

# THE CHILD WHO WALKED ON THE SKY

## CHAPTER I

The world itself has a name. The world is called Zod.

They say that the machine, pulsating and silent, is in the belly of the world. The Machine. Since the beginning of time, the Machine has counted and calculated. Since the beginning, the Machine has copied and translated time and made it something vaguely comprehensible to the minds of men. It is the Machine that calculates the slow succession of years. One year is a cycle of well-defined time determined by the mechanism and revolutions of transparent spheres in the belly of the Machine.

The child was eight years old. Eight is sometimes very old already, very desperate. Sometimes it is old enough to die.

He was eight years old and his name was Horan. That was an additional crime—but he was long past just one crime, he was past counting his revolts.

In the world of Zod, the children do not have a name. The adults who make up the class of Subjects do not have one either for that matter. The Prime Master has a name. The Teachers and the Directors, too. But especially not the children.

They yell them out by a number.

Before, his number was 47. He was 47. The forty-seventh student of the class of Maladjusted in the world of Zod. He was barely born when they had placed him in this class of “specially” controlled education.

He had learned life; he had received the teaching like the other children with him. There were hardly more than a hundred in each “special” education class. There was a natural turnover; some entered, others left. Those who left had become subjects of Zod: they had cured their sickness, they had modeled them correctly and they had wiped out the harmful traces of revolt. If the teaching did not bear fruit, after a certain number of years, the maladjusted still left the class. For somewhere else...

The classroom was high-ceilinged and cylindrical, like a big tube stuck right in the middle of Zod's flesh. The ceiling was dome-shaped, pierced in the center by a ventilation grill. At ground level the corridor crawled up the wall, in an even spiral, opening onto the individual student cells all the way up to the vaulted ceiling. Horan's cell was practically at the top of the corridor, almost under the grill with its steady breathing of fresh air.

He was stretched out on his bed, his hands crossed under his neck, his eyes lost in the tightly woven mesh of grill that covered the air vent. In this position, looking toward the door of his cell, he could see nothing else, nothing but this grill.

Horan was small and slim. Fragile limbs and skin so white, so thin and delicate that it was almost transparent. In certain spots, under his skin, you could see the bluish network of glassy veins, especially in his temples, and in his wrists, too. His face was round. A small, round child's face. Big, colorless eyes, too often hardened by some terrible inner inferno. And then the mouth, like a pink line, blunt, determined, more often closed than open. On top of his round, fragile, disturbingly firm face, a black shock of hair sticking up, in constant battle.

For a long time Horan lay there without moving, simply stretched out on the cozy bed, staring. All around him the confused murmur of thousands of words strung together, hundreds of confused conversations swirling softly. For an hour yet, maybe more, the lights of the classroom would stay on, then it would be dark and the signal to sleep.

The muffled sound of a footstep suddenly drew Horan's attention and he stopped staring at the ventilation grill. His eyes fell on 23, standing frozen in the doorway. Horan propped himself up on one elbow, smiled faintly, and nodded. 23 entered and looked around for a chair. He did not find one.

“Come and sit here,” Horan invited, pointing to the foot of his bed.

23 smiled and sat down. He was eight years old, too. He had come out of the Birth Machine on the same day as Horan. A little taller, maybe, pretty stocky, and with dark red hair. The synthetic fiber shirt was stretched tightly over his short trunk.

"He won't come tonight," 23 said. His voice was deep, almost husky. He was scared, certainly.

"What makes you say that?" Horan asked.

The other shrugged, twisted his smile. "The time," he said. "He usually comes earlier."

That was wrong. The instructor could show up at any time. Sometimes he burst in just a few seconds before the signal to sleep.

"He can come at any time," Horan said. "And he'll come tonight, for you and for me."

23 fidgeted on the bed, buried his fists in his coat pockets. He was pale and trembling.

"Are you scared?" Horan asked.

"Of course you're not scared!"

An astonished gleam flashed briefly in Horan's eyes. Scared?... No, it was certainly not fear.

"I don't think so," Horan said. "They won't have me."

This time the astonishment was in 23 and he stared at Horan for a long time, trying to guess, to understand what was hiding behind this idiotic... and decisive declaration. After a while, he nodded his head and said, "They forbid us to talk to you and we're punished when we do. They forbid us to listen to you."

"So, what are you doing here?" Horan shot back angrily.

"I really think you're crazy," 23 said softly. "You're not scared... You say you're going to escape."

"And you accept it, don't you? Arg, the instructor, will come soon. He'll call 47 and 23 to tell them they have to die tomorrow, that they're incapable of becoming subjects of Zod. In front of everyone he'll yell out the sentence and you'll accept it? You'll accept walking to the Death Chamber tomorrow? You'll accept that this is your last night of sleep?"

