouted.

Sagen watched him for a moment. Then, to his surprise, she settled back in her chair and, without preliminaries, launched into what he thought was a tangent of some kind meant to divert him. But he soon changed his mind.

"In this world and at this time," she proceeded, "the scientist is distressed in his work. He is distressed to find that the conclusion he has reached about the matter he is studying is not the essence of that matter, but a reflection of himself. Man cannot get out of himself to be completely objective." She fingered the tape dummy and groped through her tools for a container. "There seems to be no way that man can escape from throwing a shadow

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

of himself on all that he studies. You need an eye that transcends self, the vantage point for truth and reality—the all-seeing eye. Some people have it to a slight degree, very slight. But what you need is the real thing. The child has it. He needed only to be shown how to use it.”

Oberon stared at her incredulously. “You mean you—you *showed* him how to do it?”

She nodded gravely. “I did.”

“But what—what did you—how did you know? How did you know that he—”

She cut him off brusquely. “Why do you think the Capacians gave you Elijah?”

It was too much. He could hardly keep his own questions straight. How could she know what had been going on between himself and the Dragon? She’s trying to trap me, he supposed, although he couldn’t begin to guess why, or what her involvement here was, so he answered promptly: “Who mentioned Capacians? I’m talking about the boy.”

“Don’t play games with me, Daniel,” she replied. “By now you have discovered that Elijah can see ether; you know what the ether is; and you have just found out that Elijah was cloned by the Capacians from the body of your transport officer, Will Benson.”

No, there was certainly no point in playing games with Sagen. Apparently, he was going to have no choice but to be honest with her.

“All right. But we can’t prove it’s true.”

“You don’t need proof, Daniel. It’s true.”

“How can you be so sure? Why should I believe you?”

“Because I am a Capacian.”

Oberon said nothing and sat in silence, the victim of a slow, gripping impact. She watched him and waited, her bony hands clasped in her lap.

In repose she looked much less formidable than when she stood over her controls, her elbows held out from her sides, as if in readiness for some sudden, violent action. She was a tall woman with a strange way of standing, almost as if she were about to spring at you; it was something her students always mimicked. It made her seem threatening. Oberon realized that his mind was running away with him.

His thoughts spun dizzily back to the present. Here he

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

was sitting in a chair staring tongue-tied at an elderly woman. He felt victimized and somehow ridiculous, while in the pit of his stomach a peculiar sensation hardened to a tight, cold knot.

"That's hardly like you, Sagen. You've never been very good at jokes." The boldness of his words seemed to unleash something inside him, which he discovered was fury and outrage. He flushed darkly. "No, Sagen, you're not funny."

Sagen did not turn her head or change her position. She continued to gaze at him without responding, waiting him out.

He stood up and kicked back the chair, quivering inside. "A Capacian? You're a Capacian?"

Still, she neither moved nor answered.

"Supposing it's true. Then why—" he thundered. "Why are you telling me now? Do you realize where we are, Sagen? We're halfway to Telphon 281. We've come all this way, and spent all this money and time and effort, and I'm supposed to believe that?"

Her gaze followed him as he strode back and forth. At last she replied solidly, "You will believe me. If you don't now, you soon will."

"But why, why?" he kept muttering. "Why? And where's proof? Is there proof?"

"The proof is in the code," she said.

He froze. Of course, the code. Invariably, he forgot to include the Capacian Code in the puzzle that was gradually unfolding, probably because so far it had contributed nothing toward solving any mysteries. It had not yet figured in. It had not yet been deciphered.

"Then the code is connected to all this?" he queried. There was no point in pretending the whole thing was a dream now.

Sagen replied, "Yes. You will discover that the code has everything to do with this. All of the proof that you say you need will be there when you solve it. It is all there, I believe."

As Oberon stood and looked at her, he allowed a long silence to come between them. His memory was taking him back to Algernon Six and Lenard's eager face and urgent words: *What can I say . . . try not to make sense out of something?* No, he meant the ether. He could have

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

had no inkling of this. All of this was going to make sense, Oberon hoped, and yet his soul revolted against what he was being told; he did not want to accept it. Why? Because it seemed such a dastardly interference in what he felt should be the ideal order of things: gliding through space on a productive mission, locating the Capacians, learning much, returning home. His sense of operations was violated foremost—even before he felt the fear, the terrible resurgent fear—and it was from this violation that his first reactions sprang.

“Could you translate the code?”

“Probably not.”

“What do you mean by that?”

She pointed to his chair. “Sit down, Daniel, and let me explain something to you.” He threw himself down again and listened helplessly as she went on.

“You see, I am a Capacian—I think of myself as a Capacian—and yet I am a Terran at the same time. You are probably wondering how this can be. You were shocked when I revealed my true identity, weren’t you? But part of your shock came from having always expected Capacians to be a different form of life from *Homo sapiens*. You couldn’t bring yourself to believe that a Capacian could be so like yourself. Well, I am a creation rather like Elijah, but much more completely an artificial thing. It is this way; I was chosen for one duty, which I have now done. When I was chosen for it, my Capacian body was destroyed, including my brain. All that remained of me was some of my consciousness: a collection of fragmented memories, ways of thinking, attitudes and a few vague scraps of the technology I had formerly known. A new body—a Terran one—was created for me, even with a complete set of artificial genes. Then, what was left of my consciousness was absorbed by the Terran brain, and I became a functioning Terran, but with a consciousness that remembered another life—somewhat—and was convinced of a duty which must someday be performed.”

“Which was to make Elijah see the ether,” Oberon concluded.

She nodded.

“So you don’t remember everything,” he mused. “And you can’t translate the code?”

“Even if I could, I would not.”

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Why?" he demanded.

"Because I am that wise. You must allow it to be solved in a manner that will really convince you that this is no practical joke, as you put it. It must be solved in a way that has nothing to do with me."

"Nimmo," he surmised.

Her lips twisted thoughtfully as she regarded her work again. "Or another way."

"What?"

"You will see."

He had reached a dead end, and he knew it. "It had better answer a lot of questions, and soon," he concluded sternly. Again, Sagen turned to him with eyes of outrageous acuity, vision that seemed to pierce through to his innermost thoughts, that seemed to strip away his reserves and defenses and find him at the core a timid and doubting creature, aimless, uncertain and insecure.

Huskily, she inquired, "Do you know what your questions really are? What is the purpose of life? What is the most effective way to organize society? What is real justice? Truth? Beauty? What should you worship? How should you live?"

Her words stabbed his mind. He could only shake his head mutely, and she spoke again before he could compose any reply.

"Have you thought about what life would be like if there were no more questions left to answer—not one?"

Oberon nodded weakly and found his voice. "Yes, I have. I can't imagine it."

"Could you, perhaps, imagine a people so highly advanced that all other peoples in the universe are inferior to them, so highly evolved that their perceptions are perfect and they can view freely the whole of reality and truth?"

Oberon sighed and shook his head helplessly. "That's too hard to imagine."

"But possible?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose it's possible."

She smiled slightly. She seemed to be leading him along. "Can you imagine that such a society might choose to die rather than enslave any other society?"

"Why should it have to enslave any other society?"

"Suppose all other worlds were so primitive in com-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

parison that it would have to enslave them if it tried to live with them, or was forced to live near them."

"That's an unbelievable gap."

"But consider it. Suppose some great natural disaster were about to destroy this society's whole world, and there was nowhere else in the universe for them to go where they could be out of contact with these lesser worlds. Don't you think such a society might choose to die?"

Oberon began to sweat profusely. He was appalled. "What are you saying?"

Silent again, she kept her inscrutable profile turned toward him, and he could obtain no hints from her face. At last she said slowly, "It's just something to think about."

"Are you talking about the Capacians?" He was not stupid or blind, so he plunged ahead into the obvious conclusion. "Does this have anything to do with why Elijah was cloned?"

Unfairly, she seemed to have ended her talk.

He leaned toward her, as if to break the intolerable barrier between them. "Why don't you just tell me everything? I have a right to know. I'm captain of this ship. I'm in charge of this mission. Why don't you just—just tell me—"

Sagen was shaking her head, allowing the silence to grow until Oberon's suspense was almost a physical agony.

"Sagen," he implored.

Her eyes confronted him, direct, penetrating, two steady lights on tranquil grayness. A furtive smile drew the shadows of her face into new channels.

"It's an experiment," she said.

"What?" he whispered.

"An experiment," she said in a low, intense voice. "What do you want? What is it that you want? You have come on this mission to find that out for your whole world, and you are going to find it out, whether you locate the Capacians or not—you are going to find it out."

"It was then that Oberon suddenly knew his other fear. He could face it now and call it by name. It was a thing that had suggested itself to him in such a way that he had refused to believe his senses, and he had therefore not been able to know why he was afraid. It was this: Elijah was the living, breathing embodiment of purpose, a deliberate, active purpose. Purpose radiated from the child; it

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

glared from his records, it manifested itself in every move he made, in every new thing he proved prematurely capable of doing. Why had no one else recognized this? Because people no longer liked to think in terms of cosmic purpose. No one liked to look at something or someone and ask: "What is the purpose of this existence?" Yet, ironically, it was the most urgent question behind and within all of the thousands who sought the Capacians.

Once again, Oberon felt himself standing beside Paiselle at the departure banquet, and once again he could see the wistful and determined look in the commodore's eyes as he said: *Perhaps they can tell us why we live.*

Thou art the man.

2 Samuel 12:7

ALONE IN HEADQUARTERS, Nimmo was putting in another futile hour with the Capacian Code.

At the helm, Oberon stared over the shoulder of his first officer's station replacement at the paneled layout of the monitorial. His eyes passed over the running channels of color-coded buttons and keys again and again, glancing aimlessly from highlight to highlight on the small, busy screens. It was healthier—and less noticeable to others, he had discovered—than staring at a blank wall or off into empty space, for something important would usually catch his eye and catapult him back to reality.

With Elijah close at hand, he found it difficult, and impossible at times, to be aware of anything but the whole Capacian dilemma, as he privately termed it. The boy was behind him now, working at the field-coordinate grid with a protractor and being tutored by Benson, who took spellbound pleasure in associating with his junior look-alike. That he was Elijah's duplicate and genetic host had not occurred to him and probably never would, according to the Dragon. But seeing them together always disturbed Oberon.

He wondered how Benson would feel if he knew. He might feel that he was watching himself have a fresh start on life, but that he had to remain apart from this other form of himself, unable to advise it, warn it, help it sufficiently. His particular need for emotional involvement would surpass that of all true parents who saw mere parts of themselves reflected in their offspring. It would be the strongest, perhaps the most dangerous, emotional tie the world had ever seen, and for Benson a more terrible

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

frustration than any his species had ever dealt with before. Surely this discovery did not have to be made. But what guarantee had the Capacians included in their plan?

Oberon wrenched his gaze away from the buttons and dials. He had been standing here a long time, or had he? He realized with exasperation that the simplest daily matters were beginning to confuse him.

The man before him turned sharply from the ocular and was startled to find his captain so unexpectedly near. "Sir, we appear to have a disabled starship ahead. Coordinates locate her on route to Careth from Ruthenia, although, wait—no, she's drifting." He peered again through the ocular. "No position; she's drifting."

"Is it a Ruthenian vessel?" Oberon inquired, returning to the command seat. The Ruthenian system, a non-member sixteen light-years ahead, was the *Anriahd's* last stop before Telphon.

"Can't tell, sir, but we'll be close enough for magnification in a few minutes."

Elijah ran over, peered at a dial and shouted excitedly, "In three minutes!"

At all stations interest began to mount. Then the crewman exclaimed, "It's a League ship, sir!" And he switched his focal point to the main screen for a larger view. Before them the *Clarion*, a small passenger starship, drifted aimlessly in space. She appeared intact from the side they could see, but her lights were dim. There was a flurry of activity as the *Anriahd's* monitoring systems attempted to probe the vessel.

"Communications?" Oberon requested.

Shyla replied, "I'm afraid not, Captain. Their channels are all very weak—signal strength only 1.3—and the static is terrible. I can't tell if they're receiving me or not."

She made repeated attempts to break through. Oberon spoke over the telecom: "Security alert." In a case like this, every eye aboard, whether human or mechanical, was kept primed for lurking Draconians.

Minutes passed. Then Shyla's reception changed and she switched it to audio. Above the roar of static, they could barely make out a man's voice.

"Can you read me, *Anriahd*? Can you read me?"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Yes!" Elijah shouted impulsively, and Benson playfully clapped a hand over his mouth.

"We are receiving you, *Clarion*," Shyla called through. "Go ahead."

The words faded in and out. "This is Captain Isek DeVoto speaking. Three of our conversion tubes are inoperable—some defect along the lines. We're working on it, but we haven't found it yet. We're only running on half power, level one, and we can't hold our course. Can you lock us into tow?"

Oberon slipped on a head rack and spoke carefully against the mike. "This is Captain Daniel Oberon of the *Anriahd*," he enunciated. "We're slowing down to lock you in. Where are you headed?"

"To Careth, if we can make it, for a proper overhaul. A breakdown like this is rare enough, but I don't wish to endanger the lives of the passengers any further. Can I transfer them to you?"

"Of course, if they don't mind going back to Ruthenia. How many have you got?"

"They don't mind. Just two of them. The ambassadors Gareth and Camille Brandon."

Oberon's stomach gave its now accustomed lurch. He was getting used to feeling like a marionette whose strings were consistently jerked too hard.

"They're my parents!" Elijah announced needlessly, and Oberon was aware of him standing beside the communications console, pulling at Shyla's sleeve with vivid excitement.

As he looked at the radiant seven-year-old, the immensity of a new problem confronted him. Suppose the Brandons did not want to see their son? They had made it a policy to estrange themselves, but surely they must follow his schedule enough to know that he was taking mascot training aboard the *Anriahd*. Would they change their minds? If not, he would have to manage to keep them discreetly apart for six days, not an easy task within the confines of a starship.

Casually, Oberon asked DeVoto, "Do they know their son is aboard?"

There was a static-filled pause. "Yes," said DeVoto, committing himself no further.

Oberon changed the subject. "Stand by, DeVoto. I'll

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

send my chief engineer over—she might be able to solve your problem. Stand by for umbilical hookup. We're moving in."

To be free of all distractions while the delicate maneuvers were made, he sent Elijah out.

Elijah tore below decks to find Nimmo, whom he interrupted with squeals of anticipation. A bath followed—at the child's own insistence—and then a hasty donning of dress uniform for the big event.

On his way to transport, Oberon passed the open door of the mascot's quarters. Within, Elijah giggled and romped. In a chair by the table, Nimmo sat silent and slumped, watching the child with joyless eyes.

From behind the controls partition, Oberon watched Sagen cross the huge deck, the lines of her thin, angular body well concealed by an engineer's coveralls, a small kit of microtools in her hand. She waited unobtrusively, gazing through the airlock viewer at the men who labored beyond, in spacesuits, to release the accordion-pleated umbilical. The clips were unfastened, the umbilical unfolded majestically into space, then connection was made. The men opened the airlock and climbed out of their cumbersome suits, but Sagen was still early, for there were other minor adjustments to be made before she could walk through.

Oberon debated, then walked over and confronted her. He was surprised when she turned to face him immediately and began to talk.

"There's something about their signal-beam variability that alerts me. I calculated it while monitoring your communication, and there's a ten-to-three discrepancy that may indicate the adjustors. I think I can trace the problem," she said, but he scarcely acknowledged her statement. His thoughts had nothing to do with the *Clarion*.

"One of the priority questions—as you are well aware—is about Ergang."

He did not have to elaborate, and he did not have to lower his voice, for the technicians were well out of earshot.

Sagen smiled wryly and answered. "Everything he says is right without question. He just doesn't say it all."

This departure from the matters at hand did not take her by surprise. You could never take Sagen by surprise,

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Oberon remembered. That was one of her tantalizing differences from other Institute personnel; she was always prepared to answer the most unlikely question with ease, at any time, in any place. Now, however, she was being unspecific. But his question had been unspecific. He paled as he realized the effort it took to be direct with her. It was almost as if he did not want to be direct with her.

"He says that to know all is to merge with the fabric of the universe itself, which would imply an end of sentient life as we know it," Oberon continued forcefully. "Elijah himself says that evolution takes us toward higher and higher forms of consciousness."

She gazed at him unblinking, expressionless, totally neutral.

"Is this what happened to the Capacians? We know that they were much more highly evolved than we could—"

"You don't need to ask me as many questions as you think you do. I have already told you that."

There. The pattern was established. Sagen was not going to be direct with him. He was to draw his own conclusions.

But Oberon was not content with this.

"Sagen, what if I should decide that Elijah is a threat—a monster, a totally bad thing for us?"

After a moment of silence, she replied, "I suppose you will have to decide something, won't you?"

A distant roaring in his ears grew steadily louder. He glanced about, as if in pathetic search of an outside source for this horrible din. Alternately, he stared at Sagen without seeing her, for all he could see was Elijah, romping and laughing, playing with Nimmo, Elijah gazing at something with his infinite attention, divulging the secrets of the universe with a friendly, confiding air, as if giving advice. All this seemed to happen before him, as his ears filled with the roaring and his mouth tasted terrible fear.

He was going to have to make the decision. It was up to him alone. He felt himself reeling away from the knowledge, as if from a physical blow—yet he looked again and there it was. All he had to do in the infinity of the next few seconds was review the education he had been receiving on this mission, look ahead and see before him the test, inescapable, without compromise.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

It shocked him to have to admit that Paiselle had been wrong—Elijah was capable of digesting the philosophy of Ergang; in fact, the child's life-style was that of the most confirmed Ergang disciple.

And he could with the same alacrity wrap up the whole universe in a single mathematical formula. For all time, that had been the far distant object. His world fed upon the quest of it, and from the unfulfillment grew like a well-nourished thing. It was this dearest truth that always lay ahead, promised by evolution, mankind and mystery itself, for everyone knew what the questions were. But somehow, something had always made sure that it was left for a future world to approach, even closely. Oberon knew that to acquire it now would not be good for his world.

Therefore, Elijah was not good for his world.

"But why—why me?" he attempted, expecting no response and getting none.

At once he despised himself for his helplessness and despised Sagen for her indifference. As she studied his pale, desperate face, nothing in her own expression changed, implying somehow that it would never change, no matter what he decided, no matter what he did.

Nothing more passed between them until the transport crew had completed its operations. Then Sagen gave him her strange, hard smile and stepped through the airlock. He heard the faint rattle of her microtools as she entered the *Clarion*.

In a moment there were new voices.

Hastily, he straightened up and tugged down on his shirt, trading his terror for an air of outward assurance, hoping that his face regained its color as his stance regained its confidence.

Isek DeVoto emerged, followed by Ambassador Gareth Brandon and Ambassador Camille Brandon. The captain of the *Clarion* looked strained, and he stayed only long enough to wring Oberon's hand, thank him and introduce him to the parents of the most illustrious child ever born in the history of the League.

Physically, Gareth Brandon was less of a man than Oberon, but his voice was louder and he had blunt, strongly handsome features. "Never thought we'd end up

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

on the ship that's bound for Telphon!" he boomed as he shook hands.

But as Oberon turned to greet Brandon's wife, he experienced a keen thrill. Camille Brandon was, as newspapers, journals and acquaintances claimed, an unusually beautiful woman. Her platinum hair was precisely coiffed, her face high-cheekboned and smooth, set in mirthless self-appreciation. She took Oberon's hand with reception-line grace and murmured, "Captain." Her formal gown was decorated with tiny crystals in galactic swirls. He wondered briefly if she always dressed like this, or if she had changed for the occasion, and he wondered if she was disappointed in the casual attire of the *Anriahd's* crew. She gave no sign.

Formality and informality mixed in a thinly pleasant situation, and Oberon was just about to conduct them to the nearest lounge when Nimmo entered the area with Elijah. The little boy left his friend behind as he dashed up, ecstatically, to meet his parents for the first time. Quivering with excitement, but tongue-tied, he stared at each of them, uncertain of which one he should greet first. But beauty won out and he threw himself on Camille.

The deck resounded with her husband's loud, hearty remarks. "Well, hullo, young un! That's my boy! What a fine, strong young man we have here!" But his tone lost its vitality. He seemed at first startled, then deflated, by the boy's tiny size.

Camille leaned over the child slightly. "Hello, Elijah. You're looking well. No, don't climb up." She held him off by his shoulders, gazing into his jubilant, appealing face. Then she patted his cheek briefly and disengaged her hand from the small fingers that tried to grasp it.

While everyone laughed and commented, Gareth Brandon lifted his son high above his head. The scene was noisily deceptive. Nimmo watched enviously for a moment, then turned with a furtive movement and left before Oberon could catch his eye. Various crewmen continued to stand around. They seemed cowed by the volatile presence of Gareth Brandon, and they were obviously puzzled by the striking differences between the Brandons and their son. This did not appear to bother the Brandons, but it did bother Oberon. As discreetly as possible, while everyone's attention was still claimed by

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Elijah, he dismissed his men and sent them back to their duties.

Then he said to the ambassadors, "It will be a while before we resume course for Ruthenia. Would you like to rest, or would you prefer to look around? We'd be happy to give you a tour."

"I'll give them the tour!" Elijah shouted. It suddenly occurred to Oberon that the child had been standing beside him holding his hand as he gazed raptly at his parents. What should have been pleasure came as a cold, sick jolt of awareness.

"Elijah is conversant in every level of technology you see around you," he informed them, and Gareth Brandon responded with a huge laugh.

"Isn't that just grand! Of course we'll take your tour, my boy!"

But Camille gave her husband a dangerous look and said in an undertone, "Are you sure you know what you're doing?" In the excitement he appeared not to hear. Elijah was jumping up and down.

"Come with me! Come with me!"

Camille held herself back. "If you don't mind, Captain, would you show me to a lounge? I do feel rather tired after our experience on the *Clarion*."

Elijah showed no disappointment, but seized his father's hand and pulled him out the exit, and Oberon found himself in the solitary company of Camille Brandon.

"The lounge is this way."

