

# THE RETURN

BOOK IV OF VOYAGERS

*BEN BOVA*



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**BOOK IV OF VOYAGERS**

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**THE RETURN**

**BEN BOVA**



**A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK · NEW YORK**

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THE RETURN: BOOK IV OF VOYAGERS

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A Tor Book

Published by Tom Doherty Associates, LLC

175 Fifth Avenue

New York, NY 10010

[www.tor-forge.com](http://www.tor-forge.com)

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ISBN 978-0-7653-4815-9

First Edition: August 2009

First Mass Market Edition: August 2010

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

**TO BARBARA,**

---

*who fell in love with Keith Ston*

Forget the myths you've heard about the White House. The truth is, they're not very bright guys.

---

Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward

*All the President's Men*

# THE RETURN

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## PROLOGUE

---

The starship had come from beyond the beyond, ending its pilgrimage through space and time back to the place where its journey had begun.

Keith Stoner came back to his home world, but it was not the Earth he had left. The coastlines were noticeably altered; the north polar sea was almost entirely clear of ice. It looked so tantalizingly similar, but it was a different world. Most disturbing of all, its history was subtly different.

Worse still, the people of Earth were ignoring him. Politicians, world leaders, even the scientists did not answer his greeting. He had known from the outset that he would have to approach them carefully, gently. He did not want to alarm them and rouse their deeply rooted xenophobic fears. But his messages were ignored. They were doing their best to pretend that he did not exist.

And there lay the danger. They were all in peril, both the star voyagers and all those who lived on the crowded, brawling surface of the planet.

Life itself was at stake. The brief candle was already flickering, failing.

Puzzled, frustrated, Stoner decided to try a different kind of message. They won't be able to ignore this, he thought. But he wondered if that would be right.

# BOOK I

---

## RAOUL TAVALERA

The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well meaning but without understanding.

Louis D. Brandeis  
*Olmstead v. United States*  
1928

## CHAPTER 1

---

“You’ve changed.”

“I’ve changed?” Raoul Tavalera cast a surprised look at Evelyn Delmore, sitting on the sofa next to him.

The party had pretty much drifted away from the living room. The old-fashioned, overfurnished room was almost empty, except for a few of his mother’s white-haired friends and Evelyn, who’d been at Tavalera’s side since the instant the party started, just about.

His former neighbors and old schoolmates had gathered in his mother’s house to celebrate his returning home after nearly six years in space. But it was a strangely quiet, subdued sort of party. Hardly any alcohol, for one thing. When Tavalera had asked for a drink his mother had handed him a fruit punch. He had to get one of his old college buddies to spike his glass with a dollop of tequila. The guy poured the booze surreptitiously out of a pocket flask, eyeing the tiny red light of the security camera up in the corner of the ceiling.

And not all of his classmates and former buddies had shown up. When he asked where Vincenzo Tiorlini was, Tavalera got shifty looks and embarrassed mumbles about work camps in the flooded Pacific Northwest. Zeke Berkowitz, too: re-education center for him. They said he’d be out in another few months, maybe. Even Ellen O’Reilly. Her flaming temper had gotten her sent away somewhere nobody seemed to know where.

Six years, Tavalera thought. A lot had changed in six years. Or maybe, he thought, it’s just that I’m looking at everything through different eyes, after being away for so long.

There had been dancing, of sorts. Very subdued shuffling around the floor of the dining room which had been emptied of furniture for the evening. Dull, old-fashioned music from individual phones that each dancer clipped to his or her ear. So that the noise won’t disturb any of the old people, Tavalera’s mother had explained. He had tried to tune the phone to something livelier but got only a god-awful shriek in his ear; the phones were restricted to one single channel, bland and boring. Finally Tavalera had given up in numbed disgust and returned to the living room. That wasn’t dancing, he told himself. He’d had more fun in kindergarten when the teachers made them all march in time to patriotic songs.

Looking around the hushed living room, Tavalera found that most of the partygoers his own age had crowded into the kitchen, but even there they were a pretty quiet crowd, he thought. He remembered impromptu parties aboard the *Goddard* habitat, all the way out by the planet Saturn, where’d he spent a couple of involuntary years and fallen in love. They were noisy, cheerful bashes, fueled by home-brewed booze everybody called rocket juice. People danced to music that made the walls vibrate, for crying out loud. This homecoming gig was more like a wake than a party.