"47!" 23 was aghast.

Horan calmed down, smiled. He said, "I have a name now. I'm called Horan. It's an old word from the language of the Ancients. It means rebel."

Shocked and trembling, 23 stood up, took three steps back. He looked at Horan as if he were the most terrifying monster that could come from above the sky. "A name, but... but you..."

"I don't want to be a number anymore," Horan said ferociously (he was gritting his teeth, looking at nothing). "Yes, I took a name, this morning. I gave myself a name. I'm called Horan."

"Names," 23 said, "are reserved for Teachers and Instructors. Only for them and the Prime Master... And you..."

"I don't believe in the Instructors or the Teachers," Horan said. He did not shout, was no longer furious. He suddenly looked very unhappy, weary, shattered. He was an eight-year old child and his eyes glistened with tears. "I can't believe in them," he continued in a croaking voice. "I can't. I never could... Since always. Since forever. I know they're lying to us, they're lying to all the Subjects. I know it's false. Everything they teach us... They told us that we have to believe in tomorrow. The Hope Religion! Me, I can't. Not in that way. For thousands of years it's been like this and millions of subjects have died, for no reason, for nothing... For nothing."

"But death," 23 risked, "is also a form..."

"I can't believe in it!" Horan cut him off. "I can't. They also invented legends for death... for afterward... I know there's nothing in what they say. I know." He did not finish. All of a sudden his shoulders shook with sobs. He was silent on his bed, became a little heap, a little thing, a knot of tears.

Without saying a word, 23 stepped forward and after a short hesitation put his hand on Horan's shoulder. They stayed like that for a moment, in silence. Then, when the sobs died down, 23 spoke softly, "You see, you're scared, too."

Horan shook his black shock of hair from left to right. He said, "It's something other than fear. I don't want to die for nothing. They won't have me."

A long time afterward, he raised his eyes, wiping away his last tears with the back of his hand. He noticed that 23 had left. Horan felt vaguely relieved. 23 was nice. He, too, was not destined to become a perfect subject. He, too, was bound for destruction. Waste was not tolerated in Zod.

But Horan preferred to be alone. Alone with his eight years of life, with his sickness of maladjustment.

But he had tried! To hear and understand and swallow quietly this teaching that was supposed to make a number out of him for life. Yes, he had tried... But total failure. It was deep down inside him, stronger than him, stronger than all the drugs and all the machines. Refusal. The bitter need to refuse.

He had quickly become one of those taboo subjects, headstrong, with a mind that was more rigid than the oldest of metals. He had become, almost despite himself, almost without knowing it, one of those who had that talent for always asking the questions that should not be asked, if you did not want to sow the seeds of doubt; one of those extraordinarily gifted in spin and the perpetual need to know more; one of those who are always asking “why”?

Why this? Why that? And why not like this or like that...

He had become a waste.

They told him: a long time ago the people of Zod lived in the sky and they were happy, learned, they knew everything, they were the masters of all sciences. They knew too much and one day the sky exploded. A handful of survivors, a meager handful, took refuge under the wreckage of that murdered sky—for, they had foreseen this catastrophe. They took refuge in a shelter that became the world of Zod. And they still live in Zod the buried land, as they have for thousands and thousands of years. For more than 22,000 years. They wait for the sign. And the sign will come, one day, and then the chosen people of Zod will once again be able to take possession of the sky because it will be forever rid of the monsters that inhabit it.

They told him this. They told everyone this.

But Horan had answered, why? While the others accepted. Horan—he was still just 47—had expressed doubts. Doubt, the desire to always know more, was in him from the time when, still a five-month old fetus, they had wrenched him from the belly of some female to stick him in the accelerated incubators of the Birth Machine. It was in him.

He did not believe in the sky inhabited by monsters or in the sign that was supposed to come.

They had told him: The Prime Master of Zod is eternal. He is the God of Hope. He is the guide of the people of Zod.

And he, Horan, without even trying, without any effort at all, asked why. Why give names to Teachers and numbers to Subjects? Why should the Instructors and Teachers live so long when the Subjects die after thirty years of life? Why? He had said naively, “I want to become a Teacher.”

It was, of course, a huge mistake. In the first place, a psychologically maladjusted had no chance of becoming a Teacher or Instructor. Horan less so than the others. And the guide of the class had understood completely. “I want to become a Teacher” in the mouth of this curious 47 might certainly mean, “I want to become Prime Master”.