She walked beside him in her stately manner. In the lounge she sat on a couch. The long, flowing lines of her formal attire made her look draped and somehow unalive, except for the clear eyes from which her cool, passionless intellect always seemed to be focused on something straight ahead. She regarded the pictures on the walls, made a few remarks about them to Oberon, then gave in to an uncomfortable silence.

Oberon sat and looked at her. She was probably the most stunning woman he had ever seen, but with a tight economy of words and actions, and her way of putting off her son, had an almost fastidious tone. He remained quiet long enough to review these impressions of her, then said tentatively, "Elijah was overwhelmed when he heard you

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

were going to join us. I guess he hasn't seen you in a long time." He felt it was best not to seem to well informed.

"He has never seen us," she corrected immediately, and though her tone remained cool and modulated, she went on as if impelled. "I suppose it can't hurt him really—not at this point. He'll just have to understand that he must do without us. He can understand that. He's a big boy now."

She stopped and glanced at him sideways.

He stretched a little in his chair, trying to take the edge off his tension. "No, he isn't," he heard himself saying, and he made a feeble attempt to turn the whole thing into a joke. "I'm not," he went on lightly. "Sometimes I still want my mother." He gave a laugh, but her smile was humorless and faintly annoyed.

There had to be some way to win over this unfriendly woman. He decided to be direct. "Would you permit me to say that I think you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen?" He said it in such a way that she could not possibly misinterpret his intentions, but he smiled a smile that would have sent Shyla Benson into raptures.

It had no effect. Camille replied, "You are wondering how such a beautiful woman can be so disinterested in her own child."

He shrugged and was silent.

She went on starkly. "I have never thought of Elijah as my son. He is entirely an Institute possession, as you know quite well, Captain. But I never did think of him as my son, not even when I happened to give birth to him."

This was an opening. Oberon took advantage of it as subtly as possible.

"I guess Elijah's birth is something of a mystery," he remarked, half-laughingly, and she threw him a look of cold warning. He could not tell whether she knew something or whether she was simply on the defensive because of appearances: a raven-haired, dark-eyed son.

She said, "I am quite aware of the odds against hypermentalities."

So Oberon changed the subject, for he had found himself unable to extract any information from this source. It would not have surprised him if the Capacians had planned that, also.

Instead, they began to discuss the Draconians.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"I enjoy working with the Draconians," she said in her clipped, almost surly manner. "In my line of work one finds out that they are not as narrow-minded as so many of us assume—" She continued in this vein, elaborating on various aspects of their culture, such as their interest in perfecting hovercraft and their versatility with domestic animals. Not once in her lecture did she look directly at him, and she did not invite any response.

Oberon controlled an impulse to cut her off brusquely. This was sheer snobbery, calculated to annoy. Her implications were obvious as far as he and his Space Troop peers were concerned, for, out of tact one did not champion the Draconians in the presence of a starship officer. But this was the essence of the usual misunderstandings that arose between diplomats and those in command of ships, concerned wholly with safeguarding lives.

Oberon was beginning to find Camille distasteful, but just as he was groping for some way to end this confrontation gracefully, Gareth Brandon, Elijah, Muriat and Nimmo arrived at the door and everyone was talking at once.

"Well, Camille, you passed up a grand tour! Grand tour!" Brandon proclaimed to his wife.

Nimmo reported, aside to Oberon, "My little pal was able to answer every question, Captain—every single question he asked!" Beaming proudly, he took a seat while Muriat was being introduced to Camille. She extended her hand languidly and confessed that she had heard that he was in charge of her son's education.

Red-faced, but anxious for their approval, Muriat began immediately to expound upon the merits of an Institute education, and when everybody was seated he held the floor almost helplessly. "It's a good thing we have all these facilities for Elijah," he emphasized, nodding toward the child, who was doodling on the nearest computer screen, unconcerned with his importance in the matter, "because he'll profit from his education much more than Ergang did—we've planned his curriculum with that purpose in mind."

"Superb!" Gareth Brandon responded enthusiastically. "We're glad to hear that—aren't we, Camille?" Failing to evoke any comment from her, he turned to other issues and opened a debate with Muriat about the influence of

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

space science on the political actions of the Council. Throughout their exchanges Camille was silent, her eyes lowered. She did not watch Elijah.

Oberon had not, either, at first, but gradually the never-ceasing purposefulness of Elijah's activity distracted him and he noticed that the youngster was repeating the same thing over and over, drawing a crescent, rubbing it out, then drawing another. For a moment Oberon lost the trend of the conversation. Searching his memory, he tried to find some relevance for this strange little obsession of Elijah's, but there was none. As far as he knew, it was connected to nothing.

Gareth Brandon was lecturing them. His manner of waving his hands as he talked suggested that he was used to addressing much larger audiences. His wife's face was turned toward him, but she remained unresponsive, her eyes still downcast.

The discussion went on for another hour. Refreshments were served. Camille remained silent and glum. She did not brighten until Nimmo offered to show them their quarters in the area of guest suites.

They all dispersed when Oberon excused himself to report to the helm, but Brandon headed straight for the biology labs—like most politicians, he had side interests in science.

Oberon felt sorry for the Dragon, whose train of thought would presently be interrupted by a tourist. He felt sorry for Nimmo, who had been left to contend with Camille until her husband returned.

Elijah simply disappeared.

The guest suite was roomy and tastefully styled, but Gareth Brandon was not in a noticing mood as he roamed restlessly about, his eyes fixed on his wife. Before a mirror, Camille sat arranging her hair, the sleek lines of her body moving to the rhythm of her fingers.

He eyed her with appreciation. "I should never have married an ambassador," he said jokingly.

"Neither should I," came the languid reply.

The air became crisp with tension.

Gareth Brandon straightened up. His loudness faded away and something that he didn't usually flaunt broke through to the surface.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"You're always competing with me, but you didn't even try today. What's the matter with you, Camille? Losing your touch?"

She did not reply for a while, twisting and shaping her hair. At last she answered flatly, "Perhaps it has never occurred to you that I might like to have Elijah."

"You didn't strike me as being exactly fired with enthusiasm."

Then her hands were motionless on her lap and she was staring at them, her face sharp with fury. "How could I?" she blazed suddenly. "He doesn't even know me."

"You didn't give him a chance." He went on pointedly: "Camille, I don't think we lead a very natural life."

"When did you discover that?" She gave a caustic laugh.

Brandon shrugged, hating their conflict, but unwilling to change the subject. In a marriage like theirs, certain things had to be aired, and it was better than leaving them to rankle unsaid.

"We live this—this ridiculous competition. You're not a woman, and I'm not a man. Here we are, diplomats, and we don't even know what compromise really is. We don't love; we struggle."

A hand touched her back. She shrugged it off.

"If you're so certain I'm not a woman," she said icily, "then why do you make love to me?"

"Camille." Brandon chewed his lip and hunched his shoulders in impotent protest. After a moment he said, "Perhaps we could take the boy on a trip. We've a sabbatical coming up, and . . ."

There was no answer.

He turned away from the void between them and stared through the starport at the black void beyond.

If sound was essential to the mental well-being of space-roving humans, so was a feeling of night and day. For those removed from natural cycles, artificial ones were a physiological comfort, so during the "night" the corridor and main deck lights were dimmed.

In engineering the lights had just been turned down and the deck was a vast expanse of darkness except for a few lit areas where the night shift went about its tasks.

Elijah's weight was not enough to activate the sensor

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

mat that opened the doors to this huge area, so he waited alone in the corridor for a long time until a technician emerged.

The little boy darted through. In the strong light which shone from Sagen's office, he stood for a moment blinking his sleepy dark eyes. Then he adjusted his dress uniform and went in.

Sagen glanced up briefly from her computations and looked down at him. "What are you doing here at this time of day, Elijah? Where is Nimmo?"

Elijah answered her last question first. "Nimmo's in the infirmary because he wasn't feeling well and he thought he might have a seizure. He says he doesn't want me to see him like that." Then he ended his explanation. "I wanted to see you."

"What about?"

Elijah was very tired, and he was suddenly afraid he was going to cry. So he shook his head violently and curved his fingers around his eyes in a manner that suggested goggles. "No, I just wanted to *see* you."

In a puzzled gesture, Sagen's arms spread out from her sides, but Elijah mistook her intentions and ran into them, clutching and wriggling in against her. The face that he pressed with his own was soft and warm.

She made no attempt to hold him, but she did not push him away, so he stayed there for a while, happily clinging and trying to seek out warmth.

"You can teach me a new game now," he whispered in her ear and backed off expectantly.

She was gazing past him, stunned. The look of bewilderment was quite out of place in her eyes. He followed her gaze, then turned back to her and saw that she was looking straight at him now with the same expression.

Elijah stared back, his triumph tinged with dissatisfaction. At last he planted a loud and thorough kiss on her cheek, but even this got no response. She did not seem to feel it at all.

Instead, she murmured in her deep, husky voice, "I'm sorry. I don't know any new games."

Elijah gazed at her understandingly. He was surprised to find that he would have liked a new game, when he knew very well that there was nothing else at all worth considering except the old one. After seeing the dust, there

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

was understanding it. And after understanding it, there was nothing.

This contented him.

Straying from her, he poked around the office, became momentarily absorbed in her tools and graphs, glanced at the closed starport and then returned to her side.

"Are we on course for Ruthenia now?"

"Yes," she replied distantly.

"Did you find the defect in the *Clarion* okay?"

"Of course."

Elijah deliberated whether or not he should ask about what she had found, and finally he decided that for once it really wasn't that important.

"Did you see my mother and father?"

"Yes, I saw them."

"Aren't they nice?"

"Very nice."

He paused again, then said imploringly, "Will you put me to bed now?"

Sagen's head shook slowly from side to side and she replied, as if answering something other than the child before her, "No."

A slow, reproachful anger took possession of the little boy's face. Confused, he slumped against the console and gradually turned away, straining against tears.

Sagen tapped a button on the telecom. "We had better call your friend, Dr. Edwards. He will attend to you, I'm sure."

The Dragon appeared on the screen, his gray hair disheveled, impatient at another interruption. When he saw it was Sagen, his scowl faded only to return when he heard her brief request. "I'm sorry, Sagen. I can't leave the lab at this moment. Elijah." The little boy stepped silently into focus. "You couldn't—couldn't put yourself to bed?"

Elijah sighed. "Put myself to bed?"

The Dragon looked at the dismal little face. Guilt swept through all seven feet of him.

"Look—Elijah—the captain is off duty now. I'll send him down to you. All right? Would you like that?"

Elijah brightened. "Yes, I'd like that," he said.

Science is nothing but perception.

Plato

ASIDE FROM HIS abnormalities, Elijah was a model child, Oberon was beginning to discover, for there was certainly no hassle over the routines of bedtime. The boy's dress uniform, too rumpled for further use, was placed in the debris collector to be recycled. A new one would be processed by the supply crew on request.

"I was growing out of it, anyway," Elijah said as he stood under the starport in his sleeping suit. "Look. Don't you think this is getting too short in the sleeves? I must've grown a whole lot since we left Earth." He drew himself up at the shoulders, lengthening himself as much as possible.

Oberon decided that a little stalling at this point was natural enough. He had to chuckle. "I think you could get away with that one for a while yet."

Elijah looked down at himself, then up at his captain, and he raised his arms. "I want you to pick me up," he requested.

"Don't you think you're getting a little too big for that?"

Elijah skewered him instantly. "You just said I haven't grown much."

Dismissing the remoteness that deepened inside him, Oberon bent down, obligingly, and lifted him. Standing still beside the starport, he held the child and they both stared out at the inaccessible depths beyond. For a moment their predicament faded and Oberon began to enjoy the new feeling of this small, warm body in his arms. The spell was not broken when Elijah asked to be carried to his bunk. "Throw me in," he commanded. This was done.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"There's something I have to say before I go to sleep."

"Oh, what's that?"

"It's something I learned when I was really little." Elijah drew up his knees, hitched his arms around them and recited gravely:

"Our teacher Bilan, which art so high
Lay fallow not my brain.
Thy knowledge bestow. To our questions reply
if Thou would have us know all things.
Instruct us
and correct our errors
As we correct those who err before us
And leave us not to ignorance
Demean us not with the force of Error
For Thine is the knowledge, the power and perfection
Forever."

When he finished there was silence. Elijah could not see his captain's expression because of the dim light and the fact that Oberon sat half-turned away, as if he did not really want to be there.

This gradually tugged and worked inside the child until a great void began to form where there were usually warm, comfortable feelings about the people he knew and the places he occupied. He often questioned his world, but never in a way that made him want to cry, for he had always been sure of everything until now, when suddenly something in his parents, something about this day, something in this man beside him made him unsure of himself.

Elijah's face crinkled up. He swallowed and blinked. "Don't you know the Orion prayer?" he mumbled, fumbling with the coverlet. Nimmo knew it and Dr. Edwards knew it—even Muriat, silly Muriat, knew it.

"Don't you know it?" he persisted.

With his head still lowered, Oberon nodded, but when he looked up again the grim lines of his jaw had softened and there was a strange, generous light in his eyes. Reaching over, he ruffled the boy's hair for a moment. Then he arose.

"I think I may have heard it before," he said in a tired voice as he coaxed the small body under the coverlet and

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

tucked it in. "Now, it's way past your bedtime. Time to go to sleep."

"Time, time, time," Elijah repeated to himself. The eyelids drooped, then blinked back open. "But you can leave the light like this. I'll turn it down when I'm ready to sleep."

"You're not ready to sleep yet?"

"No," Elijah protested. "I haven't finished thinking."

Oberon said nothing more. He left the child lying there, awake and thoughtful.

Alone, Elijah closed his eyes again and looked inward. He often tried to look inside himself, as well as outside, but right now it was futile. You only peeled aside layer after layer of inwardness and never quite reached the core. Yet you could sense the core. It was just not ready to be looked at yet. Not quite yet.

He came out of himself reluctantly, feeling very disturbed. Something was wrong, something concerning him. It must be that he was not sufficient, that he was not informing the captain in a manner that was clear and consistent enough. He had tried to find out the things that the captain didn't know so that they could discuss them and reach conclusions, but this never worked with this particular man. Unlike Nimmo, who always answered a question to the fullest extent that he could manage, Oberon tended to generalize, to clip his answers short or dodge entirely. So Elijah never knew where Captain Oberon stood on the matter of knowledge. This had begun to bother him.

He would have liked to read his mind, but he was afraid to ask permission. It was so frustrating when people refused him, and he hated frustration, so he avoided the whole matter altogether.

Oberon hadn't liked the Orion prayer, the child sensed. Then it must be that he did not know very much about Bilan.

Bilan was the biggest mystery to all the people he knew. Whenever he was allowed to penetrate a mind telepathically, the mind contained the conviction that Bilan was a mystery that would never be solved. Everything else would be solved, the mind was sure, but never Bilan. How could this be so? How could this be so when the very mind that

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

contained the thought was a thing more like Bilan than any other form of matter?

Things were postulated about Him, it seemed, and had been for centuries and centuries, but no one could prove whether they were right or wrong.

Elijah smiled. Neither could anyone prove anything about the atom. The scientific community could only produce math that gave probabilities that certain things would occur when certain things were done to the atom; nothing was absolute.

Elijah stared up at the ceiling. All of the things that he had been taught were filing through his mind in a kind of inspection line. It was like an army inside his head, he thought, amused. There were many things that he *knew* but had not been taught, and these watched the regiment of things he had been taught file past, and in many cases did not agree with it, or approve of it at all. One thing above all else he knew for sure.

Even Bilan had His math.

Or should he say there was even math to describe Bilan? Perhaps that was it. In any event, everyone should know this and Elijah resolved fiercely to make it known—in a clear and consistent manner that couldn't fail to please and interest this strangely withdrawn Captain Oberon. For he ought to be pleased, just as Dr. Lenard had been.

Elijah wondered how much time it would take. Time, time, time.

He yawned. Then suddenly his eyes popped wide open and he lay very still, listening to himself. His mind still did not want to rest, for it was saying something important.

Elijah bounded off the bunk and looked for a scrap of vellum. When he found one, he wrote on it: *The fabric plus the warp equals time.*

You couldn't have the fabric of space without the warp, or the warp without the fabric. They made and sustained each other in a way that caused a beautiful chronology and a glorious spinning motion. This order and motion were also interdependent and together made this thing called time, which marched through all life and followed the warp like everything else.

Carefully, he placed the notation in his locker, welcoming the feeling of satisfaction and deep quiet that came

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

over him now that he had found this thought and written it down. There was a formula for it, but that would come later. Now he really was tired. He ran back to his bunk, turned down the lights, flung himself on it and closed his eyes with a happy sigh.

The image of his parents flashed by him and almost reawakened him. But they were not important.

When your eyes are closed, he thought, you see dark particles sifting past you. And if you look at them long enough they get like a whirlpool, and the whirlpool carries you off to sleep.

***This higher completeness
cannot be grasped by us,
with our present limitations.***

Schiller

AT RUTHENIA THE Brandons left discreetly without calling their son to say good-bye. But Elijah did not seem to notice that they had gone, and he never asked after them. While they were departing in a shuttle, he was happily occupied on the floor of his quarters with his game cubes, forming the same pattern that he always formed and humming tonelessly to himself.

Forced by circumstances to become increasingly aware of his mascot, Oberon found that, in the ten months that had elapsed since their departure from Earth, this child's code of behavior simply never changed. Elijah was always interested, always alert, always responsive. He understood and completely enjoyed every facet of life aboard the *Anriahd*. If Muriat failed to test him sufficiently, he tested himself. He expected people to involve him in their work. In asking a constant stream of questions, he was not so different from other children his age, but his questions were keenly unchildish and showed deep insight. Muriat often reported, with exasperation, that he tended to question everything he was told, with questions that always anticipated the answer, as if he could see where everything led with the same ease that he could feel that a ball was round or a box was square. He kept the overworked education coordinator trotting back and forth with tapes of obsolete physics and chemistry journals. Most of the time these regaled the child; he read them and laughed at them the way a normal child would laugh at cartoons. But sometimes, after sending Muriat to the tape library for an armload, he merely stacked them up and then tried to see how quickly he

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

could whisk away the bottom-most cassette without upsetting the entire stack—while Muriat hovered in the background wondering whether he should feel used or rewarded because the child was actually playing.

Occasionally, Elijah did stop to pore over some small toy, but in a manner that could not be called playing. The texture of something, its color and even its smell could hold his attention for long moments, Oberon often noticed. He seemed to balance his world view by looking inward as deeply and avidly as he looked outward, and Oberon always got the impression that Elijah ultimately observed the same essence, no matter which direction he chose.

And, as always, he was totally unpossessive. After a tour of the Birdstar Spacecraft Corporation on Ruthenia, he returned with a BSC pass, maps, pamphlets and a build-it-yourself starcraft model—all of which wound up in the debris collector shortly afterward.

Oberon shuttled down for shore leave after pressure from the Dragon, to take advantage of a long-needed break. But his was half a business trip as usual, for Birdstar was scheduled to provide the *Anriahd* with the Pathing Device, the last item on their acquisition list. Sagen's invention was only for the use of pioneer vessels, which was exactly what the *Anriahd* would become as soon as it entered Telphon. Once it was tied into the ship's main computers, it automatically mapped the course and established instant coordinates for previously uncharted regions of space. Since Ruthenia was the farthest League outpost, it was the only planet that supplied them.

To Oberon, the invention of the Pathing Device had begun to seem less remarkable. Now he felt certain that Sagen had tossed this nugget to the world deliberately to ensure an expedition to Telphon 281.

But it was a beautiful thing, all the same. At the desk in his quarters, Oberon removed the little machine from its container of squashy packaging materials and sat down with it on his knees. It was pretty to the eye of a space-man, with the gleam and smell of newness, and a frame of adjustable fittings. Along one side the circuits were exposed for grafting. Carefully, he unscrewed some fastenings and raised the top a few inches to allow himself a glimpse of the dazzling intricacy within.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

In this product of a mastermind, a woman's touch was evident. As soon as the *Anriahd* resumed course for Telphon, he would have the personal privilege of installing it.

There was a sudden hiss from the door as it slid back to admit the Dragon. For a moment he waited there as though confused, blinking toward Oberon. Then he ambled over. His gaunt face bore lines of acute strain, there was a hard light in his eyes and he seemed thinner than ever.

"What's that? Oh, the Pathing Device." Edwards reached for it and Oberon let it go with reluctance.

"Who's going to install it?"

"I am," Oberon said adamantly.

It was examined and weighed critically by the large hands. "Not at all like Sagen, really," came the caustic retort. "I mean the atmosphere of the thing—smooth, delicate, beautiful, almost ecstatic. Look at all the little highlights."

Oberon rescued the sacred object and eyed his friend with concern. "You're a grumpy one," he accused. "What's the matter—spacesick?"

The Dragon gave him an odd stare before speaking. "Perhaps it's that, but I don't think so. As a matter of fact, I just finished heaving up my guts, but I don't think it's spacesickness. It's our mascot. He doesn't talk about the things he sees because he's confused, Obi—temporarily confused, and it's catching. He doesn't open up to me about the inner workings of cells except to set me straight, or to mention particles that we haven't discovered yet—that have no names, but seem to be so damnably indispensable. To us they've been unfindable; to him they're gigantically obvious. What he's been taught is full of gaps to him—or else it isn't right at all." He sank into a chair and sat with his head bowed forward. "I'm upset, Obi. I'm upset all through me. Everything I know has lost its value, its meaning. Nothing means a damned thing. All of my work is becoming one ghastly nothing. When that child leaves my lab, I get sick to my stomach. It's ridiculous. I don't know why I should feel this way." He shook his head hopelessly. "I love truth. I want it. I shouldn't feel this way."

Oberon listened in cold dismay. He removed his hands

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

from the Pathing Device and wiped the perspiration off the metal. "You've been seeing a lot of Elijah lately?" he questioned.

"I have to tutor him like everyone else," the Dragon replied dully. "And I just gave him a physical examination—"

"What for?"

"A mascot is supposed to have one every six weeks for the records," he reminded the younger man. "Growth and all that."