I’ve known these people since I was a little kid, he mused. We all went to school together, right through college. But they’re different now. Strangers. Maybe it is me, he repeated to himself. They haven’t changed. I guess I have.

Tavalera was a compactly built middleweight, exactly one hundred and eighty-two centimeters tall. He had a long-jawed, melancholy face with a set of teeth that made him look, he knew, like a caricature of a horse. Not handsome, but not entirely unattractive, either. Somber brown eyes, dark hair that he kept cropped short after years of living and working aboard spacecraft.

“Yes, you’ve changed,” said Evelyn Delmore, peering nearsightedly at him as she sat beside him on the sofa. The crumbs of his homecoming cake were scattered over the big tray on the coffee table, the table itself, much of the floor, and Tavalera’s travel-weary slacks. He realized how old-fashioned the

living room was, with its fake fireplace, overstuffed furniture, and the wall-sized TV screen that was never off. There were only a few of the older neighbors in the living room now, all of them placidly watching the TV news.

The big wall screen over the mantelpiece was showing bulky, ungainly robotic soldiers clanking through some village in a jungle. Might's well be the same newscasts they were running before I left, Tavalera thought. The info bar running along the top of the screen read: **Medellín, Colombia.**

That red unblinking eye of the security camera bothered him, up there in the corner of the ceiling by the old-fashioned crown molding that his mother loved so well. It seemed to be staring at him. Why does Ma need a security camera? Tavalera wondered as he sat on the sofa. She's got one in every room, for chrissake, even the kitchen.

He heard somebody yowl with laughter, back in the kitchen, where almost everyone had moved to. Except for Evelyn, all the people of his own age had squeezed in there. That's where the food is, he thought. The laughter quickly cut off, as if some teacher or librarian had hissed out a warning shush.

He got up and headed toward the back of the house, Evelyn half a step behind him. Tavalera felt almost annoyed. I don't need her hanging on me! He thought of Holly, back at the *Goddard* habitat. He wondered what Holly's doing right now.

The kitchen was jammed: people were sitting on the counters, crowding into the mudroom, couples sitting on the back steps that led up to the bedrooms. But their talk was subdued, low-key. They were almost whispering, as if they were in church, or afraid to let anyone hear what they were saying. It unnerved Tavalera.

His brother, Andy, was entertaining them all with an impromptu display of juggling. Impromptu and inept, Tavalera thought. Andy had a big grin on his face as he tossed pieces of fruit in the air. The floor around his feet was littered with oranges, apples, and something that had splattered and made a pulpy mess.

It didn't bother his mother at all, Raoul saw. She seemed dazedly pleased at all the friendly faces crammed in around her. She was standing by the stove, looking kind of dumpy and round and as white as bread dough, smiling vacantly, hardly changed at all in the years Tavalera had been away. Except that now her white hair was dyed ash-blond.

Why in hell did she dye her hair? he wondered.

He realized that Evelyn was staring intently at him, as if trying to read his thoughts.

Embarrassed at her attention, he asked, "I've changed, huh?"

"Yes. Definitely." She kept her voice low, just like all the others.

"How? For the better?"

"I don't know yet." She was about Tavalera's age, pretty in a pale blond way, even though she was decidedly on the bony side. Holly was lean, too, but vivacious, always full of energy, full of color and fun.

"You're . . . quieter, I guess," Evelyn continued. "More reserved."

He shrugged. He'd been off-Earth for nearly six whole years. He'd seen massive Jupiter, giant Saturn, the solar system, up close; he'd repaired scoopships that dove into that planet's swirling, multi-hued clouds. He'd nearly been killed out there. He'd lived in a huge space habitat that carried him unwillingly to Saturn, with its bright gleaming rings. He'd left Holly in that habitat that was now orbiting Saturn. He'd promised her he'd return. But the government had refused to allow him to leave Earth again, wouldn't even let him send messages to her.

He'd received no messages from her, either. Was the government blocking them, or had Holly already forgotten about him?

Messages. He'd expected the local news media to make at least a little fuss over him. Back home after traveling halfway across the solar system. None of his old buddies had ever gone into space. But nothing, not a peep in the news nets, even though his brother worked for the local TV center. Just like I've never been away. Nothing. Everything here's the same, even the friggin' never-ending war against terrorists and drug cartels. Except for Mom. She's a blonde now, for chrissake.