They rarely came across rebels in Horan’s class. Of course, there was no meanness in him, or hatred or anger. He was just a child. His defect was even worse than anger or hatred: it was called dissatisfaction, curiosity. Need for the absolute... it had countless names.

Some Teachers, talking among themselves, claimed that they saw these tendencies to rebel against the teaching more and more often. The percentage of waste was rising higher and higher as time went on, in Zod. The Teachers claimed that some kind of frustration complex was at the heart of these psychological defections. A mental shock occurs in the fetus’ unconscious and the aftermath just intensifies it in certain subjects. So, what was needed was love and tenderness. The Teachers said that some people might require these things... They said this among themselves and in whispers, feeling a blasphemer’s shame. Love and tenderness were very old words that were of no use at all in the current language. They served no purpose in Zod. They were not needed because, well, the remaining survivors could very well disappear in just two or three generations.

Of course, Horan could not know what the Teachers said when they talked among themselves, in their distant cells deep in the heart of Zod. He did not know. But he knew the two taboo words.

Love. Tenderness.

And others besides. Like “Father” and “Mother”.

He had learned them recently. Only a few days ago. He had to steal one of those old, fascinating books from the highest shelves of the room of antique bookcases. The books were unbelievably old and dusty. They looked like they came from some kind of bottomless pit and when you touched them

it was like you were putting your finger on the dawn of time. The covers were hardened, wooly, and the plastic pages were yellowed and stained.

Horan had stolen a book. Its writing was one of those ancient writings he had wanted to learn in the first years of teaching—another point against him because students ordinarily did not choose to violate the dead languages.

The child had been able to keep the book for one whole day and night. At night he read in the dark—he often wondered if all the other children, like him, could see in the dark when the lights went out. He could. He had never spoken of it, out of fear of revealing another, as yet unsuspected defect.

He had read. He had arduously deciphered part of the book and he had learned the words. Father, mother, tenderness, love. And others, which were more or less connected to them. He was able to understand the gist of them, but he found no comparison or translation in the language of Zod. They were really new words, unique words. He had vaguely felt some incredible sense of wealth in them. But also danger. A dreadful danger.

The words were not made for Zod. Maybe they were magic, or evil... But he was not scared. He started to love the words.

Like he loved the little noise, the weird little noise that he had been hearing above his head every night for the past three or four days. Higher than the bulging vault of the classroom. Higher than the ventilation grill. It was there in the magma of the collapsed sky, a little sound of life passing by...

The breeders—or more precisely, the Subjects in the mandatory breeding period—of Zod could have called themselves “fathers”... The bellies of the women could have been the bellies of “mothers”... No. It was really something else. It was really a secret, it was magic.

It was for elsewhere.

And that noise, high up, in the sky of steel and rock? That little noise...

Brutal, the voice suddenly thundered over the loudspeaker and startled Horan. And yet he was waiting for it. He couldn't not help but wait for it: he would be eight tomorrow and the wastes in special teaching never got past that age. That was the limit. That was the first thing they taught: “Be worthy and capable of becoming Subjects before you're eight years old.”

He was waiting for it, but he was startled. He felt tears rising again. But he was not scared. He was determined.

He jumped out of his bunk and walked through the door of his cell. He was in the bare corridor, on that spiral ramp that sloped all the way down to the floor of the classroom. He leaned over the rail at the very moment when the metallic voice pronounced his number.

“47... 23... 45... 37...”

A few away feet from Horan, 23 had left his cell as well and was also leaning on the plastic railing. He was very pale.

“56... 78... 13.”

There were nine of them in all. Nine who, tomorrow, would turn eight and who had not been able to learn, who had not been able to swallow the teaching like a sponge soaks up any liquid whatsoever. There were nine, incapable of becoming satisfactory subjects. Nine with a conscience too twisted, too complicated, with too many rebellious tendencies, eyes too open not to become dangerous down the road.

Nine wastes.

At the bottom of the classroom, at the end of the giant spiral, the Teacher standing there was the size of a pea. But his voice, like thunder, his inordinate voice, rendered even drier by the amplifiers, went on, “...tomorrow when you wake up. You will be guided to the exit of this classroom and into the Death Chamber. Thus the law of Zod demands. Thus the law of life demands.”

Then, miniscule, he left.

There was not a sound in the classroom, except, again, for a few split seconds, the booming echo.

But Horan had chosen not to accept the law of Zod; he was made in such a way that he could not accept it. He had chosen to put his hope in a different law of life. He was convinced intuitively that the teachings of Zod were hiding marvelous mysteries.

He avoided looking at 23, alone and frozen on the ramp, and went back into his cell. As he was sitting down on his bunk, the lights went out. But it changed practically nothing for Horan.