"Oh, yes; slipped my mind," Oberon said, hoping that nothing really important managed to slip his mind during this ordeal.

"I've told you that I believe Elijah has a Capacian brain. Well, I can't prove that it is, and I can't prove that it isn't. The variations in his optic nerve simply don't exist at all in any other type of brain—not even the slightest suggestion. So I have nothing to compare them with—" He broke off irritably. "Obi, don't you think we should notify Paiselle? Here we are, orbiting Ruthenia with relay satellites everywhere—"

But Oberon was shaking his head. "You know my orders, Dragon. Contact headquarters in the case of emergency only. This is not exactly an emergency. No lives are in danger and nothing is interfering with the mission."

The Dragon muttered on, half to himself. His demeanor was that of a man with an obsession, and an uncomfortable one. "He has such fantastically broad perceptions compared with ours. How can he even talk to us? Why does he feel so sure that he can make us understand?" He considered his friend's deeply troubled expression, then said with slow caution, as if he feared the reaction, "Sometimes I—I almost feel afraid. Almost. I know it's foolish of me, but there are times . . ."

Oberon knew there was nothing he could say. Every day he recognized a widening gap between himself and the Dragon, his friend and fellow thinker of so many years. Being willing to admit to these feelings did not matter where the Dragon was concerned, for he would never accept their message of danger.

"Why should I feel that way?" Edwards groped.

"Because he *has* expressed himself, Dragon. He *has* told us what the ether is—"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Oh, no, no, Obi!" Edwards reared back in his chair. "You can't just accept it like that—he's so young. He's got to grow up yet before we can be sure—"

"Are you certain of that? I disagree, especially since his brain has lived before, and lived with the truth—" He stopped abruptly.

Beyond them the milky wash of a galaxy was moving in to fill the starport. The Dragon had been watching it, but now he turned to gaze, astounded, at his captain.

Oberon had not meant to exclude his friend from his most recent discoveries about Elijah, but, with the *Clarion* incident and preparations for Ruthenia, there had been no opportunity to confer privately with him. Leaning forward, elbows on knees, he related Sagen's statements, taking care to censor himself in one respect. He did not in any way expose his position in the matter or give any hint of his terrible dilemma. The Capacians had made it abundantly clear that it was up to him alone.

When he finished talking he waited in silence, expecting some kind of reaction from his slow-speaking, slow-moving friend. But there was none. The Dragon remained immobile, his hands clasped in his lap and his eyes down-cast. The minutes went emptily by. Then there was a muffled cough and the shaggy head lowered still farther, hiding a grimace in the palm of one hand.

Oberon studied him. "It is a bit hard to take, isn't it?" But he did not expect the emotion that gleamed up from the Dragon's eyes.

"I always knew there was something," came the shaken, murmured reply, "something about her."

Slowly, Oberon realized the meaning of his words. "Yes?" he encouraged. "You mean you knew her before?"

The Dragon gave a scarcely perceptible nod. One hand came off the chair arm and Oberon grabbed it. "How well—" But he was rattled by this exchange and unsure of his ground, for he was seldom allowed to know the deepest feelings of his Draconian friend.

Edwards made an indistinct reply before changing the subject. "We worked together for a time on the Beta Colony. It was years ago." He glanced out the starport again, murmuring, "Our precious little clone. So he is one of them, after all." Then, forcibly, he resumed the discussion. "You say it's hard to take, Obi? Not for me, not

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

really. You see, we are all products of our different environments, and mine has certainly been different from yours. The totally unexpected, the novel and new—they barely startle me, as a rule. I have learned to take them for granted, and because of that, Obi, I would say that you are more qualified to deal with this than I.”

He paused, letting his words sink in, then went on abrasively, for the subject was a rare one and did not sit well with him. “My life was saved by a split-second miracle when I was an infant. My life since then has been a series of adjustments and compensations. Many, perhaps most, of the things I know as a medic are incomprehensible to the rest of my kind, which makes me, ironically, a leader in my field and is the reason why I am here on this journey. I am at every second of my existence aware of how poorly I synchronize with my world. I am always and forever aware of my unique and momentous displacement. I don’t live a life. I live a predicament.” There he halted.

For a moment Oberon stared at the floor, unwilling to meet his gaze. He had always wondered what really went on inside this tall elongation of a man, and he had never expected to be told directly. Here before him was a devoted physician, but the career was the Institute’s sentence and the Dragon’s escape.

“I still think we should notify Paiselle.”

Oberon shook his head. “No, I feel that we should wait. We’ve no proof of anything yet that the commodore would accept as an excuse to turn back. As far as I am concerned, as captain of this ship, the Capacians are alive and waiting for us. We have to keep on.”

“You’re right,” the Dragon admitted at last. “We have to keep on.”

For a while each sat absorbed. Finally, Oberon commented, with a weary chuckle, “It’s ironic when you consider that Elijah springs, physically, from a race whose evolution is thought to be the slowest in the universe.”

The Dragon nodded thoughtfully and took out his pipe. “But if Ergang’s philosophy is true, then we are all destined to reach the level of the Capacians sooner or later. It is there—one of the many plateaus in this universe—and we can attain it ourselves.”

Through an effort of will, Oberon restrained the im-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

pulse to shout as he answered, "But right now? All of a sudden, in mid-course?"

"I think we can," the Dragon said soberly. "I hold to what Elijah says about it—that the answers would all be there if we just knew how to get at them. Why should we have to wait for the rest of time?"

"It seems that Elijah can get at them," Oberon stressed. "What do you think that will do to us?"

Edwards replied, "I expect it will open our eyes further than they've ever been opened. What's wrong with that?"

"Upset stomachs," Oberon countered, and the Dragon winced good-naturedly and had to smile, which made Oberon wonder if he had gained ground.

"Everything falls so neatly into place," the Dragon resumed, "especially the role of the Brandons, now that we have actually met them. Camille is an unfeeling, willful and spoiled woman. She is exactly the type of personality that would be efficient with Draconians. She is exactly the wrong type to have children, and would never want them—not a domestic fiber in her body. Elijah was guaranteed to the Institute."

"Yes, that seems certain," Oberon said.

For a moment the Dragon watched his friend with a searching and strangely defensive gaze. "What do you think of when you observe him from day to day, Obi?"

"What do you mean?"

"Doesn't anything strike you about his behavior, especially now that you know he has a Capacian brain? Doesn't it ever occur to you that for all his abnormalities he's amazingly normal? Normal in *our* sense—in his wants and needs—in his affections. Look at the way he clowns around with Nimmo. That's the way you used to behave with me. He isn't so very different from us, really. He couldn't possibly hurt us."

Oberon looked away. The Dragon did not understand. Despite his own encounters with the boy's incredible perceptions, despite his torn feelings about them, he did not fully understand.

In Oberon a new sensation deadened the urge to reply, and, unhappily, he recognized an old acquaintance—a haunting dissatisfaction with the people around him. It was not unusual for him to feel this way around others, but it was unusual with the Dragon. Even as a youngster,

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

in the midst of the most appropriate company, this dissatisfaction had rubbed him deep inside and blunted his zeal. Something was missing from all these people, and he could only describe it, ineffectually, as a sense of how things must be.

Sounds and glimpses from his past came to him: his boyhood friendship with the Dragon and their delight over some new concept, some mutual discovery; a boy in his teens running beside a tall, ambling figure, watching him in class with keen respect, carrying their friendship beyond the Institute and into the world that was theirs to examine.

Now he could only look with misery at the widening gulf between them.

Edwards glanced at the time panel and arose. He went to the door and stayed there, looking back.

"Are you glad, Obi?"

The Dragon repeated trenchantly, "Are you glad that Elijah is able to explain some of the things you've always wondered about?"

Oberon emerged from the past with difficulty, his chest tight with emotion.

"I don't know," he whispered, steeling himself.

The Dragon waited a moment longer before activating the door. At last he said, "Well, I thought maybe what I told you at first—about how I've been feeling—might have alarmed you." He then said in a carefully measured tone, "I just want you to know that I am glad of it."

He went out, concluding in transit, "And the Council will be delirious!"

What is essential is invisible to the eye.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

IN THE HUGE area of engineering, Elijah raced about, working off the day's charge of pent-up energy. The boisterous slapping of his gripper boots on the polished deck was lost in the deep percussion of the engines and reactors and the throbbing of the gigantic power coils. The loud noise made him want to sing, so occasionally he stopped and, bobbing about, sang in a piercing treble, the tuneless, wordless soliloquy of a happy child.

On the periphery, Oberon sauntered past the auxiliary fuel pods, watching Elijah and absorbing the atmosphere of the boy's playground. As a mascot, he, too, had enjoyed coming down to this part of a ship, where you could feel the vibrations in your marrow. It still attracted him as it pulsed with inspiring and comfortable power, but gradually he found himself drifting toward the small observation deck that connected engineering with transport. Inside, the soundproof doors deadened the engine noise and the silent universe lay open for inspection.

Aware of his reflection moving along beside him in the starport, Oberon stopped, regarded it and addressed it in his thoughts.

There are no levels of being that we cannot understand, Elijah had said to Lenard.

But there were. He sensed them within himself, and out beyond the visiplat, past the scintillating galaxies where his eyes encompassed millions of miles of blackness at once.

How like self is this universe, he thought. Endless, endless, never-ending.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

The doors burst open and Elijah darted through, admitting a brief roar of noise.

"The end is beginning and beginning to end and beginning to end to begin," he singsonged, prancing up to tumble against the visiplate. Then he looked at Oberon contritely.

"I'm sorry—I wasn't really reading your mind, but I couldn't help catching that thought from you when I came in because I didn't know you were in here and I forgot to shut off."

Somehow, Oberon had not expected that Elijah might be able to exercise his telepathy and his spirited body at the same time.

"Why were you—on?"

"Oh, just because it helps. It extends me, sort of, when I'm seeing the dust. But I'm not allowed."

Then he changed the subject by raising his arms over his head. "Pick me up again, Captain Obi, like last time." As usual, during Nimmo's confinement to the infirmary Oberon had charge of Elijah for the night. Would it always begin the same way? He plunked the boy on an arm and Elijah rode him comfortably into the elevator, gazing at him with the direct look of a child.

"What were your parents?" he asked suddenly.

"They were engineers." The elevator whirred them to crews' quarters, where Elijah's interrogation echoed slightly as he was carried to his rooms.

"Are they still alive someplace?"

"My mother."

"Your father's dead? Do you miss him?"

"I didn't really know him."

"Did it matter?"

"I don't think so." Oberon was surprised by the intensity of these questions, but they led nowhere, or nowhere evident to him, and ceased when the boy was deposited on his bunk. Before Oberon could reach for the sleeping suit, Elijah jumped off and began to roam about aimlessly, flinging toys into slots and drawers, stacking up cassettes and texts.

"The Dragon said he took too many growing pills when he was a boy. Did he really?"

Resigned, Oberon dropped into a chair. "No, that's just a fable, Elijah. The Dragon is Draconian."

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Oh, yes. Well, I really know about that. But I like it when he tells me silly things. Most people always think they have to give me facts."

Oberon experienced a familiar guilt.

"A fable, a fable," the boy repeated, wandering around. He gave his captain a shrewd look. "Isn't that something like mythology?"

"Well, yes. They have a lot in common," Oberon conceded.

Elijah murmured, half to himself, half-checking with his elder to make sure he was correct. "That's when you take something you don't understand and put it in terms that you *can* understand. It's like when centuries ago, the people on Orion, and I guess on Earth, too, made up these stories about other people who made the weather and trees and rocks and things. They made them up because they didn't understand what weather was, or how trees and rocks got there. So they pretended that people made them, because they thought they understood people."

Oberon listened, saying nothing. It must always be the same with Elijah, he realized—never a departure from the learning process, never a careless moment totally free of revelations.

Through the starport he saw faint patches of ethereal color: blue, green, red. In approximately one hundred hours the *Anriahd* would pass through an emission nebula—a cloud of ionized interstellar gas—one of the most beautiful of cosmic scenes. Elijah would spend the day at Nimmo's monitorial banks making spectroscopic and radio observations of their colorful environment. There was nothing more entrancing in all of space, Oberon believed.

The child said suddenly, "What if you found Bilan?"

Oberon became increasingly aware of the dark, tilted eyes, staring, probing into his. His periphery dissolved, taking away the room, their bodies. It was as if he had been gazing into the black of space and had become aware that it was alive and looking back at him.

"Yes?" he encouraged from dry lips.

"Just suppose," the youngster said mildly, and a stack of cassettes fell over with a clatter that restored everything to normal. "You wouldn't have to imagine him anymore," he said.

"No," Oberon admitted.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Then you would know everything."

It was the most positive statement he had ever heard.

"I guess so," Oberon replied accordingly.

After a moment, Elijah dropped his speculative gaze and turned to open a drawer. From it he pulled something which his back shielded from Oberon's view. He spent a few seconds tugging at it and reshaping it before he turned around again and held it aloft for his captain to see.

It was a double Mobius sphere made of vellum.

It was a new one, constructed a little less crudely this time and larger than the earlier models that had disappeared from his quarters months ago.

Pointlessly, Oberon asked him, "What have you got there?"

"You know!" Elijah laughed. "Remember a long time ago when you asked me if I knew what happened when Ergang was playing around with topology one day? Well, I thought you meant this, but I wasn't sure, so the next time I saw Sagen I asked her, and she said she didn't have to tell me. See, she was right!" Then he interjected, "But Dr. Lenard told me."

The opportunity had arrived. "I have a question for you," Oberon began, and he was not surprised by the response.

Elijah glowed.

"Why did you make this? What is it that first gave you the idea?"

"The ether," Elijah said.

"How?"

There was a large computer screen in the activity console on the table. Elijah went to it and switched it on, pulled out the light-pen and methodically wound the slack of the cord around his arm. For a moment there was silence except for the faint snaps of static electricity when his sleeve brushed against the screen. On it he drew a perfectly balanced diagram of the double Mobius sphere.

"Well, if you could see the fabric of the universe itself, it would tell you all about the whole structure, because that's where the gap closes up. I told Dr. Lenard all about this." It was an insinuation.

Oberon decided to be frank. "We did discuss it," he confessed, "but not quite in these terms. Go on. You mentioned the gap."

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Yes, the gap. That's easy to understand," Elijah assured him. "See, the world seems to have two directions. It either goes this way"—with the light-pen he wrote: 1, 1/2, 1/4, 1/8, 1/16, 1/32 . . .—"toward the subatomic and on down smaller and smaller."

Oberon nodded.

"Or it goes this way," Elijah went on, "up through molecules, organisms, galaxies, meta galaxies—"

He wrote 1/32 & 1/16 & 1/8 & 1/4 & 1/2. . . .

"And we used to think that each direction went on to infinity and never met with the other anywhere. But then we started to believe that the universe bent back on itself someplace—that time bent back on itself—" Elijah smiled. "And that existence was part of some cycle that always bent back on itself. Ergang found out that it was all true with this." He patted the vellum model and considered his captain's intent gaze. "Look at it." He pinched an area of the vellum between two fingertips. "As a whole thing it has only one side, but any segment of it has two sides—just as the part of the world that we see seems to have two sides, an outside going in the direction of the macrocosmos, and an inside, the microcosmos. But when you look at the whole thing at once, you can see that the outside is continuous with the inside."

Wrenched from its mathematical camouflage, it was so simple. Oberon said, "You told Dr. Lenard that the fabric of the universe is like a thought—"

"Yes! Yes! That's where the gap closes up! In the ether!" Elijah proclaimed emphatically. "When you begin at the beginning, way down deep in the microcosmos, you have the thought, or maybe I should say the message, that starts everything organizing and organizing. And then when evolution has taken life to the most highly organized form, it becomes just like a thought again. It becomes *mind*—just *mind*."

Mind above matter. Mind, the origin of matter. Mind on a higher level, beyond, but an outgrowth of matter.

"I told him it was simple," the boy mused, referring to Lenard, Oberon supposed. "What seems like two sides or two directions is really one continuous surface which travels in and out of the center again and again."

"Alpha and Omega," Oberon murmured.

Elijah stared acutely. "So when you look hard at some-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

thing the way I can," he explained, "you penetrate its source every time, and that way you always see the center of everything. And this point is called the Beginning and the End because it is the beginning and the end of things—it's where the gap closes up."

While Oberon watched, Elijah wrote out Ergang's formula and tried to explain how it had been derived from the Mobius structure. For a man trained almost exclusively in interstellar navigation and diplomacy, Oberon was a passable mathematician, but the finer points eluded him. He could not grasp it all.

But this was the philosophy of Ergang, the precious points half-developed, merely hinted at in the work of the giant intellect. He watched and listened in complete terror and awe, even as Elijah finished, whipped off his clothes and flung them around the room in his usual bed-time manner.

His course lay ahead, unplotted but compulsory.

To ask "Why me?" was futile and pathetic.

From the bunk Elijah was now gazing at him hopefully, eagerly, looking forward to some sort of response from his captain. He waited without making a sound until Oberon came over to pull up the coverlet. Then he rolled over in silence and closed his eyes.

Dimly, Oberon knew his reaction had not totally pleased the child.

The unimaginable touch of time.

Wordsworth

ELIJAH'S EIGHTH BIRTHDAY and Telphon 281 arrived almost simultaneously. While the little boy unwrapped all the gadgets and toys given him, the black void of Telphon closed around the ship and the known universe withdrew behind them. There was a galaxy thousands of light-years ahead, but there was not even the tiniest sparkle in the cosmos to suggest its presence, only the faint radio signals that were monitored constantly at the helm.

Oberon peered into Nimmo's unmanned viewing hood and searched the abyss around them for the dozenth time. Then he called across the nearly empty helm to Benson, who had the misfortune of duty during Elijah's birthday party.

"Any emissions from any other direction?"

"None, sir, except those from behind us," the navigator sighed. He was dividing his attention between his station and the sounds of the celebration, which were being piped through an open channel from rec deck.

The telecom at Oberon's seat was buzzing and he found Sagen's face on the screen. She needed help with some heavy equipment, and all her technicians were attending the party. Snatching the excuse to avoid it himself, Oberon headed for engineering, preferring the frustration of dealing with Sagen. From time to time he found himself inventing small excuses to be around her, hoping that she would volunteer some remark or suggestion to help him. She never did. And she never gave a satisfactory answer to any of his questions.

"Won't Elijah reach a point where he'll realize he's going to do damage and stop himself—the way Ergang did?"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

he asked while lifting the heavy converter component for her to repair. He struggled into the office with it, dumped it on the counter and flung himself into a chair before she could thank him and thereby subtly dismiss him from her presence.

Sagen searched methodically among her tools. "He has a Capacian brain, Captain. He is being brought up by Orions, whose god is a god of knowledge. He is an Institute child. He will do what everyone around him wants him to do."

"Do you know what he is going to tell us?"

"Some."

"But you couldn't do the same yourself if you so desired?"

She replied indifferently, "I haven't got a Capacian brain, Daniel. I don't know everything."

Oberon was frantic. He wanted to leap up and shake her, strike her, yell out that she must come through, must be able to show him some way out of this. There had to be a way to choke the information out of her. But violence was out of the question, just as destroying Elijah was out of the question. Kill Elijah? To do so would be insane. But not to do so would be insane, utterly insane.

A vision of the Whelps filled his whole being with revulsion and disgust. When he glanced at Sagen as she bent over the converter, torrential abuse surged up inside him, burning for release. His mouth numbed with the effort of restraint. Yet, above all this inner strife, his brain was looking down coolly, analytically, patiently waiting him out. This was a reaction, the result of overloaded nerves. It would gain him nothing to order Sagen thrown in the brig, to threaten, rant and rave.

He returned to the helm.

As he entered and headed for the command seat, Nimmo looked up from his viewing hood and reported, "The energy readings we've been receiving are from a supernova, sir." The celebration must have ended, for some of the crew, rumped and disheveled, were at work at their stations.

"What?" Oberon fired back. "Are you certain of that?"

Nimmo checked again. "Sure am. Definitely a supernova. That's a galaxy ahead with a prominent supernova."

Oberon's mind took a dizzy revolution. It occurred to

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

him suddenly that Sagen's starport had been open for the first time.

Another comment from Nimmo reclaimed him. "We can focus on it now." He gave a sharp whistle of astonishment. "Holy Moses, will you look at that!"

A rigid immobility locked Oberon to the deck.

"It looks just like all those drawings Elijah's been making," Nimmo remarked with a laugh and beckoned to his captain.

Moving stiffly, Oberon went to the monitorial and peered into the hood.

Floating against the void of Telphon was a crescent galaxy.

Directly in the center of the radiant arc was a nebula at its dense beginnings, pulsating violent light—a supernova. The crescent curved gently around it, a sheet of stars, all of which appeared to be dispersed at equal distances from one another.

At this station, above the jewel-like imprint, lay the computer representation, a graphed-in crescent, perfect in proportion, shining from the screen.

Oberon raised himself. Benson was craning toward him, expecting instructions. "Maintain course and speed," Oberon directed automatically.

"We're approaching her from—I guess I should say one point of the crescent, sir."

"Fine. It's best to avoid that supernova," Oberon muttered. The man who had always held a polished command suddenly felt disconnected from all logic. He knew that this was the Capacian galaxy, but he had not one shred of evidence to offer his crew.

Not one shred. Certainly not the Capacians, for nothing remained of them except millions of high-speed electrons dispersing forever through space.

No one else, except possibly the Dragon, would be able to guess the meaning of Elijah's compulsion to draw crescents. And the code remained insoluble. As proof that the Capacians were dead, it was the only hope, for somewhere in its text it must identify Capacian territory, and therefore end the senseless quest that his world had undertaken.

He drummed the console and stared ahead with vexation.

A truth rocketed out of Nimmo's subconscious.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

He might have thought that his tired eyes were playing tricks on him when a group of symbols isolated themselves from the rest and chained his gaze for no apparent reason.

For suddenly he recognized the design that Elijah always built with his blocks.

With a jerk of astonishment, he bent forward and stared at the computer screen. Truly, it was the formation that Elijah always made.