But it's not the same, he told himself. Or I'm not the same. Evvie's right. I've changed. Six years off-Earth changes you. Has to. What I took for granted before I left looks . . . strange now. Stifling. It's like coming back to kindergarten after six years of being on my own.

"Before you left," Evelyn was saying, "you were sort of a wise mouth. Now you're . . . well, quieter. Guarded, sort of."

"I'm older," he said with a cheerless smile.

"Aren't we all?" she replied.

Tavalera gestured toward his brother, still juggling, with a silly grin pasted on his face. "Andy's exactly the same as he was the last time I saw him."

"Oh, Andy!" said Evelyn. "He'll never grow up."

Somehow the quiet buzz and restrained laughter seemed almost desperate. It's like everybody's afraid of making any noise. Like we're all back in Sunday school. It became too much for Tavalera. He pushed his way toward the back door.

"Where're you going?" Evelyn asked, right beside him.

"Outside. I need some fresh air." I need to get away from these zombies, he added silently. And I don't need a clinging vine smothering me. He wanted to tell Evelyn to go away and leave him alone, but he didn't have the nerve, didn't want to hurt her feelings.

She came with him as he shouldered his way through the well-wishers who pretty much ignored him in their determination to have a well-behaved good time. Except for his mother, whose eyes followed him every step of the way, looking—not worried, exactly. Concerned. Maybe she's hurt 'cause I'm not enjoying the party, he thought.

Outside it was twilight. The sun had just set; the sky was deepening into violet. Not a cloud in sight. Tavalera saw. The sky fascinated him, after years in spacecraft and artificial habitats. Everybody here took it for granted, that big blue bowl that turned red and gold and deepened gradually into black, dotted with stars that twinkled at you. It isn't that way aboard spacecraft. Even the *Goddard* habitats, big enough to house ten thousand people, didn't have a sky or even a horizon.

It was warm enough outdoors to be comfortable in just his shirtsleeves, even though spring didn't officially start for another month or so.

The neighborhood looked subtly different from the last time he'd seen it. The backyard seemed smaller than he remembered it, the stubbly grass worn down in spots where Tavalera recalled playing ball with his buddies. But now there was a tall aluminum pole in the far corner of the yard, anodized olive green, with another one of those red-eyed security cameras atop it. That was new. The camera turned slowly, slowly, then stopped for a moment when it aimed at Tavalera and Evelyn. He grimaced, then the camera resumed its slow sweep of the area.

Rows of houses stood along the wide, slightly curving street, equally spaced. Just like before I left, Tavalera thought. Maybe a little more crowded, new houses where there'd been open lots and playgrounds before. Or maybe they've shortened the backyards so they could squeeze in some extra houses. Otherwise nothing seemed changed. Except for the poles and the cameras every third house. Who are they watching? he wondered. Who's doing the watching?

Most of the lawns looked half dead, a sickly brown caused by the warming. The new high-ris-

poked above the screening line of struggling young trees out behind the houses, where the park used to be. Tavalera had played baseball in that park and pedaled his old bicycle until it fell apart. Now the area was a refugee center, housing for people driven from their cities by the greenhouse flood. Hispanics, mostly. And some Arabs or Armenians or something like that. They didn't like to be called refugees, he'd been told: they preferred to be known as flood fugitives.

I guess the world has changed in six years, Tavalera thought, even though most people are doing their best to ignore the changes.

He walked around the house and down the driveway in silence, Evelyn step-by-step beside him. She made him feel nervous, edgy. No cars in the driveway. All the partygoers had either walked to the house or taken public transportation. Driving individual autos wasn't forbidden, exactly, he had learned since his return. But the city frowned on unnecessary driving. And the fuel rationing kept people afoot, as well. Rationing hydrogen, Tavalera thought. They get the stuff from water, for chrissake. Why should they have to ration it?

Something flickered in the corner of his eye. He looked up, and his breath caught in his throat.

"Jesus H. Christ! Look at that!"

Evelyn looked shocked. "You shouldn't take the Lord's name in vain! They might hear you."

"But look!" Tavalera lifted her chin to the heavens.

Long ribbons of shimmering light danced across the sky: soft green, pale blue, white, and coral pink. Like trembling curtains they moved and shifted while Tavalera stared, goggle-eyed.

"What is it?" Evelyn asked in an awed whisper.

"The Northern Lights, I think."

She broke into a nervous laughter. "Not the end of the world, then?"

