

and his tongue examined. He had cardiographs taken of his heart-beat and electro-encephalographs taken of his brain-waves.

When he finally came to himself he was standing in front of a door marked:

DR LJEE
(*Molecular Reorganizer*)

Press to Dissolve

He pressed and the door literally fell apart. An electric charge reduced it to its component atoms which were held in statis by a magnetic field until Mr Johnson had passed through. Then the magnetic field collapsed and the door came together again.

Dr Ljee was a dolphin.

Not that there was anything unusual in this, as dolphins had been granted equal rights with men under the charter of 1997. Even so, to find that one was to be doctored by a dolphin was, to say the least, a little off-putting.

Dr Ljee was relaxing on a couch of foam rubber at the bottom of a land tank when Mr Johnson came in.

'Ah, welcome, sir,' said the dolphin. 'Speaking into the microphone, please.'

(Try as they might men could never cure the dolphins of saying 'speaking' instead of 'speak'.)

'I want to be young again,' said Mr Johnson.

'Natural, most natural,' said the dolphin. 'I myself have already taken the treatment once. You wouldn't think that I am 387 years old, would you?'

'Amazing,' said Mr Johnson. 'Why hasn't this thing received more publicity?'

'You're forgetting the Act of 2003, the one that limited advertising and banned football. We come under the province of the Act.'

'I see,' said Mr Johnson. 'Tell me something about the process.'

'Our treatment is unique—there is nothing like it in the galaxy. They say that the sleepless men of Fermus may have practised something similar, but they all went into a thousand-year trance two centuries ago, so we are not going to know for a long time. Anyway, what we do is this. Instead of a lot of clumsy surgery, grafting limbs from centuries old, deep-frozen corpses, and mocking up limbs from pseudo-flesh, we make use of the available material. We rearrange the atoms of the body into the type of person you want to be. The cost is a mere 50,000 credits.'

The last remark was thrown away carelessly, as if it were of no consequence.

'Fifty thousand credits is a lot of money,' said Mr Johnson.

'It's a lot of service,' replied Dr Ljee. 'You agree? Good, you will find the contract on the desk. Will you please sign it, and place it in the capsule provided, along with a credraft for 50,000 credits.'

The dolphin waited till Mr Johnson had done so and then spoke again. 'There is a small archway to your left. Will you please go to it and follow the red light—that will take you to the converter room. When you get there I will be waiting for you—this tank is also a lift.'

Mr Johnson entered the arch, and following the red light arrived at the converter to find Dr Ljee comfortably installed in his land tank.

'Ah, welcome,' said the dolphin. 'I hope you don't get claustrophobia—we have to put you in that.'

'That' was the converter, a massive affair that looked like a cross between a boiler and a gas-turbine.

'No,' said Mr Johnson, 'not as far as I know.'

'Good, then will you please lie on that couch.' He did so, and the couch moved forward into the bowels of the converter. He found himself looking up at a squat little nozzle. He stared at it in horrified fascination as the voices from outside droned on.

'Superfuser.'

'Ready.'

'Displacer.'

'Ready.'

'Matterport.'

'A-Okay.'

'All ready.'

'Check, check, check, check, check.'

'Trigger all.'

A blue flame swept from the roof and his flesh seemed to dissolve like wax before a blow-torch. The world went mad. Atoms span and dissolved, broke away from one system to be united with another. A great grey wave came down to wash consciousness away.

'Open up,' said Dr Ljee.

The converter door came open and a thin, shrill, horrified voice came from within.

'Mamma!' it said. 'Mamma, mamma, mamma, mamma . . .'

'Oh dear,' said the dolphin. 'I wonder if two years is a little too young?'

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