He lunged out of his seat and strode around his quarters, bewildered, exultant. *It's my name*, the boy had answered the one time Nimmo had asked him about it.

Returning to his seat, he copied the segment and fed it into the decoding slot along with its translation. On the screen above the code appeared an instant breakdown, the neat little tree of relationships used by a cryptographer to show how a given code encompassed a given alphabet.

With his hands shaking so that he could scarcely move the point of the stylus from symbol to symbol, Nimmo began to translate. Elijah's name was the second word in the first sentence.

Behold Elijah.

Leaping to the telecom, he paged every deck until he located Oberon. "Captain, I've broken the code. It's about Elijah!"

"I'll be right there."

Oberon arrived minutes later, pale and intense. "Let's see what you have." Together, they leaned over the screen.

"Behold Elijah," Nimmo translated aloud, but his voice broke and he read in silence with his captain, allowing the computer to print out the text word by word.

Behold Elijah. When he was a child, he spake as a child, felt as a child, but thought as a man, and yet a man who had once seen in a mirror darkly; but now face to face, who knew once in part, but now knows even as he also is known. And it came to pass that he put away childish speech and childish feeling, and thenceforth could express this man. Now abideth matter, energy and mind, these three; and the greatest of these is mind.

Beside him, Oberon felt Nimmo's body straighten. "Corinthians," the first officer murmured, looking dazed. "From the Bible. . . . What is this all about?"

"There's more," Oberon indicated. "Take it on."

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

What came last was numbers in word form. It was a set of coordinates, the standard signature for intergalactic communications. Nimmo read them off, then stared at Oberon in mute horror throughout the next long moment.

"It's their signature, isn't it?" he said at last.

Oberon nodded. He looked at his first officer and saw perspiration glimmering in the light of the screen. He asked, "But do you know where these coordinates place them?"

"Right in the middle of that supernova," Nimmo whispered.

*Eternity was manifest in the light
of the day, and something infinite
behind everything appeared.*

Thomas Traherne

OBERON RELAYED THE news, in even tones, over the ship-wide channel. The helm telecom buzzed with anxious questions from all departments: Had absolutely every word been translated? Were they certain of the numbers? The reaction was, as he had expected, mass disbelief, a refusal to accept this cataclysmic, premature end to the mission. But he did not have to remind his crew that no Capacian ships had been spotted anywhere for the last seven years—eight, including their mission—and that this supernova was, by all readings, just eight years old. Then came hot bursts of anger. Work was hurled aside in disgust and he was forced to place the ship on alert status in order to keep the necessary personnel at their stations. Everyone else flocked to the observation decks to gaze strickenly at the now very large crescent galaxy.

As he stood with them outside the helm, Oberon became aware of Elijah threading his way among the crew, and it occurred to him that the bulk of the Capacian message had made no noticeable impact on these people yet. In fact, the boy scarcely attracted a wondering glance as he made his way to the visiplate and stared out. Here was the Capacian investment himself, standing unregarded among minds that were too shocked by the apparent loss of their quest to realize that it was not lost. They did not know what was going on, but the awakening would soon descend, and with it questions Oberon must be ready for.

Now the Capacian galaxy lay before them in beautiful, stirring perfection.

Elijah's tiny figure pressed hard against the visiplate.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

As he looked at it, some primeval pulse sounded distantly inside him, as if it were the vague memory of a violent explosion. The little boy frowned, puzzled and disturbed. Like the rumbling of an earthquake, it grew in voice until he backed away and clapped his hands over his ears.

Nearby, Will Benson stood transfixed, his eyes intent on the galaxy. For a moment he felt as if a slight breeze were playing on his face and he could smell the warm, crisp odor of vegetation. A sunbeam came out of nowhere and his lips moved with half-sung words: "Swing low, sweet chariot. Comin' for to carry me home—"

Oberon was aware of millions of layers, all clamoring for knowledge and recognition, and he felt the gigantic and glorious curve of them as it included him in what seemed to be a moving belt of existence.

In a flash he glimpsed all of creation.

But it moved inexorably beyond him, as if carried on the curve, beyond the grasp of words. Like the click of a camera shutter, the infinitesimal opening in the cosmos left nothing of itself to be remembered, but only something to be sensed.

Then came a grinding sound and startled shouts. Everyone was flung to the deck as the ship gave a violent heave and the lights dimmed and flickered. Oberon hit with terrific impact, his body rolling, yet he was able to see what happened beyond the visiplat. The galaxy enveloped them in a rush and shot out of existence. Then distant galaxies blinked in, cluster by cluster, approaching them rapidly at first, then slower and slower. Finally, they appeared to stop.

He climbed to his feet amid the babble of alarm and confusion. Men and women were dashing to their stations and Elijah was crying hysterically for Nimmo.

He ran to Oberon and clung to him. "I want to go home. I want to go home," he sobbed.

For a moment Oberon stared at the galaxies. Then he took the child by the hand and guided him into the helm, where smoke was threading up from burned-out circuits and the crew was gazing, stunned, at their instruments.

Minor damage reports were coming in from all stations.

"Captain!" the navigator shouted. "My chronometers accelerated to a blur for a few seconds—you couldn't even see the digits!"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

It was evident that some kind of force field had seized the ship and had wrenched it off course, for the Pathing Device was still computing serenely, but the coordinates it showed were thousands of light-years from the Capacian galaxy.

Abruptly, Elijah stopped crying and stood looking around in silence. Oberon moved across the helm, studying screens and dials. It was as if, for a few seconds, time itself had accelerated violently. The fact was that the *Anriahd* appeared to be traveling at her normal speed toward unknown regions. They were no longer in Telphon.

While the repair crew went to work, Oberon examined their course structure and found that they had been propelled straight through Telphon and were now on the other side, heading into what looked like another universe.

There is only one universe, Elijah had told Lenard. There is no need for more than one.

He looked at the child, who was still standing with a tear-streaked face in the middle of the helm, watching the activities around him, so engrossed that he did not even notice when Nimmo entered and hurried to his station.

"Readings?" Oberon asked him.

"Galaxies ahead, sir," the Orion reported with astonishment.

Oberon glanced covertly at the helm crew and then at the galaxies minutely approaching them on the main view-screen.

What had just happened was as clear to him as it was obscure to everyone else aboard the ship.

Ergang's universe had just been experienced by them all. Of course, Telphon was the oldest part of the universe, for it was also the place where the warp funneled inward. It was the "twist" in the double Mobius sphere. Everywhere else, the oblivion of the past and the reality of the present were appearances, the apparent two surfaces of a one-surfaced thing, but in the center of Telphon was a tiny point in space and a tiny point in time where that was not so, where all the dimensions came together. The *Anriahd* had just been drawn through that point, and, for a fraction of a second, Oberon's mind had grasped it.

He was aware of it still departing, like a tide of sensations washing out of him so completely that not even the

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

thinnest insight remained. During that moment, he recalled, a strange calm had come over him, even though his terror had not lessened in the slightest, and afterward he had taken Elijah by the hand, something he avoided doing these days. What was it that he had seen and felt? There was no way that he could begin to put it into words.

He glanced around at the dazed faces and wondered if they had felt anything beyond the sudden shock of the force field. A force field, although it eluded explanation at the present time, would have to exist at the cosmic center of Ergang's double Mobius sphere. There the space warp would condense somehow, and time would accelerate, causing a field of great distortion.

They had been swept into the other lobe of Ergang's model, into the other side of the universe.

If this was to be verified mathematically—"discovered" by the scientists aboard the *Anriahd*—it would happen later and after many debates, for it appeared to the League that Telphon encircled the known universe. That was because all cosmic roads led directly to it. If you traveled in space you had to follow the warp, and if you followed the warp, you had to end up in the center of the universe, which was nothing else but the twist of the double Mobius sphere.

"What course, sir?" asked Benson. He had replaced the previous navigator, and his face was pale.

Oberon was not going to waste time wandering around in the other half of the universe until further assignments obligated him.

"Reverse the course we have just taken and log it in with the ship's computers," he dictated.

Benson was startled and seemed to be slow to comprehend. "You mean we are not to use the Pathing Device anymore, sir?"

"I see no need," Oberon replied. "We know where we are going—the coordinates are already set. We are simply returning the way we came."

Nimmo looked up sharply. "That will take us straight through that force field again, Captain."

"Did it register on any of your instruments, Mr. Christie?"

"Not as an energy reading or any kind of obstacle. In

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

fact, there wasn't any warning of it at all," he answered, incredulous.

"Then I see no way of plotting a detour if we have no means of detecting it."

This time another voice answered him from the telecom console at his arm. "You are technically correct, Captain."

He turned a neutral face to Sagen and met an equally neutral gaze.

"I must add—unfortunately," she went on, "whatever it was that we just passed through caused a serious drain on the ship's fuel reserve."

"How long are we good for?"

"If we go through that again? We will have just enough fuel to see us back to Ruthenia at standard hyperlight. We will have to resupply there."

"I'll have the course for Ruthenia laid in," Oberon replied and blanked her off, satisfied that they were not in imminent danger. The Pathing Device would continue to operate from its berth in engineering, but its data would not be recorded in the helm. Oberon decided to let it run unsupervised and then test it for accuracy against the ship's plotting when they got back to Ruthenia. It would have to be tested, anyway, before its next assignment, if these regions excited interest—which they undoubtedly would.

Again with no warning the phenomenon seized them. This time the crew was prepared and everyone braced themselves and gripped railings. Again the lights flickered and small connections went up in smoke. But it was not quite the same. No Capacian galaxy rushed by them, although coordinates indicated that it should have. This did not make sense. Oberon paid it little attention, for he was distracted by the same vibrant jarring of the senses, the brief, intense expansion of himself as the *Anriahd* shot back through the twist.

When it was over he lowered himself into the command seat, exhausted and shaken, and aware of Elijah waiting nearby. The child did not speak until his captain turned to meet the fixed gaze of his dark, half-tilted eyes.

"Why did they name me Elijah?"

By "they" he must mean his parents, Oberon inferred. He shook his head from side to side. "I don't know," he said, heavily uncomfortable, and unsure of where this was going to lead.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Elijah remained close beside him, fingering the wide arm of the seat thoughtfully. "Will I ever see them again—my parents?"

"Yes, I'm sure that could be arranged," Oberon submitted.

"Then I could ask them why they named me Elijah."

Oberon stared back without responding, muted by the raw overload of his emotions. The feeling of having missed something had become an unwanted ache behind his jaw and a pressure in his eyes, and yet some inner part of him was relieved. He knew he had seen something. He was still aware of that perception receding further and further from him, and of the few vague feelings that were left ebbing forever out of his system. Yet, for a moment, there had been something ultimate before him. Then he knew why he could not say what he had seen and why no memory of it remained.

It was impossible for a normal human being to assimilate it—not without being torn apart.

The glory, jest and riddle of the world.

Alexander Pope

OBERON MET WITH the Dragon in the projection room half an hour before the scheduled conference.

"He's a very small boy with a very large importance—it's too big for anyone that age," Edwards said with low-toned urgency. "Remember what I told you before, when we found out that he is seeing ether. We don't want to force our hand in this. He's at a very impressionable age—"

Impressionable, Oberon thought, yes. The boy gathered impressions and drew them inward, where they were unraveled, categorized, and found their way out again with all meanings laid bare.

"There are some characters on this ship who could turn him into a monster of conceit. Just look at the way Shyla Benson gushes over him—" the Dragon went on, but Oberon cut him off with annoyance.

"You don't fool me, Dragon."

Edwards looked at him blankly.

"You don't know how to handle this any better than I do."

Gaunt hands waved disdainfully toward screens, banks of reference tapes and computer terminals. "No," he emphasized. "And all of this machinery is no help to us now. Elijah's case is beyond that. We've got to pilot ourselves on sheer instinct, Obi, and you're the captain of this ship." He droned on, as if it soothed his nerves to hear himself talk. "You sometimes wonder if man has any instincts left, or if instinct is just another vestigial organ like the appendix, useless from lack of use." He departed on a favorite

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

tangent. "Speaking as a doctor, I can only point out the danger of that becoming true. Look at us. We have machines that can do almost anything our senses can do: read the emotions of our fellowman, detect his motives, tell whether or not he is lying. Instead of using our memories, we use tapes to replay the past for us. And what does that leave for us? Feelings are obsolete. They have become subverted—"

The Dragon broke off suddenly, and his face darkened. He was regarding the empty space beyond Oberon's shoulder with an odd expression.

"Kate," he murmured. Turning, Oberon was startled to see that Sagen had entered and was moving up to take a seat at the table. He had not heard her come in.

"You're early," he commented inanely.

She made no reply and the Dragon said nothing more. For several minutes the three of them sat in silence, looking at each other.

"There is one thing that I don't understand," Oberon said at last, addressing himself to his chief engineer. "How was Elijah able to break the code? I mean, how can he know what his name is in the Capacian language if he has never had any contact with them at all?"

"I can tell you how," the Dragon spoke up, snapping out of his withdrawal. "Ever hear of the theory of hereditary knowledge?" Sagen smiled vaguely, but she would not look directly at him.

"Of course," Oberon said. "They say that if an organism became advanced enough, it could evolve a method of storing information in such a way that it could be inherited by the offspring—as if it were eye color or height."

The Dragon took it from there, making a point of directing his statements at Sagen. "We have a good idea of how advanced the Capacians were, how highly evolved," he said. "If Elijah can see the ether, then why couldn't he have been born with certain basic information already coded in his brain cells? What do you have to say about that, Kate?"

Oberon stiffened, wishing the Dragon would not push his luck, for he did not fully comprehend Sagen's position as an accessory in the Capacian experiment. His feelings toward her were not the same as Oberon's, but different,

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

and unclear. Oberon was immensely surprised when Sagen confirmed what they had just been saying.

"You are quite right, Doctor," she said and continued with dry exactitude. "Elijah's brain cells contain certain micropatterns for which there are representative genes. These micropatterns house memories—or information, as you put it—which would be passed on to the offspring in a normal Capacian. But Elijah was cloned from human material, so, naturally, he cannot pass them on. When he reproduces, he will pass on the same set of chromosomes as Will Benson."

Just then Nimmo hurried in, which brought the discussion to a conspicuous end. As he passed to the projection console, he glanced obliquely at Sagen and blinked a silent question at Oberon. Oberon tossed him the newly programmed tapes of the Capacian galaxy. He would have to explain later that Sagen had been discussing Elijah's progress in matters of engineering, something she never offered to do under any circumstances, but Nimmo did not know that. He had noticed the many private conferences between Edwards and Oberon, and when he knew for sure that they concerned his little charge, he expected to be filled in. It was getting increasingly difficult to conceal Sagen's role, but both Oberon and the Dragon felt it prudent not to overload their first officer with any of these developments. He was already too emotionally involved with the boy.

In fact, his attachment to Elijah was becoming a matter of concern. It was going to be difficult for the child to part with his friend at the end of the mission. He was going to undergo the kind of trauma that Paiselle's plan for his upbringing had been designed to avoid. There was more than just the Brandons' indifference at work in their estrangement from their child, Oberon was convinced. Something had to account for Elijah's constant, unfluctuating personality. He had never had an emotional jolt.

"My little pal is really disgusted with your Capacians," Nimmo remarked as he inserted the cassettes and programmed the wall screens. "He's like a little kid who's just found out there's no Santa Claus."

Sagen watched the screens impassively. Oberon asked, "Has he had anything in particular to say since we passed through that force field?"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Nimmo grinned at them and shrugged. "Last night he kept babbling to himself—a constant stream. 'Fraid I didn't listen very carefully because I was tired, and it was too complicated, anyway. But I do remember him saying something about a twist—about passing through some kind of twist. But I don't know what he was talking about."

"Was Elijah sleeping when you left him?" Oberon checked warily.

"Yep, like a baby. We played gravity pool for two hours, so he was sure to want that nap."

Oberon was satisfied. This was the first time he had excluded Elijah on purpose from a ship-wide concern, but it was best not to expose the child to the questions the crew of the *Anriahd* would suddenly be asking.

He had not underestimated the situation.

It was a disheartened and perplexed group that assembled before him. The loss of their goal had blighted their pride. The mission had been a gamble, of course. They had accepted the possibility of finding nothing in Telphon, but no one had expected to find the Capacians destroyed, and the loss humiliated them.

Why had they died? Why hadn't they built an artificial world or moved to some other planet? Why hadn't they phrased the code in their own words instead of borrowing the format from Corinthians?

"They never let us learn anything about them before," Shyla Benson pointed out. "Maybe it was the best way to cover up their own style of communication, by saying what they wanted to say in our words instead of theirs."

"Good point, Miss Benson," Martins, the sociologist, replied. "But I think we should consider what they are saying rather than how."

There was a murmur of assent.

He went on succinctly, addressing Oberon as if he had been elected speaker for the rest of the crew. "This whole thing is unheard of, but I guess we have to accept it. We've got to admit that our first reaction when we heard the translation was that these Capacians were playing some kind of game with us. But why should they bother? It can't be a joke. It's their first communication with us and their last words, on the cosmic scale. They've got to be trying to tell us something. Now, we all know what

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Elijah Brandon is, or we think we do: a telepath and a hypermentality. There's an awesome mind in that little kid—we all know that, and we haven't been exactly losing our heads over it. But let's just stop a moment. Let's just face simple fact. Here are the last words of the most advanced civilization in the universe, and they're about Elijah."

Heads nodded, faces showed collective agreement.

"I don't see that we can derive anything from the code that we don't already know about Elijah," Oberon equivocated.

"We'd just like to know a little more about him," Martins requested. "Mr. Muriat, what can you tell us about his education?"

Muriat reviewed Elijah's curriculum and explained it to them. Nimmo was called upon for the more personal aspects of the boy's development.

"He's just like any other kid in some ways," the Orion assured them with a grin. "He likes to tear around and cut up. Doesn't play with toys much, but he likes some kinds of quiet games. He likes his plasticubes—" Oberon refused to return the quick, humorous glance. "And we all know about his precision drawing. And when he isn't cross-examining the computers, he's climbing on them, but he hasn't gone up any reaction tubes lately." There was a murmur of laughter. "And he can play gravity pool like a pro."

"Does he have any strange habits? Anything we might be overlooking?" questioned one man rather shrewdly, and Oberon's gaze darted to him in near alarm. But the man was a psychologist. Such a question could be expected of him.

Nimmo stuck out his lower lip and rolled his eyes thoughtfully. "Not that I can think of," he answered.

As Oberon had expected, these pursuits got them nowhere. Nearly every person in the room had tutored Elijah at some time, if not regularly. Except for the incredible power of his mind, they could only agree that there was nothing else particularly remarkable about him. And he certainly looked ordinary. None of them had paid more than polite attention to Shyla's chatter about his resemblance to her brother. Nearly everyone half-believed that the child was part Ayhillian, but out of deference to

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

the Council the subject was tactfully avoided. And none of them saw enough of him from day to day to draw any conclusions from his behavior. If they had caught him watching the ether, they would have thought he was daydreaming. Even the fact that he frequently drew crescents meant nothing beyond a simple coincidence to them.

But the drilling went on. The mood of interrogation seemed to have taken them by surprise, and they questioned their captain as if he were the only source of the explanation they needed. He sensed this, and in it recognized the same dependence that he had always felt on Paiselle and the Council for answers, direction, authority. It was a dependence bred into all of them from their earliest infancy; an upbringing by exceptional people and miraculous minds.

"It appears to me," Oberon addressed them, "that the Capacians never intended us to encounter them in the flesh—"

"If they were flesh," someone interjected.

Oberon went on: "But they couldn't resist a commentary on what must be the greatest genius our own world has ever known. That's what it looks like to me—a commentary, even dressed up in our own syntax to make it as clueless as possible."

Muriat reminded them, "Elijah is unusual even as a genius. We have never had anyone so brilliant—we mustn't forget that. Maybe they were simply impressed."

"At their level?" Martins scoffed. "Unlikely. I still don't see why they should take such a huge interest in him," he persisted. Then he said, "Perhaps Elijah resembles them."

There was a dispersal of low-toned exchanges, followed by a waiting silence. Oberon felt the sharp jab of a nerve in his jaw as he replied to this. "Proceed, Dr. Martins," he encouraged smoothly.

"Look at our own example," the sociologist cited, taking them in with a broad sweep of his hand. "When is it that we get involved—however slightly—with any species on any planet? It is when that species is humanoid—like ourselves. I think we should at least consider that there might be something special about Elijah that only Capacians can appreciate. Maybe it's something we can't even see. But we could look for it."

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"We could start right now," one woman, a physicist, spoke up. "I myself would like to know a little more about Mascot Brandon. I don't know about you, but from my own experience I can say that he's a walking physics handbook. I never have to look anything up when he's around. I just ask." There was more laughter; then everyone was swapping anecdotes. Oberon, Edwards and Sagen were silent, listening.

Oberon had failed to imagine how many similar confrontations had taken place between Elijah and other members of the crew. But they were numerous, and as they were told he detected in every case the same faint, apologetic unease that had haunted the Dragon's last private conference with him.

The door opened suddenly and there was Elijah, his hair mussed and his eyes sleepy. All talking stopped instantly, and the little boy found himself gazing in surprise at a roomful of silent, wary men and women.

He turned to Oberon with indignation.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Captain Obi, but I didn't know there was any conference."

The wall panorama distracted him and he paused to stare. Three dozen small screens glowed with the spectra of all known galactic shapes: galaxies in near collision, with their arms and bridges warped into peculiar embraces, galaxies with tails, elliptical galaxies, spiral galaxies, cluster galaxies, double galaxies.

Relief coursed through Oberon. "Come on in, Elijah," he invited. "We're holding a little session on comparative astronomy. The crescent galaxy as opposed to the other forms we know. Nimmo."

Nimmo tapped out instructions and the Capacian galaxy flashed onto the central screen.

Oberon continued speaking while Elijah hunted for a chair and finally settled for a lap. "As you can see, the shape of this galaxy is radically different—absolute cosmic perfection, if such a thing can be. I do not believe that any tidal distortion can be responsible because there are no other galaxies close enough to affect it."

"No, we can rule that out," someone remarked.