Shaking his head, his eyes still turned skyward, Tavalera murmured, "Aurora Borealis."

"But why's it showing this far south?" Evelyn asked. "We never get the Northern Lights in Little Rock."

"Must be a really big flare on the Sun," he replied. "Or something."

## **APOLOGIA PRO VITA SUA**

BY YOLANDA VASQUEZ

As they say, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. All I wanted to do was to teach children. I had a vocation to teach, but they eventually drilled that out of me. I adored working with kids, watching their eyes light up when they discovered something new. But I ended up doing little more than going through the motions, just like everybody else.

Now I am an old, old woman and I have seen us all—all of us—fecklessly strolling down the gradual, inevitable slope toward hell, good intentions on every side, the best of intentions, I assure you. But the path slopes downward, nevertheless.

You may think I am bitter. I don't believe that I am. They tell me I'm too old to receive the replacement heart that would save my life. So be it. They say that my time is up and it would be against God's will to artificially extend my years beyond my natural span. God is calling me, they tell me, and I should not seek to evade His call. The truth is, I'm too tired to fight it.

Of course, up in Selene—on the Moon—they would use stem cells or nanomachines or some other form of secularist science to rebuild my failing heart. On the Moon a woman of one hundred and

seven years isn't regarded as a lost cause waiting for death to claim her. People have lived to be hundred and fifty or more on the Moon, or so I've heard. Maybe the low gravity helps them.

No, I am not bitter. But if they're going to do nothing but pray over me while my heart slowly gives out, at least I'm going to tell the truth about them. About me. About us all.

I'm writing this in pencil, a stumpy old-fashioned pencil that I smuggled into this hospital's death ward along with my little bag of clothes and personal items like my favorite toothpaste. The toothpaste they give you here tastes like gritty wet cement. They don't call it the death ward, of course; it's the All Saints Hospice for Terminal Patients. That's the official name. It's a whole separate wing of the enormous hospital here in the New Morality's headquarters complex in Atlanta.

I hope I have enough paper to get all my thoughts down. I hope I live long enough to say everything I want to say. Need to say. Somebody's got to say it. I'm scribbling these thoughts onto the backs of old-fashioned photographs, menus I've saved for donkey's years, letters and invitations and even some of the evaluation reports I received back when I was teaching. Nothing electronic. Nothing they can trace.

Even so, I have to be careful because they have cameras in every room, every hallway, watching you all the time. But the cameras are only as good as the people who monitor them and most of the monitors are either lazy or stupid or both. Or maybe they're just bored with watching old people shuffling through the last days of their lives.

They think I'm working on my scrapbook, pasting all my fading memorabilia into an old-fashioned book with microfiber pages that they'll send to my nearest living relation once I've given up the ghost. My great-grandniece. She lives way out in the Asteroid Belt, at an asteroid called Ceres. Far enough away from the New Morality and all their holier-than-thou jail guards.

That's how I think of them: jail guards. They call themselves doctors and nurses and even pastors and ministers of the Lord. They're nice as pie when they sweetly disconnect your pacemaker or pump you intravenously full of tranquilizers so you won't bother them with cries of pain in the night. But they're really guards in a jail that's as big as this country, from sea to shining sea. Or maybe they're more like orderlies in a great big nationwide insane asylum.

I can remember the old days, back when I had just started teaching. Back then the kids were free to play punchball in the schoolyard, and sometimes to punch one of the other kids if they got into a scrap. I remember when they could roll in the dirt and tussle with one another to settle their arguments and then be pals afterward.

But then I saw on TV that some cartoonist in Holland was put in jail because the government there was afraid his cartoons would offend Muslims. Freedom of expression? Forget it. You had to be nice to everybody. Don't give offense to any person or group. Especially those who might blow up your apartment building.

The schools were invaded by social workers and psychologists. They came to do good, to help the children avoid violence and shun evil thoughts. They *organized* all the sports activities; kids shouldn't be allowed to just go out and play on their own. They've got to be controlled, for their own good. They've got to have organized leagues and official statistics. And no name-calling!

Nowadays even if a kid raises her voice in the hallways she's sent to the school psychologist to learn how to control her anger. And they bottle it up inside themselves all their lives until sometime it bursts out and people get killed.

