THE ULTIMATE REWARD-*
2016 A.D.

by Eugene Hager

The pneumatic sidewalk carried Zon Darak through the main corridor of sector nine toward his cubicle in section seventeen: impervious to the slight air resistance and the passing panorama of titanium and concrete, he pondered the events of the day. For the thirty-first time in the eight years since he had reached the requisite age of forty-seven, Zon had submitted his application for the Reward; even though the previous thirty-six applications had been rejected, he still had high hopes of winning the Reward. Spurring him to work harder, each rejection had made him more intent on winning the Reward: he could not understand why older and less accomplished workers were rewarded while he was not. Even his co-workers agreed that because of his great initiative and labor, Zon deserved the Reward; furthermore, Zon resented the fact that the Reward was given to men below the minimum age merely because they were creative and independent thinkers.

Gliding out of a side corridor, some of Zon’s co-workers saw him and shouted greetings; he waved a return greeting and turned off into another side corridor because he did not wish to discuss his application and be pitied for past rejections. This detour almost prevented him from reaching his cubicle before the door automatically closed and locked at hour four; he slid into the room just as the door began to close and breathed a sigh of relief because being locked out of his cubicle would undoubtedly jeopardize his chances for winning the Reward. As he caught his breath, he glanced slowly around the tiny enclosure noting the sparse furnishings: the room contained his sleeping tub, a bench and a table which folded down from the wall at mealtime, the food slot, and an old straight chair which had been given to him by one of his co-workers who had won the Reward. Promptly at hour five the bench and table unfolded, and with a humming click the pneumatic food tube deposited a plastic tray and two plastic containers onto the table; Zon added water from his drinking tube to the containers of dehydrated food and sat down to eat his supper.

While he ate the coarse gray porridge and drank the vitamin-enriched tonic, he stared at the polished titanium wall and thought about his application. Under the System an individual was allowed

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to apply for the Reward when he reached the age of forty-seven if he had produced the required number of units on his job; in Zon’s work one was required to mine one million tons of nobelium. According to what Zon had been told, the persons who won the Reward were selected on the basis of their attitude toward the Committee and the amount by which they exceeded the labor requirement for their work group; Zon knew that he had exceeded the labor requirement by at least ten thousand tons and that he had always been polite to the Committee members, but his applications had still been rejected. He wondered if he should express ideas for bettering the lives of the workers as some of the recent winners had done, and he still wondered why the Committee had not put some of the ideas into effect; he had asked some of his co-workers about it that very day.

Zon’s thoughts were interrupted by a warning bell; he finished his vitamin tonic as the bench and table began to fold into the wall dumping the plastic containers into the disposal slot. Five minutes later, the lights were automatically turned off; however, Zon did not feel like sleeping but sat in his chair and stared into the blackness, pondering his application once again. Although the Reward had been discussed frequently, Zon knew only vaguely what it was; however, he did know that it involved returning to the outside where there was sunshine and green grass, something which he had not seen in almost forty years. Smiling as he recalled his youth on a farm in Virginia, he could almost feel the warmth of the sun and smell the freshly-mown grass; those were the happy days, the days of the “Golden Age” of the United States. A frown replaced the smile as Zon remembered the evil times that followed; historians later called it the decline of the United States. Although during the 1980’s it had appeared that the major problems of the times had been solved, the following decade proved that the problems were only temporarily suppressed; the election of a Negro President in 1992 seemed to demonstrate the maturity of the country, but the subsequent refusal of the white legislature to pass any of his programs proved that racial prejudice had not been eliminated. An apathetic public failed to rally behind the President when he appealed to them to support his defense program; even the fall of Japan to China and the loss of Brazil to pro-communist forces did not stir the American people. It required the loss of Mexico to Russia in 1994 to cause the people to back their leader, but then it was too late. In addition to the serious foreign situation, internal difficulties plagued the country; prices climbed as defenses were strengthened on the southern border, rioting broke out in several cities as communist agitators kindled anti-government feelings, and corruption in the senate was revealed by a special Presidential committee. Furthermore, the Ku Klux Klan and the Black Muslims who had been disband in 1987
were once again prevalent throughout the country; in spite of these problems, every corrective action attempted by the President was blocked by the lobbyist-controlled Congress. Climaxing the process of decay was the market crash on September 7, 1994, followed by the assassination of the President and his entire cabinet by a Ku Klux Klan bombing team on September 9. Emboldened by subsequent rioting throughout the United States, the Chinese decided that the time had come to attack; over one thousand missiles struck the United States and the non-nuclear neutron war heads killed over two hundred million people. Although the United States was virtually destroyed, its offensive rocket system was relatively undamaged: proving its claim of possessing the most powerful rocket force in the world, the remains of the United States Air Force launched three thousand missiles against Russia and China killing all but three million of the three billion inhabitants.