Nimmo switched views while Oberon went on evenly: "Perfection it is, I insist. You will notice that all of the stars are in the same plane, and all are approximately the

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

same distance apart. There is no halo, no clusters. And all of them are old, in the last stages of stellar evolution. How many stars, Nimmo?"

"One hundred billion, exactly, sir," Nimmo said.

Oberon gazed at the glittering arc. "And number one hundred billion and one was the Capacian star," he murmured. Elijah, slumped relaxedly on the lap of some woman Oberon did not know by name, followed the discussion closely, his eyes two depths of pensive watchfulness.

When it was over the officers and crew, except for the boy, dispersed. Oberon also remained in his seat, debating whether or not to question the child about his knowledge of the twist, but he decided against it, at least temporarily. He had to be cautious now that the Capacian message was at large.

He must be sure that he kept Elijah's own message confined to the few who had already heard it. While he thought about this, he felt himself whirlpool to the core of its meaning, struggling against the forces inside him that screamed to know more. Constantly he recoiled from it, aware of what was happening to his world. Constantly he returned, fascinated.

The Capacians said, *Now abideth matter, energy and mind: these three, and the greatest of these is mind.*

Mind over and above matter, Elijah had indicated. Thoughts, the process of mind, operated on time cycles, Oberon reasoned; they began and ended much like an event in time. If the ether were thought—the ultimate thought—then it, too, should fit into this pattern. And yet it was not the same. It was timeless. *Timeless itself, it gives time.* Was it, then, a medium which propagated all lower forms of mind, giving time in this respect?

Religion always demanded its timeless sphere as the dwelling place beyond nature for the god or gods. The ancient mythical gods of Oberon's civilization had been depicted as living outside of man's time on a changeless plateau of existence. While man had this thing called time to race against and contend with on his own plane of being, the gods were always timeless. Were the ancients so very wrong in their basic assumptions about things beyond nature?

Motionless itself, it gives motion. How could something

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

motionless cause motion? That defied common sense and took him back to Lenard's parting advice: *Try to get away from making sense out of something.* Yet it was a known fact that cause and effect did not always hold true in the sub-atomic world. Down there, far beneath the atom's tiniest parts, it was apparently possible for something motionless to cause motion.

Abruptly, he came out of his thoughts when he noticed what Elijah was about to do. "What are you doing?" he asked sharply.

Elijah looked up from the projection console. "I'm going to replay the first half of the meeting, the part I missed," he explained.

"Go find Nimmo," Oberon directed. "Go play, or something. There's nothing in the first half that would interest you."

"But I want to hear it," Elijah protested, his eyes widening. "I don't want to miss anything."

"You may not replay it. That is an order," Oberon snapped, taking the cassette away from him and replacing it in its filing slot. As a final gesture he switched off the master unit so that the wall screens and table readers went neutral. Elijah was staring up, alarmed by this unexpected rebuke.

"Yes, Captain Obi."

Oberon felt sudden distress. He realized that this was probably the first time the child had ever been spoken to harshly. What was the matter with him? He had to control himself better than that.

"I'm sorry, Elijah. You're a good boy—I'm not angry, just a little tired. We've all been rather upset lately. We've all had a lot on our minds."

Elijah's fright vanished. He sighed. "Because the Capacians are dead?"

"Yes, that's it." Oberon took his hand and led him out of the projection room. "You're off duty now, aren't you? So am I. How about a swim?" After all, Elijah was only a child, and like a normal youngster in a few ways. Perhaps he would forget.

"Okay," Elijah muttered.

They went to rec deck and changed for the pool. For half an hour he splashed with his mascot, dunked him, threw him in on request. The deck, with its sounds of

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

splashing water and shimmering reflections, had a dimension of normality that refreshed him for the moment. But the truth always burned through the distractions, the escapes. A heavy feeling had pervaded his body and was nearly sinking him. He must be, directly or indirectly, responsible for Elijah's destruction. But he found that when he pried off his moral aversion, he only discovered the simple but effective obstacles of the practical side.

Elijah was just about as safe as he could be. There was, of course, a certain amount of risk in sending anyone out into space, and the risk was greater the younger the child. A child of seven, as Elijah had proved, was more apt to crawl up a reaction tube than a child of twelve or thirteen. But detection devices and communications were too good. Except in the case of a totally freak accident, there were not many ways in which a youngster could get killed aboard a mission starship.

"Wanna see me dive?" Elijah climbed up on the edge of the pool beside Oberon, bent over and tumbled head first into the water. When he surfaced Oberon applauded him. Elijah climbed out, proud and dripping.

A hot, tight pain grew under his skull; it was like sandpaper scrubbing raw nerve ends.

He clutched the slippery little body and playfully tumbled it back into the water.

*Number is entirely a creature
of the mind.*

Berkeley

HIS FIRST SUSPICION when he found Elijah alone in the projection room several weeks later was that natural curiosity about that conference had overwhelmed his mascot's honor. But he was wrong.

Shining up from the table viewer was the crescent galaxy.

Elijah sat humming and kicking his legs, gazing at it. His one-piece playsuit was streaked with lubriflake from engineering, his black hair was tousled and he looked, in the manner of small boys, as if he could use a good bath.

The short legs kicked rhythmically and Oberon realized that the child was concentrating almost with ferocity, so that it seemed necessary for his body to work off the energies of his mind.

"What are you up to, Elijah?" he asked, gently this time.

Elijah stopped humming and kicking and confronted him squarely.

"I'm looking at this. It's my favorite shape, you know."

"I thought the sphere was your favorite shape."

Elijah frowned. "Well, the sphere is more important to everything else, but this one is more important to me."

"Why?"

A glazed look came over the boy's eyes. "I don't know." Then he added quickly, "But I'll find out."

They were quiet for a moment, Oberon watching Elijah, Elijah watching the screen. He began to hum and kick again, until something seemed to click in his thinking and he demanded, almost in a shout, "Are you sure I was born?"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

He could not conceptualize these feelings—not yet. This was only a beginning. This humming and kicking, this fascination with the crescent shape and the intense wondering—these were the childish things. Elijah must not be allowed to put away his childish things.

Despite these realizations, a dry chuckle escaped Oberon. “Of course you were born,” he stated without elaborating. He had answered the question.

“There are things that I don’t know yet,” Elijah sighed dismally. “I said that once before—to Sagen.” He went on: “And since that time I’ve found out exactly three hundred eighty-one things—things I’ve found out by myself. I’ve been taught exactly five thousand sixty-two things since then. But that’s not even close yet.”

“Close to what?”

“Close to knowing everything that there is,” Elijah said matter-of-factly.

Oberon pursued him. “Do you know how many things you have to know in order to know everything?”

Elijah nodded.

“How many? What’s the number?”

He received an open-mouthed stare, and then Elijah continued to gaze at him, as if trying to figure him out. Finally he said, “It’s one,” as if he were certain Oberon should have known this fact. “When you get that far, it isn’t a number anymore. It’s just one—one thing.”

The telecom buzzed, startling them both.

“Captain? Are you down there?” It was Nimmo’s voice.

“We’re talking!” Elijah yelled indignantly into it, and Oberon removed him, gently but firmly.

“I’m here, Nimmo. What’s the matter?”

“Something really strange. You’d better get up here. Nothing’s making sense. I think you ought to have a look for yourself.”

Oberon reported to the helm and found Nimmo bending in consternation over his viewing hood, eyes riveted.

“Sir, we ought to be sighting the Ruthenian galaxy now, but damned if I can find it. No trace. Have a look.”

Oberon examined readings and graphs, and it became evident at once that their destination was not where it should be.

“Check our position,” he ordered.

The navigator reported their coordinates. The *Anriahd*

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

was approaching the Ruthenian galaxy, as plotted. But there were none of the usual signs to indicate anything at all ahead of them and the telescreens showed nothing but void beyond their prow.

"She's disappeared!" Nimmo exclaimed.

"A galaxy does not simply vanish, Mr. Christie," Oberon said angrily, checking and rechecking. "There are no phantom islands in space."

Obviously, there was nothing wrong with the monitoring system, either. They were still registering magnetic disturbances, temperature and the chemical elements of the usual cosmic debris that surrounded them.

There were baffled faces glancing up at him from instrument panels. He saw that Elijah had followed him to the helm and was gazing pensively at some chart readings. The boy raised his eyes appealingly to Oberon, as if about to say something, but Oberon turned away without giving him the opportunity.

He did not need to ask Elijah anything this time, for he suddenly knew what had happened.

Stepping to the telecom, he pressed the button for Sagen's office. In a moment she came into view, looking interrupted and short of patience. "Yes, what is it?"

"Relay the Pathing Device readings."

Her eyebrows raised. "The Pathing Device readings? You'll have to wait a moment. I haven't assigned anyone to that station since you canceled its use."

"That's all right. Just pipe me up whatever you've got."

In a few moments the sparse interior of Sagen's domain blanked off and the coordinates of the *Anriahd's* position, according to the Pathing Device, appeared on the screen.

He transferred this data to the main viewscreen and listened to the startled exclamations around him with a resigned smile.

"S-sir," the helmsman stammered, "according to that, we're about three million light-years off course."

Behind them, Elijah was bouncing about, giggling, as if highly amused, but Oberon ignored him.

"Wait a moment! I'm getting a glimmer!" Nimmo shouted from his monitorial.

Oberon nodded. "We seem to have quite a discrepancy," he said, addressing them all. "Ship's computers place us in one location and the Pathing Device places us

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

in another. And I have a hunch that we will know shortly which one of them is correct. If the Pathing Device is correct, that glimmer ahead of us should be the Draconian galaxy, and we should begin, very soon, to pick up transmissions from the main spaceport of Draco One."

Nimmo stared at him, dumbfounded. "Draco?" he cried. "But that's clear on the other side of the League."

"Exactly the point," Oberon said. "Better phrased, it would be on the other side of our half of the universe, which is exactly where we are. I believe that Telphon is responsible. It turned us around—yes—but not back on our original course because of the way we turned—"

"The way?"

"Telphon turned us in a figure-eight, following the natural warp of the force field we entered. We were catapulted out again on a course parallel to our original one—on the other side of our half of the universe."

He glanced around, reading the bewilderment in their faces. But it would soon be perfectly clear to all of them. As soon as the data reached the labs three decks below, and the navigational mechanisms were carefully inspected, all proper connections would be made.

"Then our computers have been damaged," Nimmo surmised. "They're still behaving as if we had reversed course for Ruthenia."

"But the Pathing Device—" Shyla Benson spoke up. "Wouldn't it have been damaged, too?"

Oberon was silent for a moment. If he needed final proof that Sagen was indeed a Capacian, he was about to have it. No one else would construct a navigational device to withstand the huge amount of concentrated stress found only in Telphon, and never before experienced by any League starship.

"That remains to be seen," he said. He could ignore Elijah no longer. The boy was hovering impatiently at his side, charged with excitement, scarcely able to stand still.

"Can I tell? Can I tell them?" he begged.

Distract him. Give him something to do. But the monitorial beside Nimmo was inconveniently manned by a technician. As Oberon glanced toward the faulty navigational grid, Elijah could contain himself no longer and burst into an explanation.

"It's really very simple. Telphon is the twist in the cen-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

ter of the double Mobius sphere," he related vociferously to his startled audience. "It's like this—Ergang found out that the universe was shaped like a double Mobius sphere. That's how he got the physics for hyperlight drive and everything. And that other universe we saw when we went through the twist is really not another universe, but just the other half of our own. We didn't go on into it this time. Maybe we will some other time. Anyway, Telphon is the center, the twist, and it's a place where time seems to get faster because all the dimensions are sort of compressed by the warp. If you follow the warp, you always go in a huge figure-eight, and you always end up exactly where you started from. That's what we're doing. We'll go through the Draconian Empire and then we'll be back in the League again." As he talked his excitement steadily diminished until his voice at last fell into a strange, flat, toneless quality of pure knowing. He went on to explain where the weaknesses of the *Anriahd's* computers had been exposed by Telphon strains and how the physics of the Pathing Device had resisted them.

Oberon glanced about the helm mildly, every ounce of will clamping down on sheer panic. Shyla was agape, and even Nimmo was watching uncomfortably. When the child finally stopped, his explanation complete, they all seemed dazed. There were hasty, low-voiced exchanges and nervous smiles. No one said anything out loud.

"Captain, are you all right?" Shyla asked suddenly. "You look very pale."

"Don't you feel well, sir?" someone else asked.

Oberon straightened up quickly. "It's all right. I'm all right. Just a headache." He forced a smile. "It's not exactly pleasant to find your ship several million light-years off course."

There was tense laughter. "We could refuel at Draco One," Nimmo speculated, but Oberon did not answer him. He moved toward the exit, something dreadfully imminent.

"Nimmo, take over."

He plunged through the exit. Halfway across observation deck, he stumbled against the visiplate and stood there sweating and shaking, as if deathly ill.

Why was this happening to him?

It seemed impossible for it to be happening.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

For a few seconds he trembled, overcome with anger and sorrow for himself. But then he rallied and stood for a moment at a loss, staring ahead vacantly. Inside, beneath the fading grip of self-pity, was a basic disbelief in his feelings, such as when, as a child, he had tried to make himself cry in order to gain something. What he had wanted just now was to feel sorry for himself in order to overlook his real fear—whether or not it was right to kill Elijah.

His world viewed this child as a gift from the gods. But a gift from the gods was unfair, for evolution demanded its phases of time and would not tolerate disruption. The universe was filled with beings in roughly the same stages of development as *Homo sapiens*. A family, they seemed to be meant to think and grow together, to reach out, to socialize, to merge psyche with psyche.

His training had made him a good decision-maker, but not a comfortable one. He never felt utterly sure.

Suppose, his weary mind plodded on, suppose I were Elijah's father? Suppose everything were the same except that he was my son, and I still believed the right thing to do was kill him? Would being his father make just enough of a difference to save his life? Is Elijah simply unfortunate that I am *not* his father? Again, his memory probed back, desperately, to Lenard. How would he handle something like this? If it had been his own son instead of Elijah whom the Capacians had chosen, could he kill him? Would he, like Abraham, be entirely certain that it was right?

He was not Elijah's father, but his captain, with the same amount of responsibility for him, only minus the emotional ties.

There was no one who could advise him.

**From obscure to bright,
By due gradation, nature's sacred law.**

Edward Young

WITHIN HOURS, ELIJAH'S explanation was verified. As the faint glimmer expanded into a gigantic, star-studded wheel—the Draconian galaxy—they began to receive transmissions, fragmentary at first, from the command headquarters on Draco One.

They passed a cluster of decoy patrol ships, staked out for the purpose of wasting the enemy's torpedo rays. Next a detachment of real patrols and scoutships glided in to form a parallel course to the *Anriahd*, three on a side.

"I'm not afraid," Elijah asserted courageously from his station beside Nimmo. Encumbered by his headset, he gaped expectantly at the mainscreen.

"Maintain general alert status." Oberon's voice filtered through the telecom to all decks.

"Contact established," Shyla announced, and a thickly accented voice delivered its curt message.

"Greetings from the Draconian Command of Draco One. This is Commander Itanar speaking. Please state your business."

Oberon spoke carefully into the mike. "This is Captain Daniel Oberon of the League Space Troop. Due to computer malfunction, we are thousands of light-years off course, and must refuel. We have no authorization to enter your sectors, and no clearance for visitation in your Empire. However, I request permission to assume standard orbit around your planet."

There were a few moments of silence, broken by the mild static of the open channel.

"He's coming in over video," Shyla said, and all eyes

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

centered on the mainscreen as the view of the galaxy shimmered out to be replaced by the head and shoulders of Itanar against the harsh angles of a Draconian war office. From the screen he looked down at the calm expression of the alert young man in the command seat. His eyes roved the helm cautiously and almost blinked with astonishment when they encountered Elijah. But the sight of the child seemed to relax him.

"It is assumed that you know that we are in a state of war," he said, voicing a military courtesy only. The League had been amply aware of this for several decades.

Oberon answered, "I have no choice but to risk the dangers of entering a warring system. We must take orbit to conserve fuel, and either purchase the necessary factor from you or await relief from the nearest League outpost."

"Permission granted on behalf of your condition," came the reply at last. "Our survey scopes have established that you are indeed dangerously low on fuel, and that your secondary circuits have been weakened. Normally the patrols that are holding flight beside you would escort you to our planet, but they have been ordered to remain in that area. We are expecting an attack on Rastaban."

Rastaban was a Draco I colony in a small, two-planet system minutes ahead. Then the objective of the war at present was this solar system.

Nimmo's eyes rolled at his captain. "Do you mind if we use a little extra fuel and lay on some speed?" he muttered. "The sooner we're out of this area, the better."

Oberon regarded the craggy face of Itanar and nodded gratitude. "Thank you, Ty Itanar." The commander blanked off and moments later the scout and patrol vessels swooped away as abruptly as they had come.

"Full speed ahead," Oberon instructed the helm.

Avoiding the Rastaban system, the *Anriahd* proceeded toward Draco I.

During the interim Oberon debated with himself. There was not much time to decide on tactics, but he supposed that an audience with Marek would be expected of them; at times it seemed that the emperor of Draco I was more available to outworlders than he was to his own people. He ruled absolutely, but subtly, through a subordinate legion of delegates, of whom Ty Itanar, Commander, was

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

one. Yet he was not a tyrant. He was the heart and soul of his world, open to its needs and closed to his own. Unmarried, as completely unadorned by private life as a man could be, he lived for the conquests of his planet, and the League was indeed lucky that he never used his power for personal gain. He was less aggressive than his Draco II counterpart, but, officially, he remained an enemy of the League.

Oberon thought first of Elijah, who was by all standards the most important member of the crew. The prospect of taking him down to see Marek filled him with misgivings, but he suspected the child would be safer on the planet than in orbit, where the activity of an attack would imperil any visiting ship. On the other hand, they would be shuttling down to the command headquarters of Draco I, certainly a prime target. It was a toss-up, really. In the end, Oberon decided that Elijah would transport down with himself and Nimmo, and he hoped the emperor was magnanimous enough to overlook the indiscretions of children. He thoroughly doubted that Elijah would remember to smile with his mouth closed.

In deference to Draconian social etiquette, they would have to remember not to smile or laugh with their lips parted, displaying teeth. That was going to be damnably hard, even for grown men. As soon as Oberon announced his decision, Nimmo began at once to instruct Elijah in their necessary deportment.

"The Draconian formal address is Ty, like our Mister. You call the emperor Ty Marek."

Elijah shrieked with laughter, then halted at Nimmo's blank stare. "You mean we have to Ty them?" he dissolved in giggles again, falling off his seat. Nimmo caught Oberon's stern glance.

"Sorry, Captain." He grinned. "I was told that a little horsing around would be good for him, but I'm afraid he's gotten into the habit." He began to teach Elijah in earnest. "And laugh with your lips shut—like this." He demonstrated as best he could, and Elijah, in the perfect mood to practice, wandered around the helm in a state of close-mouthed hilarity.

"U-hmmm. Hmmm. U-hmmm."

Oberon punched a shipwide channel. "Attention, all decks. You are fully aware of the navigational error that

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

has occurred due to the damage sustained in Telphon 281. We are about to assume standard orbit around Draco One, as soon as a docking berth is available. Maintain general alert. All stations stand by."

In another twenty minutes the emperor's secretary made contact, granting permission to dock for fueling and requesting official visitation at Marek's headquarters.

Oberon assigned Sagen to the docking and fueling detail—which would take, at most, two hours—and placed her in command of the helm. Then, as orbit was established, he reported to the transport deck with Nimmo and Elijah.

Transit time was about ten minutes. The shuttle, piloted by Nimmo, skimmed over mile after mile of missile sites and launching pads before being guided in to an empty landing strip by the main control tower. From afar, the military complex appeared a mass of blocks, flung together without plan, but as they drew closer it became the starkly impressive and forceful architecture of war.

"You may debark," the control tower voice intoned.

It was the first time Oberon had ever set foot on a Draconian planet. The first thing he noticed was that apparently all Draconians moved slowly and ponderously, although their girth, considering their height, was spare. And they *were* tall. The warden who met them outside the shuttle airlock towered at a good seven and a half feet. Close at his heels was a dog the size of a lion, with a snout like a grizzly bear. In a flash Oberon remembered Camille Brandon's lecture on the Draconian style of domesticating animals and her mention of the most intriguing facet—the Canine Patrol.

In a military complex such as this one, there were few armed guards and almost no sentries, only dogs roaming everywhere. Every person within, even the emperor himself, wore an odor pin, a small disc with adhesive backing which could be obtained only from the wardens. Anyone lacking this form of official passport was instantly detected by the dogs and literally ambushed. The dogs were not trained to kill or even attack, but their thunderous barking quickly brought authority to the scene. They were also trained as guides. A designated number of hand claps provided a visitor with an instant escort to any

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

area within the complex. Each dog responded to a different set of signals; each was assigned to a different area. It was a handy system when every available Draconian male was needed to man warships and orbital defense systems. Intergalactic warfare was a business that consumed the entire race.

The warden gave them each an odor pin and began to lead them toward the main gates of the compound.

Elijah hung back, staring with alarm at the dog.

"Nimmo, pick me up," he commanded, and it occurred to Oberon that he might never have encountered such a large animal at close quarters.

"The child need not be afraid," the warden assured them in guttural tones. "The canines are not hostile to those who wear the odor pin."

Nimmo carried him a short distance, then set him down, but Elijah gave a yell and began stamping his feet, as if in a tantrum. "No! Carry me! Carry me!"

There were several dogs approaching from their post at the main gates, their heads lowered as they ambled up. From the security of Nimmo's arms, Elijah gazed at them, stricken with fear.

Oberon heard the warden chuckle and saw Nimmo's puzzled frown. He made a mental note to report this to the Dragon, for it was unlike this child, so boldly intimate with the secrets of the cosmos, to fear animals.