Like I said, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Nobody set out to create this dictatorship. Yes, that's what this is, a dictatorship. Benign, for the most part, but still a dictatorship. Not a police state, not exactly. They're much too clever for that, much too subtle. We still have elections, sure

Vote for the candidate of your choice: tweedledum or tweedle dumber.

~~And it took me so long to realize what was happening! I've got nobody to blame but myself.~~ Nobody sat down and deliberately planned all this. It just happened, step-by-step, one good intention after another.

Yes, I know, the country was in an awful mess before the New Morality brought us to true Christian righteousness. Students walked into schools with guns and killed people. Thirteen-year-olds had babies. Drug gangs had more firepower on the streets than the police and felt perfectly free to shoot up their neighborhoods. More often than not the police were part of the problem.

So the people turned to God. To religion. The New Morality led the way. There were lots of other religious groups, too, but over the years the New Morality sort of absorbed them all.

Little by little. Incrementally. Local associations tried to clean up their neighborhoods, make the streets safe and livable. Good people, earnest people. The local churches were natural focal points for them, meeting places, centers where they could make their plans and recruit others. New Morality ministers showed up to help them, give them pointers and even funding, lead them on the path to righteousness.

Knowing they were doing good, they could be stern, even ruthless. But it was all for the good of the community, after all. So a few bad apples got sent away. And one or two others were permanently tranquilized with deep brain stimulators. It was all for the best. We were doing God's work and we knew it.

## CHAPTER 2

---

He dreamed of the space habitat again that night, and of Holly, the warmth of her, the joy of her. He had promised to return to her at the habitat in orbit around Saturn.

But the next morning the bureaucrats of the Office of Employment Allocation had other ideas.

The forty-something woman behind the desk had a patently phony smile pasted on her chubby face. Relentlessly cheerful, she was plump, with dimples in her face and her elbows. I wonder where else Tavalera thought as he watched her sitting at her desk, humming to herself while she studied his desktop screen.

She worked in an actual office, a real room and not a cubicle. It was a small room, but it had a window that looked out on the new housing tracts that had been put up where the sports arena used to be. She wore a dark blue one-piece suit that almost looked like coveralls. On her left breast was the palm-ring emblem of the New Morality. A larger version of the emblem hung on the wall behind her desk chair: a pair of palm boughs bent into a circle.

“I did my two years of public service,” Tavalera said, hoping to get her to pay attention to him instead of whatever data she’d pulled up on her screen.

Without taking her eyes from the screen she sing-songed, “Yes, but you owe your community twenty more years, don’t you.”

“When I’m fifty.”

Finally she looked at him. Her eyes were deep blue, almost violet, Tavalera saw.

Her smile stayed fixed on her round face while she spoke to him as if he were a kindergarten pupil. “Mr. Tavalera, you need to understand that the rules have changed since you left Earth. The greenhouse floods and the other climate shifts have forced us to require your public-service commitment immediately. Your community needs you now, not twenty years in the future.”

“But I want to go back—” He stopped himself, but not in time.

The woman’s smile faltered momentarily, then flicked back on. But her voice hardened. “Back to Saturn? Back to that colony of misfit unbelievers and humanists? For shame, Mr. Tavalera! You’re needed here.”

“You got no right to force me to stay.”

She sighed heavily. “I’m afraid that’s an old-fashioned attitude, Mr. Tavalera. We have a perfect right to require that you stay where you can do the most good for your fellow citizens. After all, it’s God’s work that you’ll be doing.”

Tavalera said nothing, but he wondered who decided what was God’s work and what was not.

“And even if we should grant you a travel permit,” the woman went on, back to her patronizing schoolteacher tone, “how would you pay for your transportation all the way out to Saturn?”

“I’ll work my way, on one of the supply ships.”

“And how will you get a work permit?”

Tavalera saw where she was heading. Work permits were issued by the Office of Employment Allocation.

Before he could think of anything to say, the woman put her smile on again and said sweetly, “You have been assigned to the New Orleans Restoration Project. Nine doors down the hall, on your right.”

Restoration project? he wondered. New Orleans had been underwater since before Tavalera had been in grammar school.

“Nine doors down the hall, on your right,” the woman repeated. “They’re expecting you.”

Numbly Tavalera got up from the chair and went to the door, then hesitated and turned back.

slightly.

“Count your blessings, Mr. Tavalera. With your technical background, you could have been assigned to repairing infantry robots in Latin America.”

Tavalera felt his insides go hollow. The army? They could assign me to the army?