These events caused the European countries to settle their differences and to establish a world government. Although the years after the formation of this government were clear in Zon’s mind, they were also strangely blurred; his memory told him that all the nations of the world joined this government and that world peace had been attained. He was equally certain that he and his fellow workers were a part of a very important special working force which was mining a material necessary for the expansion and prosperity of the world and that he and his co-workers had volunteered for this duty; just as clear were the facts that they had agreed to remain until they met certain requirements because they were also part of a scientific experiment on underground living and that when they returned to the surface, they would be hailed as heroes. However, deep in Zon’s subconscious something stirred, and words which did not agree with these facts flashed into his conscious mind for a brief moment; words such as revolution, military dictatorship, tyranny, enslavement, and brainwashing slipped briefly into his conscious thoughts. The odd blurred feeling suddenly ceased and Zon felt very tired; he climbed into his sleeping tub and was instantly asleep.

A few moments later a radio signal was sent from a videocorder in the wall to a computer in the offices of the Committee; the computer analyzed the data and sent the following message to the Committee: “Subject 67593746592-8074 has been thinking instead of sleeping for the fourth time this week. With regard to this and his statements to other workers, it is advised that he be sent to the Noituecexe chamber because it is probable that the treatment is wearing off.”

The waking device aroused Zon at hour two plus twenty; upon eating his breakfast, he found a message card on the tray ordering him to appear at the office of the Committee at the beginning of the working period. When the door to Zon’s cubicle opened at hour two plus fifty, he took the fastest pneumatic ramp to the Committee’s
office: upon inserting his message card and his identification card into the automatic secretary, he received not a green rejection slip as he had expected, but an orange envelope. Trembling, he read the letter inside the envelope three times before he believed that he was a winner of the Reward and was to go immediately to the Noituceexe chamber where he would depart for the outside immediately; after he had pinned the purple winners ribbon to his belt, he proudly strode out of the Committee's office and stepped onto the ramp that led to the Noituceexe chamber. As the ramp carried him to his desired destination, he smiled and waved to his co-workers who shouted congratulations to him as he passed by them; he could see their envy as they stared at him, just as he had stared enviously at other winners. He stopped before the cubicle with a plexiglass door with the words “Noituceexe Chamber” engraved in the plexiglass; as Zon stepped inside, he took one last glance at the underground world and waved good-bye to his co-workers. As the plexiglass door closed, a titanium door directly opposite to it opened revealing what appeared to be an elevator; Zon stepped into the elevator, turned around, pressed the “up” button, glanced through the plexiglass door once again, and then began to think about the outside with its sunshine and fresh air. When the titanium door had closed, Zon was startled to hear a hissing sound and to see a cloud of green smoke rising from vents in the floor; he realized that something was dreadfully wrong as he began to gasp for breath. As he slid to the floor, he had a sudden mental picture of the plexiglass door and its inscription: from the inside it read “EXECUTION CHAMBER.”

The first death was borne:
Now, alone, the long death is
Each day heavier.

Edward Riedinger