As the entrance drew nearer he looked around, absorbing all that he could of his surroundings. Deepening purples of evening lengthened before them, slicing through the reflected light of three moons. The walls, a harsh mixture of granite and narsatch, curved and twisted for miles, blocking off huge areas of landing strips, hangar and missile zones and launching pads. In the north sky the shimmering luminescence of a far-distant city looked like the beginnings of an electrical storm. A rigid cold hung in the air.

They were led into an enclosure swarming with dogs, then inside the vestibule of the command headquarters, where the warden turned them over to the dog which had accompanied them from the landing field. He clapped his hands three times.

"There. He will escort you to the staterooms, where Ty Marek awaits you. Follow him."

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Thank you," said Oberon with a carefully sealed smile. The Draconian gave a curt nod and stalked off.

In all directions passages stretched away, interweaving walls of deep purple and metallic trim. It reminded Oberon of some kind of insect dwelling. Treading on the smooth obsidian floor was like walking on frozen night. Upside down, their images walked beneath them. Archaic torches lit the way. Elijah had consented to walk now, but he clutched Nimmo's hand and watched their shaggy usher apprehensively.

The dog halted before a wide, flared portal hung with gilded drapes and guarded by two other members of the Canine Patrol. Oberon caught himself almost saying, "Thank you," but the big dog lowered its massive head and sauntered away.

"Enter," called a voice, deep and resonant, from within.

They passed through, and a towering figure moved toward them from a console of flickering lights. A rigidly disciplined face set in a sculptured, metallic beard gazed at Oberon through shadow and torchlight. There was, again, that faint resemblance to the Dragon in Marek's face, but it was a temporary effect. This man was taller, sleek of muscle and limb, austere and self-contained. His eyes were vivid with polished intellect, and the arms of his office gleamed from a large medallion on his tunic. His gaze swept over them and fixed, with interest, on Elijah.

Oberon extended his hand. "This is a rare honor, Ty Marek. I am Captain Daniel Oberon. This is First Officer Christie and Mascot Brandon."

The emperor clasped their hands and then, to their surprise, lowered himself to one knee and held out his arms to Elijah. "Come here, little one," he rumbled.

Elijah was remembering taped views of Marek, and the respect and liking he had felt for him. Without hesitation, he stepped up and hooked an arm over the Draconian's shoulder. Marek lifted him and stood holding him with a pleased expression, yet in his action Oberon recognized a type of ritualized appeasement common more often to non-human life. In certain wild species it was often customary for one member to approach and fondle the offspring of another, indicating in this manner his lack

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

of hostility. Draconians, as a rule, were not sentimental over children.

"If I know Space Troop regulations, this is a very young child for mascot rank," Marek said.

"Elijah is a special case," Nimmo said in answer to this subtly phrased curiosity. "He's a little brighter than most, so we thought he should have an early start."

"It is unusual for a League starship to arrive from the direction of uncharted regions," Marek continued, moving the conversation with courtly ease. He placed Elijah back on his feet and motioned the men to chairs. "Won't you join me in a glass of Elline nectar?"

"Thank you," replied Oberon, accepting the Draconian delicacy. Nimmo gave Elijah a taste of his, and Elijah made a face.

Oberon explained briefly. "Our mission was not exactly routine field work. I am sure it is common knowledge that we have been seeking the Capacians." He would have liked to discuss their mission and its findings with a leader of another world, but caution restrained him. He had no authority to do so.

The emperor gazed into his glass. "Perhaps to League worlds. We have heard mention of these Capacians during visits to Earth, but I'm afraid my people regard them as a mere superstition of your society. We do not believe these beings exist."

"Yet you are superstitious about Telphon 281," Oberon commented.

Marek glanced at him with raised eyebrows. "How is it that you are aware of this?"

As Oberon explained that Draconian culture had been the subject of his senior term thesis, he saw that the emperor was impressed. Fiercely proud of his civilization, Marek needed to be reminded that there were worlds capable of respecting it, capable of disinterested friendship with its members.

The emperor nodded thoughtfully. "It is true. Originally a rumor was started by the ancient astronomers who believed that Telphon was the home of gods who regulated time. But the theory rests in superstition, for it has never been proved that Telphon is the source of time. However, we do believe that it is a very strange place."

"I can tell how you would think it was the home of time

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

gods," Elijah spoke up eagerly. To him every adult was a creature to be trusted and enlightened. "Time gods would know everything because they controlled time. If you want to know everything about a certain thing, you have to look at it all at once, which means that you have to go back to where it began."

Marek fixed a gaze of reappraisal on the boy. Oberon hurried off on a tangent.

"I understand that your civilization changed its religion barely a century ago to monotheism. Would you explain why, Ty Marek?" he urged. "It is an unusual thing for a society to do, short of invasion or revolution."

"It was quite simple, really," Marek conceded, removing his gaze from the boy. "The ancients believed in many gods, one for each dimension of life. But as our technology advanced, it became obvious that nature was made up of complex interdependencies, of relationships on every level, and we could no longer accept the same fragmented version of the universe. It became necessary to agree that there must be one mind at work in the substratum of things, one mind with many divisions."

Abruptly, he turned to Elijah again, a sparkle in his eyes. "Do you agree, Mascot Brandon?"

Elijah gave a nod and began to laugh cheerfully, but with his mouth clamped shut. It always pleased him highly when someone tried to solicit his opinion.

"M-mmm. Uh-hmmm-mm."

Marek's eyebrows shot up and he looked at Oberon with surprise and gratification. There was a slight twitch of muscle in his jaw. Then he smiled broadly, displaying a fine set of white, even teeth.

"On some issues it would be foolish not to bend a little," he explained. "But your courtesy is appreciated. My men have been instructed not to stare at your mouths."

They all laughed, and the statement seemed to relax the emperor, as well as the two Space Troop men. Smiling, he said to Oberon, "Captain, I must congratulate you on an excellent stratagem." He laughed again at Oberon's blank expression. "A while back—quite a while back—a scoutship from Draco Two gave you some trouble. I understand now how you knew to use your Draconian shipmate in that manner, but I am still impressed.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

You see, we have, since then, captured that ship and reclaimed our prisoners of war. The story came to me from them. This Draconian—a doctor, isn't he?—I would enjoy meeting him sometime, if it were ever possible."

"He never goes without his teeth," Elijah reported solemnly. Then he inquired, "Where is your bathroom, Ty Marek?"

The emperor smiled indulgently. "Go back down this corridor, turn left, then right," he directed. "If you like, I'll summon a canine to escort you."

"Oh, no, no, thank you," Elijah said hastily and the thought of the dogs caused an instant appeal to Nimmo. "Will you come with me—please?"

But Oberon was embarrassed by this request in the presence of a spartan Draconian, and he shook his head warningly, but he was too late. Nimmo was already saying, "Sure thing, little pal."

Elijah left the room clutching the Orion's hand.

Outside, he paused before the heavy drapes, then with sudden resolve burst through them, pulling Nimmo with him and started down the torchlit corridor. Halfway he stopped and looked back. The two guard dogs were still lying on each side of the door, but one of them arose slowly, shook his mighty frame and ambled toward them.

"Won't bite. All he wants is a whiff of your pin," Nimmo explained reassuringly, but the little boy pulled on his hand, retreating from the dog as fast as he could. The floor was much too slippery for running.

Every few seconds Elijah looked back at the huge, slouching animal that was trailing them with unhurried intent.

"I can see that your mascot is an unusual child," Marek commented, refilling Oberon's glass with more of the syrupy nectar. "We, too, train our children at an early age, but they learn the craft of war. Such pleasant things as scientific research must, out of necessity, be put off."

Oberon smiled thoughtfully and answered, "Research is the backbone of the League of Worlds, Ty Marek. We find that it can unite many diverse cultures in a common goal without causing wars. Nimmo, my first officer, is from Orion. There even the religion is based on the search for knowledge."

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Knowledge," the emperor muttered, gazing absently at an octagonal lamp above them. "We seek to define time and space, but we are uneducated. We analyze life and form philosophies at times, but we are unenlightened. You speak of research. What are your conclusions? How do you achieve substance when life is so full of change and contradiction?"

"It seems that way," Oberon admitted. "But there is a pattern. Actually, most of our studies and researches over the centuries have been teaching us one very simple thing which our egos hate to accept. We must stop trying to complicate the pattern. We do seem to find again and again that many of our most ancient beliefs—which have been scorned by science—have a lot of truth in them."

"And how do Orions like your first officer feel about that?" Marek wondered. Oberon gave a perplexed chuckle. "Way back in their history, they felt that man was designed to arrive at truth without the help of technology, but I'd say they've gone off course. Orion technology is the most complex in the League aside from Earth's space science, and they have more red tape around their planet than radiation belts!"

"This is interesting," Marek reflected. "Some of our political scientists blame technology in part for our present condition."

"In what way, Ty Marek?" Oberon responded politely. He kept glancing toward the draperies, still somewhat embarrassed by Elijah's childish display. He could not allow Nimmo's watchfulness to become smothering.

Marek began to talk with concern about his world, but he was violently interrupted by a sudden loud beeping from the communications console. At the same moment sirens began to wail in all directions.

The emperor rushed to peer into the monitoring screens. For a moment he hung over them. Then he snatched up a mike and spoke into it forcefully.

"Command to all bases. Defend yourselves at all costs. Reinforcements will report to the launching fields immediately." He whirled to face the Space Troop captain. "We are under attack," he said. A look of utter bewilderment was struggling through. "I just can't understand—I can't understand how—"

Oberon leaped to his feet as a detachment of uniformed

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Draconians burst in, among them the warden they had met before.

"Ty Marek!" the distraught man cried out. "The Terrans must leave at once. We are under attack!"

"What is wrong with the deflection beams?" Marek thundered.

"Useless, Ty Marek. They have been neutralized. The enemy caught us while we were recharging the orbital stations—"

"You were recharging them all at once?" the emperor demanded furiously.

The warden nodded, his face gray with humiliation. "I fear so. An error in the scheduling. A terrible accident of—"

"And with every scoutship out on patrol?" the emperor raged. "You unbelievable fools—" He whirled to face Oberon, quivering with agitation. "I regret that I must send you away so abruptly, Captain, but Draco Two has caught us in a most unusual state of carelessness. They are in apogee orbit, out of range of our ground arsenals. Their guns are set on maximum scatter. If they do not fire upon you first, you will be caught in the crossfire between them and our scoutships, which are converging from all sectors. You have roughly forty-five minutes to leave orbit before they arrive."

The Draconian warriors departed to the noise of shrilling alarms and barking dogs. The widespread panic was enough to tell Oberon that a rare and extremely dreadful mistake had occurred.

There was no time for any parting formalities. Without another word to the emperor, he dashed from the room, skidded and slammed to the obsidian floor of the corridor. Gasping for lost wind, he struggled to his feet and limped off rapidly, in the direction Elijah and Nimmo had taken.

In the small tiled lavatory, Elijah had been about to wash his hands when the sirens all over the building began to wail. At the same moment, a small bell case high on the wall above the door let out a bone-jarring scream. His ears tortured, Elijah burst into tears and threw himself on Nimmo, who, for some strange reason, was trying desperately to push him away.

In the tiny, enclosed room the raw spasms of noise

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

tore through the Orion and snapped open that hideous something inside him. For a terrible half second he knew what was coming and tried to tell Elijah to go away, but the dreaded impact from within rushed outward, ripping like a blast through nerve and muscle, jolting him into oblivion. His body jackknifed and crashed to the floor, twisting and jerking. From the distorted lips came froth and vicious, meaningless sounds.

Elijah stared, his face draining. Frantically, he pushed past the writhing body and plunged through the door into the chaos beyond. Turning in what he thought was the right direction, he tried to run, gave it up and walked, lurching and skidding, as rapidly as he could. Grim-faced officials wearing gripper boots charged by, ignoring him. From nowhere another mammoth dog appeared and headed in pursuit of the terrified boy. Elijah turned blindly down another hall, determined to shake his follower. The passages were darkening, the shaggy form behind him was drawing closer, there were suddenly no more people and only a background of turbulent noises. The little boy grew more confused and desperate, his brown eyes darting fearfully from side to side.

As he pressed onward, he folded his arms over his head and tried to erase his overwhelming fear, to admit telepathically the faintest shred of feeling from Captain Obi which might give him some hint of what to do. But there was nothing in that channel but pulsing static.

His arms came down and his steps quickened with sudden hope. From somewhere ahead, cold gusts of air swept over him. He did not know that he was entering a delivery corridor; his only thought was that outside, where the ground gave traction, perhaps he could outrun this shambling monster.

And he had to find the captain so that Nimmo could be helped.

Then came the scraping and skidding of claws as the dog broke into a run, growling up behind him. With a scream, Elijah fled, running blindly until the floor ended abruptly: He sped into nothingness and crashed down a flight of stairs. An explosion of lights was the last thing he knew.

Huge, slow-moving forms converged from the exit,

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

sniffing through the dark. They and the emperor's guard dog touched noses against the tiny, motionless body and moved away, unconcerned.

It was wearing an odor pin.

**Before acting, deliberate, and
when you have deliberated, act
speedily.**

Erasmus

AT THEIR RATE of speed, transit time from Draco to the hull portal of the *Anriahd* was slightly under eight minutes, but during the interlude Oberon tried not to look at Nimmo, silent and rigid with emotional agony beside him. *Snap out of it, Nimmo; it's not your fault.* The words hurtled through Oberon's mind but remained unvoiced, for the Orion was blaming himself with an unreachable finality that would take a miracle to erase.

There had been no hope of locating their straying mascot on foot within the allotted forty-five minutes. Oberon's duty was plain. He must protect Elijah first, the ship second. It was probable, he realized, that word had spread to all Draco II warships that the V-class League vessel *Anriahd* was carrying a native of Draco II, prohibiting aggression. But it was as good as certain that they would fire upon the Draco I headquarters at any minute. As captain, he must summon every workable alternative, and there was only one.

Since takeoff, the atmospheric static had interfered with communications, but within another three minutes Sagen's face appeared on the pilot screen.

"Prepare to leave orbit at maximum speed. All hands stand by," Oberon instructed.

"All hands standing by," Sagen replied.

"We have approximately thirty minutes left," he explained, "in which to locate Mascot Brandon and restore him to the ship. Sagen, do we have aboard the materials to build a matter transmitter, and, if so, can you assemble one in time?"

"We have the materials and the time," Sagen answered.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"But may I remind the captain that this procedure is illegal and has seldom been tried with humans?"

"It's the only chance we have," Oberon concluded flatly. "Get to work on it immediately."

"Right away, Captain." She blanked out.

"This better work." Nimmo spoke between clenched teeth, his face working. Misery grated his words. "We've got to get that kid out of there."

"It's risky," Oberon muttered. His hands gripped the controls as the shuttle nosed toward the open transport gates of the ship's stern. "But remember—we've got the finest mind in all of League engineering at work on it."

Underneath, he was confident, for he knew one thing more than Nimmo. Sagen was a Capacian. It had to work.

Entry was completed and from transport deck Nimmo dashed to the helm to program tracer and probe beams. Oberon reported to engineering. On his way he met the Dragon, and in a small chamber near the main computer banks he found Sagen and her technicians working with urgent haste. Already the reception plate had been installed, and the small shell of the matter transmitter controls was being channeled into a monitorial.

"Obi," the Dragon said with compassion, "this is rough."

Standing clear of the hurried operations, Oberon nodded. He was glad of the Dragon's presence, for he would be needed when Elijah arrived—seemingly out of nowhere—on the reception plate. There was no guarantee the child would come out of this unharmed.

There was a buzz from the telecom and Nimmo's voice ground out agony. "Captain, I can't locate him. I even programmed a tracer to pick up his blood type, but it's not working. We can't probe the complex. They've put up some kind of auxiliary energy field to ward off attack, and we can't get through."

"Keep at it," Oberon snapped. "There's got to be a weak point somewhere."

"Wait a minute—there's something—" A hum of empty channel, then savage joy. "I've got him! I've got him!"

"Lock onto his coordinates. Sagen?" He glanced at his engineer, but she shook her head. "Not ready yet, Dan-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

iel. There's something missing." She seemed at a momentary loss, gripping the sides of the machine.

"Can you hold on, Nimmo?" he called.

"It's all right, Captain. He's not moving," Nimmo's voice wavered. "I hope that's all right."

Sagen's hands retracted and she looked up at the men. "Transium," she said. "I've got to have it—several strips."

A blankness fell over them. For a moment no one could think.

"There's transium in the corridor air vent regulators," a technician gasped.

"Get it. Rip them off the walls," Oberon commanded.

Snatching up tools, they all raced out, including Sagen. Without hesitation, the Dragon followed, wrench in hand, and Oberon was left alone with the half-assembled matter transmitter.

As he stood beside it, a strange knowledge moved through him. He found himself, despite the stress of the situation, oddly aware of its basic mechanics, and then, as if his conscience had turned the other way for a moment, reason began to tell him something. If the locator cell were loosened—unscrewed just a tiny bit—the placement mechanism would be in error by several hundred degrees at the receiving end of the beam. The coordinates would appear to be correct on the meter, but the error would be there and it meant that Elijah would materialize in outer space several hundred transport degrees away from the ship.

He could hear Sagen's voice on the main deck and he knew that they were all returning. His fingers flew out and wiggled the cell a fraction of an inch upward. At a cursory glance, it did not appear to be changed in any way.

Defly, Sagen installed the transium, slammed shut the outer casing and nodded to him. Oberon punched the telecom and started to speak to Nimmo, but his voice broke on a gagging cough.

There was silence as everyone gazed at him expectantly. He was conscious that Sagen had repeated "We're ready" twice and that his hand was slipping on sweat. He was forced to strike the button again.

"Nimmo," he said, "those coordinates still stand?"

"Yes, sir. All's ready up here."

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Activate," he commanded.

Slowly, Sagen twisted the large central dial, gripping it with both hands. From the locator graph, Elijah's coordinates sparkled in green. There came a soft, rising hum which reached a crescendo, then relapsed into silence.

The Dragon jerked forward. "Nothing happened—what's the matter?" he demanded, but Sagen was scanning the controls acutely. No one answered the persistent buzzing of the telecom.

"It was faulty, Doctor. He has materialized in space."

"God, no—"

"Recalibrate," Oberon ordered.

"I have." Sagen tampered minutely, her fingers quivering. "I'll try it again, but a human being can survive only twenty seconds in space, and it is taking me that long to locate him—" She stared at the locator graph in disbelief. "There's nothing there. He's not there."

"He would have drifted," Oberon said.

"Not that much. I should detect him. This probe beam covers an area of fifty cubic miles around the sight of the error. He is simply not there."

There was a deathly quiet. The Dragon slumped against the wall, his face ashen, and Oberon turned his back to them. He did this because he knew that emotion was tearing away his mask of cold command, and he felt that he was crazy, that he did not know his own mind. What had happened to him just now? Had his own hand really done this thing?

As if compelled, he answered the buzzing telecom.

"Oberon here."

Nimmo's voice was jagged. "I've been trying to reach you. What happened?"

"We're not sure. There's been a malfunction, but we're not sure of our status."

"I'm holding a message from a Draconian warship. Draco Two, Captain. Is Elijah—"

"There's no way to tell yet, Nimmo. We're doing everything we can. Pipe that message down here."

Within moments a harsh, rasping voice issued from the speaker.

"This is Tomoran, Commander of the warship *Maldeva* of Draco Two. In our surveillance of your ship, we monitored your beaming process and found that you were in

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

error. Our own matter-transmitter unit has beamed your passenger aboard our vessel, where he is under treatment for deep shock. He is otherwise unharmed. We will return him if you will relay the desired reception coordinates."

Oberon's body pulsed with relief and acute astonishment. It came as no surprise to him that the Draconians had perfected matter transmission, but he could not understand why they were returning Elijah. Political caution was hardly likely from Draco II. It made no sense at all.

He spoke back with conviction. "This is Captain Daniel Oberon. We are grateful. Please stand by to receive coordinates." He turned to the Dragon. "Shall I have him sent to the infirmary?"

"By all means. I'll report at once." The Dragon left and Oberon relayed instructions to the Draconian warship, adding some formal words of thanks. After that they made no further communication.

Oberon leaned against the telecom and breathed deeply, too shaken to move. Elijah, in this strange interplay of politics, had been given back to them. The moment had been turned around on him by an event with the dimensions of a miracle, and at this point he could not possibly determine whether it was for good or ill. He had tried to do what he thought was right, but it was not to be.

No power in the universe could ever induce him to try it again.

The end is not yet.

Matthew 24:6

AS SOON AS Elijah materialized, limp and blue-lipped, but alive, in the infirmary, Oberon called orders to the helm.

"Take us out of orbit—hyperlight level six. Helmsman, set in a course for home."

He snapped off the communication and turned to watch as the Dragon prepared a hypo of reconditioner for the unconscious boy. After a little rest, Elijah would be all right.

Under a tonnage of feelings in which relief and shock struggled irreconcilably, Oberon accepted this fact and tried to grasp its meaning. He realized that he could not possibly fathom the extent of Capacian planning in this matter. If this much had been revealed to him, how much remained unrevealed? Perhaps the timely intervention of Draco II had been more than mere coincidence, for he truly could not understand why these ruthless warriors had returned their prisoner of war. But he knew that, eventually, there would be an explanation that would appear, on the surface, at least, to make sense.

As the *Anriahd* sped homeward, Elijah recovered fully from his ordeal. The weeks of routine duty and research passed uneventfully, but Oberon still felt ensnared. He could not believe that it was over.

*No pow'rs of body or of soul to share,
But what his nature and his state can bear.*

Alexander Pope

FOR ONCE NIMMO was in danger of losing out in the business of reconciling Elijah to his bath. While he filled the bather, the youngster wandered from the starport to the table, to the bunk and back without undressing, with his lower lip stuck out in defiance.

"Why do I need to wash?" he complained, flinging a few toys into the debris collector. "Starships are sterile, so how can I get dirty?"

"You manage somehow, little pal. Today you spilled chemicals all over yourself."

"Non-toxic—Bolithyaln, Dram and Karpacetate never hurt anyone."

Nimmo stirred with an arm, testing the temperature and watching his small friend. In reply he parroted Muriat, inflecting his voice to sound like the educator's nasal tone.