Still smiling, the woman said, “The Lord loves a cheerful giver, Mr. Tavalera. Give your service cheerfully, and all will be well.”

He nodded at her, but he was thinking, Two years of mandatory service. Two more friggin’ years I’ve gotta figure a way out of this.

He trudged unhappily down the corridor to the door labeled: NEW ORLEANS RESTORATION PROJECT. He rapped his knuckles on it once. No answer. He banged harder, and when there was still no reply, he pushed the door open and stepped into a large room filled with two rows of desks. All of them empty. There were blank computer screens on each totally bare desk, comfortable-looking swivel chairs, even trash baskets on the floor. All of them empty.

A door at the far end of the room popped open and a bright-eyed redheaded young woman called, “This way, Mr. Tavalera.”

Yep, they’re expecting me, all right.

Tavalera walked briskly along the aisle between the empty desks while the redhead held the door and smiled at him. “Nice weather for February, isn’t it?” she said as if they’d known each other for years. “No twisters yet.”

Tavalera nodded. The redhead pointed at still another door, this one labeled: T. R. BEAUREGARD, DIRECTOR.

“He’s waiting for you,” said the redhead, still smiling.

T. R. Beauregard’s office was big enough to land a rocket jumper in it, Tavalera thought. The director’s desk was wide, gleaming, impressive. Beauregard himself was standing behind it, hands clasped behind his back, giving Tavalera an imitation of a steely gaze. He wore a dark gray tunic over a white turtleneck shirt. It made him look almost like a minister, Tavalera thought. The man was chunky: his face looked soft, like children’s putty, although he was doing his best to make his dark eyes seem piercing.

A holographic display hovered over one corner of Beauregard’s desk. From where Tavalera was standing it looked like a list or a printed form hanging there in midair a few centimeters above the desk’s gleaming surface.

Gesturing to the display, Beauregard said, “Says here in your file that you’ve got a degree in electrical . . . elec . . .”

“Electromechanical engineering,” Tavalera prompted.

“Yeah. Whatever. Elec-tro-mechanical,” Beauregard said.

Standing before the desk, Tavalera explained, “It means I’m qualified to work on electromechanical systems, like the actuators that control a spacecraft’s life-support systems.”

“Spent some time out in space, didja?”

Tavalera nodded.

“Well, the work you’ll be doin’ here won’t be spacey, that’s fer sure.” Gesturing impatiently, Beauregard said, “Siddown, siddown.”

Tavalera sat in one of the two handsome armchairs in front of the desk. They were covered in smooth deep burgundy leather. Real leather, from the feel of it, Tavalera thought.

Beauregard sank into his high-backed swivel chair and regarded Tavalera unsmilingly for several moments. At last he said, “What we’re doin’ heah is God’s own work, my boy. You oughtta be proud

to be allowed to take part in it.”

God’s work again, Tavalera thought. He bit back the reply that leaped into his mind.

Beauregard turned slightly in his chair and the wall on Tavalera’s right began to glow. “Look at this,” the project director said grandly.

The wall screen showed a wide expanse of water. No land in sight. Soft blue waves surging across the sea beneath a pastel blue sky dotted with fat white clumps of clouds.

“That’s the Gulf of Mexico,” Beauregard said. “Some people are callin’ it the *Sea of Mexico*, it’s got so big.”

The camera seemed to be moving swiftly across the wide sweep of water. Off in the distance Tavalera saw something jutting up from the water. The camera zoomed in on a single slim tower standing in the midst of the sea, bright silvery metal glinting in the sunlight.

“That’s the N’Orleans Monument,” said the project director. “Memorializin’ all those pore souls that got themselves drowned in the flooding.”

“I was just a kid when it happened,” Tavalera said.

“Yeah, yeah. Now watch this.”

The camera sank beneath the waves. The ruins of the city sprawled across the sea bottom shimmering in the shallow sunlit water. Rows of buildings, most of them roofless, street after street. Then, before Tavalera’s eyes, a huge dome began to take form, a dome of glass. Computer graphics, he realized. The camera moved through the glass shell, and inside it grew new buildings and walkways, hotels and parks, thronging crowds of people strolling along from one garishly lit building to another. Children ran by, laughing. People stood along the curving transparent shell and looked out at the remains of New Orleans.

“That’s what we’re gonna build,” said T. R. Beauregard. “And you’re gonna be part of mah team.”

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