"Good habits are vital to those studying for command."

"I'm not studying for command," Elijah muttered, ignoring Nimmo's attempts to amuse him.

Nimmo chuckled. "Muriat thinks so. You seem to be able to tell him more than he can tell you, and you don't mind doing it."

Elijah smiled faintly and Nimmo's hopes lifted, then were instantly dashed.

"No bath."

"Aw, come on."

"No."

"Let's see how fast you can shuck them trappings podner."

Nimmo turned off the water and dumped in some

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

spaceships—occasionally Elijah showed a languid interest in water play. His back was turned to the boy, so he started violently when he heard the hiccuping sobs. Turning, he found Elijah in tears and stamping both feet.

“No, no, no, no, no!”

“Okay! All right!” Nimmo cried in consternation. “We’ll skip it this time, okay?” He swung the boy into his arms and carried him around. “Now, what the blazes is this all about, kiddo? Huh? You didn’t want to do anything today—didn’t want to go swimming, read old tapes, play gravity pool, play Zero G—”

“I want to go home. I want to see my mother and father.”

Nimmo swallowed. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. How many more months is it now?”

“About three left.” Nimmo’s ebony eyes gazed dismally out the starport. “I thought you liked it here.”

Elijah sniffed, tears gleaming. “I do. I don’t know what’s the matter.”

“Ah-h-h. I do,” Nimmo pronounced happily.

“You do?”

“Yup. Same thing that was the matter with me all the time when I was a kid. You’re going through a stage.”

A laugh escaped. “Oh, well, that’s very nonspecific,” Elijah said. “But it’ll do.”

Elijah awoke the next day and opened his eyes to find himself alone except for a familiar feeling of creeping uneasiness. He had felt it so many times lately, during lessons, at the helm, near the pool and even at bedtime. On Draco he had been afraid of the dogs, and he was still afraid, except that now he was also confused because there seemed to be no focus for his fear. Despondently, he rolled over and stared inward at the scenes in his mind. Colors, voices, meanings and dimensions blended in a haze which dissipated gradually as a unique instinct built sequences from the chaos, and suddenly the formula was there, as if it had always been there.

The fabric plus the warp equals time. At last he had found the mathematics to describe it.

Elijah jolted to a sitting position and the room rocked dizzily around him. It meant so much—this formula—that there did not seem to be room enough inside his head.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

There was so much to connect that he did not know where to begin.

Tumbling off the bunk, he ran for stylus and vellum, and stopped in the middle of the floor, striving for balance. With supreme effort he tried to move forward but lurched sideways instead and fell with a thud. When he reached the table, he could not seem to make contact between the stylus and the vellum. Again and again his arm came down in great wide stabbing motions that never went where he aimed them.

At last in total frustration he made his way to the corridor outside, where he had to sit down against the wall. A passing crewman grinned back at him.

"Are you going to the helm?" Elijah croaked.

"That's right."

"Will you please tell Captain Obi I have something important to tell him? I'll wait here."

"Sure. I'll see that he gets the message."

"Thank you."

The man disappeared into an elevator and Elijah blinked his eyes and shook his head, wondering what had happened to his arms and legs. Did you get this way when you were very, very tired? Perhaps. He had never been this tired.

Soon he began to slump over sideways, and by the time Oberon arrived he was lying motionless on the deck.

"Elijah." The head fell back over Oberon's arm. He saw a bluish tinge around the eyes and lips, and he rushed to the elevator with the unconscious child in his arms.

It was three hours before Oberon was admitted to the intensive-care chamber by a tearful nurse who could only shake her head in reply to his questions.

"The doctor wishes to tell you himself, sir," she whispered. "He's in his lab now."

On the life-support recliner, Elijah was barely visible through a group of attending medics. Oberon passed through and entered the lab, where the Dragon was pacing listlessly from one set of screens to another. Oberon recognized the microimprint of a virulent bacteria field shining from the priority viewer.

From this display the Dragon turned to regard him ab-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

sently, then sagged into a chair. He stared fixedly at it, hollow-eyed and pale with despair.

Oberon studied the imprint, conscious of a great sinking within himself. "What is it?"

The Dragon took a long, deep breath. "That," he declared, "is a specimen of Elijah's spinal fluid. I've never seen a worse culture. Just look at it—I'd be surprised if that boy has twelve hours left to live—" He trailed off into silence, as if unable to get to the point, then rallied with an effort, tearing his eyes from the screen. "Normal spinal fluid is absolutely clear, Obi. In meningitis and most other diseases affecting the spinal column, you'll have an isolated bacilli or a clump of bacilli here and there, but never anything as cluttered as this. Just look at it."

"What is it?" Oberon repeated gently, taking a lab stool nearby. Within the frame the crowded organisms stopped glowing as the Dragon snapped off the viewer.

"It's the Lumian Syndrome," he said starkly, raking an unsteady hand through his hair, "the last childhood killer of our century, the only disease that's beaten medical science ever since we started beating disease. It strikes only children. It always kills. There's nothing you can put your finger on, nothing that can be done—no prevention, no traceable cause and absolutely no cure."

Oberon interrupted savagely: "Nothing is impossible. We don't believe that—it's not your philosophy or mine. The League didn't send us out here to admit defeat. We'll find a cure."

But the Dragon was shaking his head. "I'm sorry, Obi. It's no good. I've put this lab computer through the medical school tapes six times over. There is not a single test I can administer now that hasn't already failed to yield."

"Why weren't we able to detect it sooner, before it became so advanced?" Oberon demanded.

"That's the terrible thing about Lumian. It creeps up and then strikes like a bolt of lightning. The first phase is almost impossible to detect—oh, there may be a little extra irritability, some fearfulness, a little dizziness, but nothing that he would have complained about, or we would have noticed." Frustration grew in his bitter tone. "You know what Elijah's program has been like—a thing that was developed to keep all our hands off him, to try

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

and simulate a normal upbringing in order to avoid all kinds of emotional complications, neurosis, whatever have you. My orders for this mission were to protect his health above anyone else aboard, but on the basis of standard examinations only—no constant extra screening. Those were Paiselle's terms."

In search of answers, Oberon's mind traveled back over the previous weeks. "Is there any way that this illness could be connected to that mishap with the matter transmitter?"

"Not really," the Dragon grumbled. "I have reason to believe that he had developed the disease before then. You must admit it's unusual for Elijah to be afraid of dogs. He's seen dogs before." He sighed heavily. "It's just one of those unpredictable things."

"What about Sagen?" Oberon began. "Perhaps she can—"

"Oh, no," the Dragon countered immediately, shaking his head. "Sagen is a dead end. She's like a robot that's been programmed to do only one thing."

"We can try."

"I've already paged her, Obi." The Dragon gazed ahead severely. "Forget it. She has no advice."

For a moment, as if time had stood still, Oberon felt all of eternity compress around him. He sat and looked at the Dragon, and the Dragon looked back from a face drawn with hopelessness. There was nothing left to do but carry on.

"Have you told Nimmo yet?"

"No. If you're headed for the helm, you can send him down."

Nothing more was said. The two men sat in silence until finally Oberon arose. "We entered the League wavefront a few hours ago. I'd better contact Paiselle."

The Dragon nodded grimly.

Before leaving, Oberon glanced back at his friend. "And don't go blaming yourself."

Edwards replied with bitterness, "I wish I knew what to blame."

Now is the accepted time:

2 Corinthians 6:2

THE DRAGON HAD miscalculated. For the next forty-eight hours, Elijah remained in a deep coma, maintained by complete life support and monitored every second by the Dragon himself. Oberon kept his own vigil in the helm, where, after several attempts, he was able to contact Paiselle at the Council headquarters on Earth. The commodore's look of delight faded when he saw his friend's face, and when Oberon explained about Elijah the older man looked as if the foundation of his whole existence had suddenly fallen away. It was a brief communication.

From the mainscreen, Paiselle stared around the helm at the silent, grim faces. Nimmo, inconsolable, worked like an automaton at his station, disregarding the commodore's shaken gaze.

"I—I just can't believe it," Paiselle stammered. "I can't believe it. There's no reason—"

"There never is any reason," Oberon said gently. He knew what his friend was going through, was sharply familiar with the sensations of admitting that, after all, the whole thing was not possible.

"I have the greatest faith in Andrew Edwards," Paiselle said slowly. "Of course, I do not expect a miracle, but we will not question whatever he chooses to do."

"We've already had our miracle," Oberon murmured, then replied to Paiselle's questioning look. "I'll explain when we arrive. There is a lot to report."

Paiselle accepted this lifelessly. "Of course," he said. He concluded with haste, "I won't notify anyone until I hear something definite from you." His image blanked off.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

He had not asked about the Capaeians, but there would have been no point in that, for the official presentation of this matter was not due until after the *Anriahd* docked in orbit around its home planet. Communications such as this one were reserved for emergencies only because of the drain on ship's power, and it was no comfort to be vulnerable for a second in the depths of intergalactic space.

Oberon turned in his seat to gaze at his first officer, whose face was screened from sight by the monitorial hood. During the long, strained hours since Elijah's condition had been announced shipwide, he had not found the time to speak some consoling words to Nimmo, or perhaps he had been avoiding it. To him, Nimmo's emotions spoke of a lack of discipline, although he had to admit that every child should have such a devoted adult companion. He had only to think of himself and the Dragon years ago.

He started to move in Nimmo's direction but was claimed instead by an urgent buzz from the telecom.

"Infirmary to helm."

All heads except Nimmo's raised from screens and grids, watching as Oberon answered the call.

"Captain here."

The grating laugh from Edwards, which filtered through the speaker, gave them all a violent start.

"Obi, have you put through that call to Paiselle yet?"

"Yes, just now. What's your report?"

"Simply this—Elijah has recovered."

Nimmo's head snapped up, but Oberon did not look at him. Disbelief shut him off from the reaction of the helm occupants, the sound of the Dragon's weary tone as he went on to explain.

"I'm sorry. . . . Would you please repeat what you just said, Doctor?"

Nimmo lunged from his station to the elevator, and Shyla moved happily to take his place.

"I was saying," the Dragon went on, "that the disease did not progress beyond the second phase. No congestion of the meningeal vessels of the brain, no atrophy of the motor cells, blood count back to normal, spinal fluid clear. The whole thing eludes me. Can you come down?"

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"Is he conscious?"

"He most certainly is—nearly decapitated me with a pillow five seconds ago. He doesn't seem to be any the worse for wear, but I'm running some tests to be sure. Can you come down?"

"I'll be right there."

But his arrival was delayed, for he contacted Paiselle at once and reported this development to the incredulous and overjoyed commodore.

"Tell your friend the Dragon that he shall be decorated by the Institute with highest medical honors," Paiselle declared in a voice shaking with emotion. "He has saved the life of the most important child of our time, and he merits more than we can possibly give him."

"I'll be proud to give him your message," Oberon replied.

The infirmary was a scene of exhausted, but high-spirited, medics and nurses, and now that the emergency had passed, the Dragon had again closeted himself in his lab. On the recliner Elijah was sitting upright, swathed in a thermal coverlet, alert and talking to Nimmo.

"Ever been fishing?" Nimmo asked.

"No. How do you do that?"

"You take a pole with a line with a hook on it. You bait the hook and dip it in the water and wait for the fish to bite."

This reminded Elijah of something. "When I can get up, can we go swimming?"

"Sure."

"Then we'll do it this way—you do the fishing and I'll be the fish!" He gave a squeal of laughter. There were approving smiles from all directions, for it was unlike Elijah to invent games.

Oberon passed through to the Dragon's lab, where his friend was comparing readings and graphs with an anxious scowl.

"Congratulations," Oberon announced, but the Dragon dismissed it with a shake of his head.

"I was a shortsighted fool not to have expected something like this," he said. "This is a disease of the central nervous system. Its closest relative is meningitis, which is sometimes caused by foreign bodies in or around the

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

brain." He gave a rueful laugh. "Elijah's entire brain is a foreign body, but it so happens that the sum total of that plus his central nervous system is a stronger, more complex, but more durable system than our own. Exactly how much he can withstand hasn't been demonstrated up till now, of course, but I still feel remiss not to have foreseen some different results in Elijah's case."

"But you're still worried," Oberon pointed out. "He's not out of the woods yet, is he?"

"No," the Dragon answered gruffly. "He's alive, thank the stars, and almost the same as before."

"What do you mean?"

Sighing, the Dragon picked up two sheets of vellum and handed them to his captain.

"Look at these. I had him draw these a few minutes ago."

The sketches were an attempt at mathematical designs, vaguely regular in character, but warped and uneven in their execution, like the drawings of most children.

"The precision is gone," said the Dragon.

"Yes, I see. But maybe it's only temporary."

"I'm afraid not, Obi." He snapped on a screen which displayed the familiar jags and curves of a neural analysis graph. "This is his latest reading. If we are to compare it with his previous readings, then there has to be minimal brain damage. If you'll recall, his readings always ran right off the graph before. Now they level off in the upper register. See?" His fingers traced out the line and he looked up at Oberon gravely. "What we have here is a rough equivalent to Josef Ergang, but no more."

A search was over; the end of a darkness seemed near at hand. Sweeping through Oberon like a strong wind came the promise of a future in which his people had been granted the right to a proud and tremendous journey.

"Paiselle says you're to be awarded highest honors for this—"

"I'll refuse," the Dragon said brusquely. "I've done nothing innovative in this case."

Oberon could not argue, much as he wanted to.

"Is his telepathy intact?" he asked.

"I don't know yet. I won't know the exact nature of

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

the damage until I've done some further testing. Right now I can't say for sure what area has been impaired."

They soon found out. Elijah could no longer see the dust.

***The huge concentric waves
of universal life are shore-
less. We grasp but a few
meshes of the vast network
of existence.***

Victor Hugo

AT THE DESK in his office, Oberon sorted vellum. Somehow, out of these piles of journals and reports, the term summation must take shape. It was something that every starship captain began to work on as soon as his ship pulled out of orbital dock, although Oberon usually put off the final draft until the last months of the mission.

Since the crisis with Elijah, another event shocked them all, and ravaged the Dragon. What had occurred was a heavier loss for him than for the entire League of Worlds, although Oberon could only sense this, and was never permitted to know exactly why.

Sagen had been found dead in her quarters.

There was no way to explain it because the autopsy revealed no discernible cause of death, but Oberon believed that it was somehow connected to her role in the Capacian experiment. He had not seen her since the Draconian incident, so he did not know how Elijah's illness had affected her, except to imagine that, despite his recovery, from her own point of view the last Capacian was gone. Elijah's brain damage had been officially confirmed.

Whether or not she knew that Oberon had made his decision and had acted upon it, he would never find out. Her most humane accomplishment was that her own personal feelings about the matter had always been impossible for him to discern. He could not have taken them into his decision because she was not completely human, and it was for humanity that he had to decide.

But he, too, had lost more than his most valuable engineer. As long as Sagen lived, there had been the hope that all this would be explained, that eventually she would

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

yield to his demands to know why he had been chosen to place himself in jeopardy for the rights of his civilization. This had been very important to him. Now that the possibility no longer existed, he would have to answer his own questions.

He examined the most recent addition to his report, the affidavit of her death, and placed it gently to one side.

Next in line was a mass of notes and statistics concerning Telphon 281.

Oberon had questioned many of the crew and they had all described feeling a sense of expansion when the ship passed through the twist, but not a single person could remember any details of that sensation. At that time the *Anriahd* had penetrated the core of the universe and passed through the infinitesimal point where mind and matter converged. For a split second, they had all become more mind than matter, but they could remember nothing of it because the capacity to retain it had not been developed in them yet. If this were mentioned in his report, it would be deleted by the archive editor as a vagueness—like the vagueness of metaphysics that he had been taught, as a scientist, to deplore.

Mathematics was preferred, and his he had amassed over the months in sufficient quantity. As he glanced through the tables and graphs, he considered their relationship to the whole meaning of Telphon.

Against the blur of feeling and instinct, mathematics seemed to stand out in purity—a sharp rebuff. Yet, when you tried to relate any mathematical fundamental to the whole scheme, it, too, became blurred and out of focus. He wondered now if it were possible after all to work from these small parts upward. Or must one do as Ergang had done, as Elijah had begun to do—take a gigantic implication and let the little things fall into order within its structure? It seemed to him that down through history, geniuses had made sweeping statements. They caused dissent and outcry, stunned and upset their fellowmen because of the range of their theories.

The theory of the double Mobius sphere, as discarded by Ergang and picked up again by Elijah, accommodated relativity and hyperlight, and explained the space warp and the structure of time. It accommodated all the great minds who had exhorted through the centuries that space

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

was a continuum that bent back on itself, a huge single dimension which ultimately had only one "side," one course for all things to travel. Ergang's cosmology was largely a treatise on hyperlight mechanics, infused with a cosmic philosophy molded on the idea of this one-sided, one-directioned structure, continuous with itself. At the time there had not been the means to demonstrate that Telphon 281 was the twist in a double Mobius sphere. Hyperlight was needed in order to accomplish that, so it was hyperlight drive that he bestowed on the world. This was why many of the crew had never heard of the double Mobius sphere until the *Anriahd* inadvertently proved its existence. This was a triumphant bounty to carry home to the Institute.

Once this data and the fate of the Capacians were made known, there would be a League-wide shift in priorities. That second lobe of the universe was an open invitation.

The bulk of Oberon's report dealt with Telphon and the masses of supporting conclusions from the research labs of his ship. Then there was a section on each of the planets they had visited: the proposal to deter the investigation of Ayhill, the photographs from Algernon Six, a detailed account of the incident at Draco I. When he had flipped through these quickly and laid them aside, his eyes came to rest on a certain capsule. Here was Elijah Brandon's PD supplement, all the tapes, imprints and recordings of his development during the mission. It had all been programmed by Muriat with the exception of various medical inserts from the infirmary log. Oberon had reviewed it many times, and had found that, for all its thoroughness, it said nothing.

Since his illness, Elijah had gradually reverted into a more normal child, a change largely unnoticed by the crew. Not once did he disappoint Muriat with his progress, but his toys had become more attractive to him, and he even voiced regret now and then at having destroyed so many. He was still a genius beyond all precedent, knew as much about hyperlight as anyone in engineering and was at ease with the most advanced forms of math, but he no longer spelled out his Capacian name with game cubes, and he did not draw crescents anymore, or ponder over the crescent galaxy.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

The subject of Elijah was the last quandary in the term summation. With sudden resolve, Oberon buzzed the infirmary and asked that Edwards report to his quarters.

Minutes later, the Dragon entered, gray with fatigue and his recent pain. Oberon watched silently as he lowered himself into a chair and moved it back from the desk to make room for his legs.

As he studied him he decided that the end of this mission could not come soon enough. The Dragon was physically and spiritually exhausted, and he needed diversion and a long rest. Because of his towering size, his infirmities were not easily noticed, but Oberon knew his friend and was worried by the sunken chest and thin arms. A limit had been reached.

The Dragon gazed back at him, faintly troubled. "Anything wrong, Obi?"

"Oh, no. No. I need your cooperation on a few points regarding this." He waved at the mess on his desk.

"Term summation—I thought as much. How's it coming?"

"So far I've completed all sections except one," Oberon began. "I have a detailed UFO report concerning Capacian visitation to those League planets on our itinerary—Earth being the most frequently visited planet. They'll be pleased with the photographs from Algernon Six."

"What's the section that's been holding you up?" the Dragon inquired, coming warily to the point.

Oberon straightened up and gave the pile of vellum a smack with his fist. "It is my firm intention," he declared, "that no one else, not even Paiselle, is to know that all that is left of the Capacians is locked away somewhere in the brain cells of Elijah Brandon."

To his immense surprise the Dragon broke into a hearty smile. "That's my boy!" Then he amended hastily, "Beg your pardon—Captain. A momentary lapse. Obi, I approve. I just hope it can be accomplished without compromising your position."

"I think it can," Oberon muttered, staring at him. "But I never thought you'd approve. What's your reason?"

"Quite simple—basically, the best intentions of a physician are for his patient," said the Dragon. "He has been traumatized twice at a very tender age—first at Draco One when he was beamed into outer space by mistake,

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

and second, of course, when he nearly died of the Lumian Syndrome. We all know from centuries of psychological science that trauma in small children has a lasting effect, even if the effect does not show up right away. Elijah's neural analysis is still phenomenal, but far less than before. He has a chance now to lead a more normal existence compared with what would be inflicted on him if he could still see the ether. I feel, as a doctor, that he needs that chance." He waited for his friend's response. "Well, Obi? Your turn now."

Oberon nodded musingly. "Your reasoning is more solid than mine," he reflected. "In fact, you'll say I'm vague as hell, but I think it makes sense. It seems to me that if the Capacians had wanted all this about Elijah to be discovered and acted on by the Institute, they wouldn't have staged this cosmic farce on the good ship *Anriahd*."

The Dragon smiled. "Give yourself credit, Obi. You aren't so vague."

"Then you agree?"

"Let's say I won't argue with you at this point. Whatever it was the Capacians had planned for Elijah to do in our world has been canceled by the outcome of the Lumian Syndrome. That clinches it in my opinion."

Oberon glanced up sharply as a turmoil inside him faded away. A relief and sudden understanding brought him to his feet, and he strode to the starport in need of a moment of privacy in which to breathe deeply and smile unseen. When he turned back to his friend again, he said, "The Capacians presumed too much."

The Dragon waited, his long hands folded over a knee.

"They were not the ultimate authority in the universe, after all," Oberon went on, his voice gaining conviction as he stared again at the changeless depths beyond the visiplat. "They thought they could alter man's destiny. They gave us Elijah. They caused this mission. We've all been puppets, our lives borrowed, exploited, rearranged to fit their plan. But it was their own oversight that decided the outcome—"

"They should have known that Elijah might develop Lumian," the Dragon supplied.

"Yes." Oberon smacked fist against palm, returning to his desk. "Sagen was wrong. She said it was up to us—to mankind—whether or not to accept Elijah, but she

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

was wrong. The decision was not made by us, after all. I believe it came from elsewhere—from someone or something else.” He tossed his head toward the starry view. “From out there, Dragon? From something in the scheme of things that knows its own mind? It’s possible, isn’t it? Didn’t Ergang call the ether an ‘entity’? Didn’t Lenard say that Elijah could read the mind of the universe?”

There is was. A tiny detail in a master plan, missed by even the very boldest comprehension of all things. Beyond the *Anriahd* lay the inside and the outside of forever, and it had triumphed over the Capacians, and had allowed its own nature to remain undisturbed. How like an entity it did seem: bending itself into a cradle of infinity for all living things, small in each one of them, tremendous in the stars and galaxies, speaking in the voice that was creation, thinking in the mind that was evolution, moving with each thing that moved through the double Mobius sphere, in and out of the center—that one fixed point that gave everything to itself and itself to everything.

The Dragon was smiling serenely. “I’ve been a doctor for a long time, Obi. I’ve always thought the laws of nature have a mind of their own.” He leaned back in his chair. They shared a moment of thoughtful silence.

Then the Dragon lowered his head with an uncertain scowl. “So, you’re keeping all of this out of your report? I suppose you could get away with it. Of course, the Council is going to wonder why Elijah is the only child in history to recover from Lumian when his attending physician did nothing out of the ordinary.”

“I don’t think it will matter so much,” Oberon countered. “Paiselle is used to Elijah’s enigmas. All he cares about is that you pulled him through—Elijah survived. Dragon, you must accept the honors.”

There was slight outrage. “That goes against my own sense of honor,” the Dragon fumed.

“Nevertheless, you must accept it. Don’t make an issue out of Elijah’s central nervous system.”

“I suppose you’re right,” he grumbled. “But the Council doesn’t accept miracles at face value. They’ll pry. They’ll find out that his brain cells are hexagonal, that his optic nerve is abnormal, and that his whole central nervous system shouldn’t be possible in terms of our real-

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

ity. So I may as well save them the time by making a clean breast of my findings."

"But all you'll give them will be the things you showed me," Oberon put in, "some microprints and a few studies in comparative anatomy."

"Exactly. I suppose they'll decorate me, anyway."

"What about the Bensons?"

The Dragon shook his head. "You don't have to worry about them. They don't know anything, and they haven't the imagination, or the background in science, to suspect anything, really. It's been a novelty for them, something to talk about, but it doesn't mean a thing. Elijah will always be a younger edition of Will Benson in his looks, but near look-alikes have happened before. And you know what the odds are against their ever again being on the same ship. I doubt if their paths will ever cross in years to come."

Oberon was satisfied on this account. "I've talked to Nimmo, and he's certainly on our side. No question there."

The Dragon smiled kindly. "All Nimmo wants to do is take Elijah fishing. He's a good man, Obi. I wish I could help him." He hesitated, then said, "I suppose we won't mention that Elijah was the one who broke the code?"

"We will not," Oberon stated. "That's one of the things we talked about. Nimmo will take full credit."

The Dragon winced and forced a chuckle. "He and I won't be able to look each other in the face."

"Have you kept any kind of medical record of Elijah's microscopic perception?" Oberon asked.

"No, I haven't. I could not exactly classify it, anyway, when I wasn't screening the boy or testing him on a regular basis to find out more about it."

Oberon nodded. "Very good, Dragon." Gathering up the vellum and capsules, he dumped them all into the top drawer of his desk. He was due at the helm in ten minutes for course adjustments. "You see, I don't think they have the means to find out that Elijah is a Capacian, in effect. The Capacians are dead, the code is ambiguous and Elijah himself doesn't know. At this point it seems he won't be able to connect the few hints he's received. And Sagen drew her own lines. We're safe. They won't

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

be able to figure out on their own what really happened on this mission. So the case is closed."

The Dragon's expression remained the same, but his fingers tightened on the arms of the chair. "All right, Obi."

"Have I left anything out?"

The Dragon's eyes shone wearily as he rose from the chair. "I don't think so. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to lie down for a while and get some rest."

"Get plenty," Oberon advised. "You're going to need it. We've only got three weeks left before Earth pops up on our screens, and everybody's deadlines are coming up. You're going to have an infirmary full of work-worn people wanting amphetamines."

The Dragon smiled absently and headed for the door. But he stopped and remained there in silence, his face half-turned away. From the starport the familiar lights of their own galaxy glimmered on a brightness in his eyes.

Oberon drew a long breath and groped for the permissible. "I'm sorry about Sagen."

Edwards did not turn around, and it seemed there would be no reply. But it did come, in a remote voice from the other side of a deep and gripping barrier.

"Why couldn't she just be content to be a woman? She had every reason to live a full and productive human life. Productive—I suppose she was, but not in a human way. And yet she could see our side."

He turned to Oberon with vivid assertion. "I know she could see our side. There was a self under that mask of duty and work and duty and work. Why in the hell didn't she give in?"

He moved suddenly through the door and left this question to suspend itself unanswered for the rest of their lives.

The love that moves the sun and the other stars.

Dante

IT CAME AS a great surprise that Elijah did not cry when the time came to part from Nimmo.

When the *Anriahd* docked at Earth's orbital station, Nimmo was assigned to one of the first shuttles that was to transport the crew to the Institute headquarters. They would all meet again that same night at the arrival banquet, but traditionally good-byes were said during the last moments aboard the ship. Between flights, Oberon stood with Elijah on the observation deck that adjoined transport, and they watched together as shuttles from other areas of the station glided past, tipped and dived toward the blue and white swirl of atmosphere.

During the last hectic hour of duty, a message had come through from Paiselle. Elijah's parents were waiting for him.

When they had been notified, as a legal formality, of their son's recovery from a serious illness, they had requested permission to include him in their sabbatical on an agricultural Earth colony a few light-years beyond Sol. Permission had been granted.

Oberon kept an eye on the door between them and the busy transport area, hoping that the reporters would not think to look for him in here. Technicians, station attendants and publicity people had been streaming in and out of the service port all day, for a starship was such an expensive vessel that it was not allowed to lay idle for a minute longer than necessary. Already they were beginning to overhaul the *Anriahd* for the crew that would occupy her on the next mission.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

He smiled down at his mascot. "Did you learn a lot on this mission, Elijah? You'd better be prepared to tell Commodore Paiselle all about it."

Elijah grinned and rubbed one boot against the other. He was stiff and cautious in his new dress uniform, a size larger than the one he had worn at the last banquet.

"I won't have to do that. He'll just look at Muriat's stupid tapes."

"Are you going to tell him that you enjoyed the mission?"

Elijah looked up obliquely. "It was very enlightening and I learned a lot—how does that sound?"

"That's fine. That will please your old Uncle Matt very much." Oberon waited, then asked lightly, "Are you going to tell him about seeing the dust?" But Elijah, absorbed with another passing flight, had pressed up against the visiplat and was paying no attention. The question was repeated.

"I can't," Elijah said.

Oberon started. "Oh, why not?" he remarked.

"We-ll, because I don't remember it so very much. I sort of remember it, but not everything, and I can't see it anymore."

"What do you remember?" Elijah's reaction convinced him that this subject was not important to him any longer. The boy was rooting around in his pocket.

"I forget. It was Sagen's game, anyhow." He found what he was looking for and drew it out slowly.

"I wanted to give you something special, Captain Obi, but I don't have anything special except this."

He held it up between his thumb and forefinger. It was a small, round white pebble.

The pebble was placed in Oberon's hand.

"You liked that man, didn't you?" he said as he soberly accepted this treasure.

Elijah nodded, his eyes wistful and gazing on something light-years back in time.

"So did I," Oberon said. "It's too bad that we can't always be with the people we like. But they have their lives to live and we have ours. And that's just the way it is."

Elijah gave a long, very adult sigh and replied, "That's exactly how I feel, too, Captain Obi."

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Some of the essentials had not changed. Elijah was still Elijah. He was fond of Nimmo, and had enjoyed him, but Nimmo did not matter. The memory of Lenard was precious to this child, for reasons, perhaps, that he might never entirely understand himself, and it was the awareness of how far away Lenard was that made him blink and frown as he turned to gaze through the visiplat again.

Will Benson stepped in from transport, his hands full of lists. "Your flight next, sir. Brandon's, too."

Oberon was unexpectedly pleased by Elijah's radiant expression.

"Let's go!" the youngster shouted, grabbing his hand. They ran, and the sound of their laughing was lost in the noise and confusion of the emptying starship.

Seated across the table from Paiselle, in the same place he had occupied two years ago, Oberon watched as the older man finished leafing through the printed version of the term summation for the last time. In two years, the sturdy Paiselle had not aged much except to grow stockier, his hair whiter. Oberon had expected him to be excessively shocked by the demise of the Capacians, but there was only a defeated casting up of the hands, a smile and a shake of the head. It was as if they had never existed.

Sagen's death disturbed him more, but, like the Capacians, she would be remembered only for her elusiveness. In six hours of closed conference, the mission had been reviewed by Paiselle, relived by Oberon, and the encapsulated imprint of the term summation had been sent down to the League Archives.

One thing which had puzzled Oberon for months was explained by Paiselle when they discussed the incident at Draco I. The Draco II scoutship, *Triad*, was captured by Draco I shortly after its confrontation with the *Anriahd*, early in the mission. Apparently, it was captured before it had been able to relay complete information to its headquarters, for, almost immediately, Paiselle was contacted by radio from Draco II and was asked for the name of the League vessel which carried a physician named Andrew Edwards. He told them readily and then decided on one extra precaution. On a world like Draco II, social

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

laws were paramount. He simply told them that the doctor they had inquired about had recently adopted ship's mascot Elijah Brandon, age seven years. According to the Draconian laws of kinship, the child could not be harmed, either.

Naturally, the invading warship from Draco II returned its unexpected little passenger without delay.

Oberon had expected the medical report of Elijah's brain damage to dishearten the commodore, but he was again surprised. As Paiselle compared the readings, he seemed relieved. "Now at least we know what we have on our hands," was his remark. "It could have been much worse." Even the text of the Capacian Code did not baffle him for long, and he agreed immediately that their use of Bible format was a deliberate camouflage. He was immensely satisfied that their topic was Elijah, without being at all perplexed or mystified by what they said about him. "I do agree with this man, Martins, however," he said as he examined the recorded reactions of the crew. "It does seem likely that Elijah has something in common with the Capacians." There was a glint of anticipation in his eyes. "Since they never had anything to say about Josef Ergang, or any of our past great intellects, I can see how Martins arrived at that conclusion, and I'm inclined to share it. But all that they're really saying," he concluded with a laugh, "is that Elijah is something special, and I think we've always known that."

"Commodore—" Oberon settled back in his chair, although their meeting had officially ended with the departure of the summation capsule. "How would you feel if you discovered suddenly that all of our questions could be answered—and practically all at once?"

"There would be only more questions," came the prompt reply. Paiselle was tugging at his dress jacket and straightening the collar. They were late for the banquet.

"You don't understand. I'm talking about the effect of total reality itself coming to our awareness for the first time—every single thing answered and explained at once."

"It can't be done."

"Is that what you thought when you initiated this mission?"

Paiselle glanced at a time panel, flustered and impatient. "Well, I—I was certain that they could tell us a lot

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

more than we could acquire in centuries, and show us more—”

“But not everything. You didn’t think they had the ultimate answers?”

“I can’t say that I really expected it,” Paiselle cried, exasperated. His eyes narrowed suddenly. “Why are you asking me these things?”

Oberon shrugged. “Just curious.”

His time was up. Paiselle was holding the door. “Come on, Dan. We’re about to miss the award ceremony. Your crew would never forgive you.”

They strode off together, dodging photographers, but when they had reached the ground floor and were headed for the huge banquet area, a strange impulse came over Oberon. He stopped Paiselle and said, “Commodore, you go on ahead. I’ll catch up in a few minutes.”

The fresh air coming from an open exit where the last rays of the afternoon were slanting in had carried a peculiar excitement into him, and his heart was beating rapidly.

Paiselle gazed at him searchingly, his square body erect and proud as he extended his hand. “Dan, you know how it is at these banquets. You get lost. There are hundreds of people there. At least half of them are going to mob me with questions, and the other half will mob you. If I don’t see you again, I just wanted to say one more thing.” As they shook hands a keen light filled Paiselle’s eyes. “Some day I’d like to hear the whole story,” he said.

He winked, then turned on his heel and strode decisively away. Oberon gazed after him for a moment, then moved to go outside, but he was stopped by a large hand descending on his shoulder. He stared up at the Dragon with surprise. A ribbon-mounted medal was shining down at him.

He started to congratulate his friend, but the Dragon broke in eagerly. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you this morning, Obi, but I’m onto something! I’ve traced the determining factor in Elijah’s recovery from Lumian. It was a reaction in the cerebral cortex brought about by an energy field that seems to originate in those appendages along his optic nerve. If I could create an artificial field of the same type in a normal child with Lumian, well—perhaps I can live up to this pretty object.” He tapped the medal and pulled his friend into a strong, close embrace.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

"That's wonderful, Dragon." Oberon glanced toward an open shuttlefield tinged by sunset. "I'll see you at the banquet in about fifteen minutes."

But he was again detained.

"There is something else," the Dragon said slowly. "Obi, I just wanted you to know about this. I had to say something to you. Sagen told me."

Oberon frowned vaguely, at a momentary loss. "What?"

The Dragon nodded and as Oberon looked up wonderingly, he found in the vivid gray eyes a respect and compassion as deep as their friendship.

"I saw her once before she died. It was after the Draco incident. She told me about you." The hand tightened on Oberon's shoulder. "I wouldn't have been able to make that decision, Obi. I couldn't have done it myself. You were—you were the right man."

Oberon gripped the lanky biceps. He was incredibly happy. "Thank you, Dragon."

Edwards said nothing more, and with a smile he ambled off toward the banquet hall, where hundreds of people had no idea that the blinding light of absolute reality had almost struck their cause away.

Oberon stepped out into the evening. Moments ago he had imagined a small form dashing down a long hall and thought he had heard the distant, soaring shout of a joyful child.

Then, far ahead, he saw them, a man and a woman as blond as the last rays of the sun. Their backs were to him as they walked toward the shuttlefield with Elijah between them. He was holding their hands, alternately prancing and trudging with the gait of happiness.

The words of Ergang echoed in Oberon's mind.

Again and again man finds a power at large in the universe, a power more subtle than the ether and more wonderful than all of the stars. Science is struck by the compelling order of all things, a thought-out order which leads one to think of the universe as a great and wonderful Being, receding at will from the reach of knowledge.

A tiny slice of the infinite was his, a single flicker from the ultimate light.

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

His gaze rose to the sky, and as he watched it his imagination lifted him and sped him through it until the universe broke full upon him again and expanded, pulsed, engulfed and eluded.

A universe which existed through itself, and for all, which was itself.

Author's Note

THE THEORY OF THE DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

Since completing this story I have prepared this appendix as a further explanation of the shape of the universe as I see it. The double mobius sphere does appear to meet more of the requirements of a plausible space-warp model than do either of the two models offered by astronomers today. I am referring to the positive curvature model and the negative curvature model, both of which will be discussed later on.

I discovered the DMS by following a hunch while a sophomore at college. For some reason (I hate math) I had become fascinated by the mobius strip. As I tampered with it and read all that was available about it, I began to feel that its concept of one-sidedness was vastly underrated, and that it should have a much larger role in the entire scheme of things. I probably would not have felt this way, or followed my hunch, if I had not happened to be reading, at the same time, about Einstein's theory of the space-time continuum. We find in the dictionary that *continuous* means "marked by uninterrupted extension in space, time or sequence," and that a *continuum* is "something absolutely continuous and homogeneous of which no distinction of content can be affirmed except by reference to something else" or "something in which a fundamental common character (*e.g.*, space warp) is discernible amid a series of indefinite variations" (*e.g.*, matter, energy, time). This concept, I realized, was demonstrated beautifully by the mobius structure, and *by no other mathematical model*. My familiarity with the two

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

standard textbook "models of the universe" was enough to tell me that neither one bent back on itself so that the "inside" was continuous with the outside." Einstein maintained that the universe must be a closed, finite sphere which *bent back on itself*.

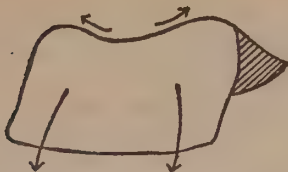
However, all I had was the mobius strip, and my model of space had to be spherical. So I extended the surface of a paper mobius strip by adding more and more strips and using tape to hold it together. My end product looked like two spheres joined by a twist. I cannot describe it any better than that, and it is impossible to draw. Beautifully simple to look at—but it can only be represented in three dimensions. To me it is interesting that it so closely resembles the "infinity symbol" ∞ — that odd little bequest from some ancient, inner conviction of mankind. It possesses a large figure-eight shape.

The first thing I did after arriving at the finished model was determine whether or not it was still mobius in structure. I was sure it would be, so I took a pencil and traced around and through it. If I did not have to remove the pencil point to get from one "side" to the other, then it was a one-sided, double sphere, a double MOBIUS sphere. It was.

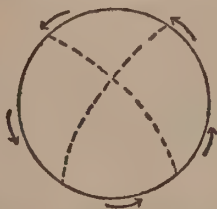
I thought about what this meant. From our perspective the cosmos appears to have two directions, or "sides," an "outside" (macrocosmos) and an "inside" (microcosmos). However, we know—we are told by both science *and* theology—that these two "surfaces" of existence are continuous with each other, that somehow, if you keep following either direction you cover both, ending up where you started from. This is difficult to understand, but it can be demonstrated on the DMS. If you pinch any segment of the DMS between your fingertips, it would seem to a minute observer in that one area, to have two "sides." But viewed on the whole, it is one-sided, or *continuous with itself*, just as existence is continuous with itself, just as the cosmos is actually a continuum.

Let me now present the accepted views of what type of curvature space must have. The theory of General Relativity says space must be curved, either positively or negatively curved. Positive curvature is like this:

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE



and negative curvature is saddle-shaped like this:



These models are both extremely lacking because neither accommodates the other, and it must be that the universe employs *both* kinds of shape. After all, the forces of positive and negative are both present at all levels of creation, so it must be that they are both present in determining the warp of space. In the DMS, they are. Here we see positive curvature in the “lobes,” or two spheres, and the saddle shape of negative curvature fits exactly into the twist at the center.

What about cosmic expansion and the distribution of galaxies? These concepts, too, can be aptly demonstrated on the DMS. It is obvious, when looking at the model, that the source of expansion is in the center of the two lobes, in the twist. This twist, I believe, is also the source of that “series of indefinite variations” which we call time. But the “closed, finite sphere” must also somehow accommodate infinity. Indeed, it does. Here is a model which is finite in shape, yet could be infinitely large, having, therefore, no limits. As for galactic distribution—Einstein also stated that the presence of matter is what curves space. Perfect. The galaxies are all located in the two lobes (contrary to what I did in the story, there would be no galaxy in the center, or twist), where they are expanding away from each other and from the center

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

at the speed of light, having first caused the space warp at their origin in the twist. Right now, with our limited technology, our measurements of distant galaxies indicate that space is positively curved. Of course this is all that we can detect because we live in one lobe of the DMS, where there is only positive curvature. As of yet, we haven't been able to penetrate the twist, and discover the negative side of the structure. But don't worry—we will!

To quote the Time-Life book *The Universe*, astronomy needs a model that would demonstrate this: "Looking out from any galaxy, a human . . . should see along a closed light path curving in on itself in space and simultaneously bending back through time to the very beginning of expansion." This is *exactly* what would happen on the DMS if you sent out a light beam (or anything) in any direction from any galaxy. It would curve in on itself by following the mobius warp of space and thus arrive back at its starting point, and in so doing, it would pass through the twist at the center of the DMS—the twist which, when viewed, is so obviously the source of cosmic expansion. But in order to complete its journey it must penetrate the twist *twice*. (Does this have anything to do with positive and negative time? I'd like to know.)

Here are some accepted facts about space-time. Let us see how they apply to the double mobius sphere.

- 1) The *central* point of our universe must lie in the fourth dimension. (To explain—the center of a 2D plane does not lie on that plane but in the 3rd dimension because all planes occupy a 3D world. Our apparent 3D world is really 4D, so our center lies in the fourth dimension.)
- 2) The universe is expanding at the speed of light.
- 3) When a body travels faster than the speed of light, space contracts and time slows down. (Einstein)

When looking at the twist, or center of the DMS, one is struck by how the "surfaces" of space appear to concentrate and merge there. (The other two standard models show no center point of the space warp.) A body penetrating this point would enter the fourth dimension in that it would suddenly become influenced by it, instead of merely "living with it unaware," the way we are

DOUBLE MOBIUS SPHERE

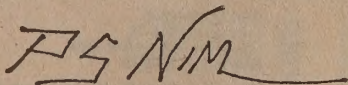
thought to do. A body could enter it very quickly by traveling faster than the speed of light. In doing this, it would exceed the *rate of cosmic expansion* and would gradually reach the center of the DMS, thus entering the fourth dimension. How beautifully fact #3 fits into this! If it is true that space contracts and time slows down for a body going at this speed, then this is actually what that body is doing—it is penetrating the center of the universe, where space contracts and, if the twist is indeed the origin of time, time slows down, becoming eventually a state of *timelessness*.

I believe that the basic forces which determine the behavior of matter and energy can be correlated with the structure of the DMS. I must leave the application of gravity, electromagnetism, the force which binds the nuclei of atoms, and the force which causes their disintegration to someone with more training than I have had. It can be done.

I am convinced that we are about to discover that the universe is shaped like a double mobius sphere. In May 1976, I was standing outside a science class at the Ranney School, where I was working. I overheard a student saying to his teacher, "I read in *The New York Times* that they now think the universe is shaped like a huge figure-eight because of the quasars."


I have not been able to find the article he was talking about, and I don't know what the importance of quasars is, except that they are matter determining the curvature of space. . . . But when I heard this I broke out in chills and my heart leaped to my throat.

Possibly the discovery has already begun.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'AS' followed by 'Nim' in a stylized, cursive script.

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