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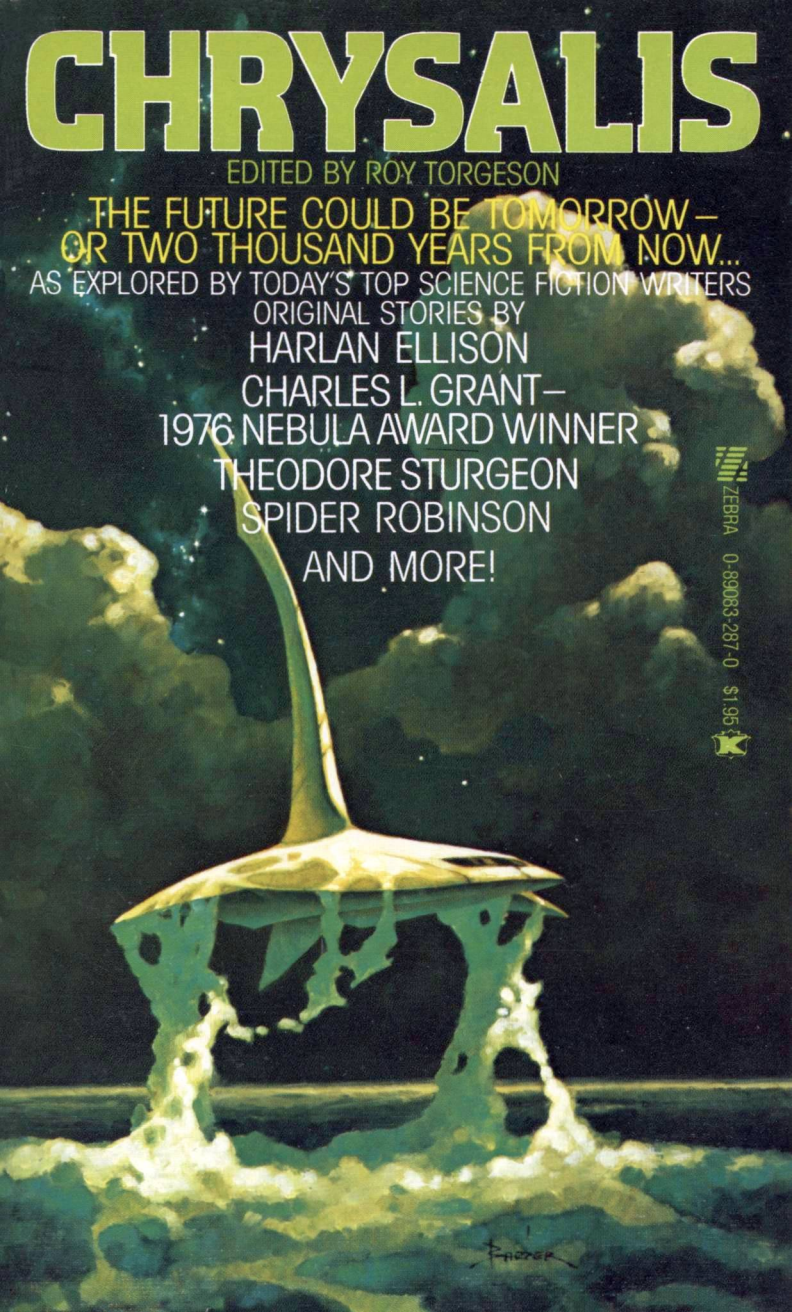

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CONTENTS

Richard A. Lupoff has been publishing fiction for a little over ten years, with several dozen short stories and eleven or twelve novels to his credit. In addition, he has written four nonfiction books, including two masterful works on Edgar Rice Burroughs. In many ways Dick is a very ordinary person (he's never been involved with a street gang, never fought in a war, never been hassled by the police for anything worse than running a stop sign, etc.). He also spent twelve years in the computer business. God! He must be a dull fellow. *However*, his fiction is something else. His style of writing can vary from "hard" sf to bizarre sword and sorcery. In other words, his writing runs the gamut of speculative fiction.

Now, about "Discovery of the Ghooric Zone – March 15, 2337." Without a doubt, it is one of the most unusual stories ever published in the field of speculative fiction – and one of the best too! The mindless readers of Perry Rhodan of Lin Carter would not enjoy it. For it is a story that challenges the reader to become involved – indeed, to peruse and experience it. Upon the first reading one will be somewhat dazzled by it, but certainly not unpleasantly so. A second reading is hardly *de rigueur*, but highly recommended. (A third and fourth wouldn't hurt, either.) By the way, if you don't know what happened on March 15, 1937 you had best find out. Ask a friend . . . especially an HPL enthusiast.

DISCOVERY OF THE GHOORIC ZONE MARCH 15, 2337

by Richard A. Lupoff

They were having sex when the warning gong sounded, Gomati and Njord and Shoten. The shimmering, fading sound indicated first long-range contact with the remote object, the long-suspected but never-before-visited tenth planet that circled far beyond the eccentric orbit of Pluto, rolling about its distant primary with irrational speed, its huge mass bathed in eternal darkness and incredible cold some sixteen

billion kilometers from the remote, almost invisible sun.

Gomati was the female member of the ship's crew. She was tall, nearly two meters from the top of her satiny smooth scalp to the tips of her glittering tin-alloy toenails. When the gong sounded she burst into a cascade of rippling laughter, high-pitched and mirthful, at the incongruity of the cosmic event's impingement upon the fleshly.

The ship had launched from Pluto even though at this point in Pluto's orbit it was less distant from the sun than was Neptune. Fabricated in the nearly null-gravity conditions of Neptune's tiny moon Nereid, the ship had been ferried back, segment by segment, for assembly, for the cyborging of its scores of tiny biotic brains, on-loading of its three-member crew and its launch from the cratered rock surface of Pluto.

Njord, the male crew member, cursed, distracted by the radar gong, angered by Gomati's inattention, humiliated by her amusement and by her drawing away from himself and Shoten. Njord felt his organ grow flaccid at the distraction, and for the moment he regretted the decision he had made prior to the cyborging operations of his adolescence, to retain his organic phallus and gonads. A cyborged capability might have proven more potently enduring in the circumstances, but Njord's pubescent pride had denied the possibility of his ever facing inconvenient detumescence.

Flung from rocky Pluto as the planet swung toward the ecliptic on its nearly 18-degree zoom, the ship was virtually catapulted away from the sun; it swung around Neptune, paid passing salute to the satellite of its birth with course-correcting emissions, then fled,

a dart from the gravitic sling, into the black unknown.

And Shoten, most extensively cyborged of the crew members, flicked a mental command. Hooking into the ship's sensors, Shoten homed the consciousness of the navigational biotic brains onto the remote readouts that spelled the location of the distant object. The readouts confirmed suspected information about the object: its great mass, its incredible distance beyond even the aphelion of the orbit of Pluto some eight billion kilometers from the sun – the distant object circled its primary at a distance twice as great as Pluto's farthest departure from the solar epicenter.

The ship – named *Khons* in honor of an ancient celestial deity – held life-support supplies for the three crew members and fuel and power reserves for the complete outward journey, the planned landing on the distant object, the return takeoff and journey and final landing, not on Pluto – which by the time of *Khons'* return would be far above the solar ecliptic and beyond the orbit of Neptune – but on Neptune's larger moon Triton where a reception base had been readied before *Khons* ever had launched on its journey of exploration.

As for Njord, he grumbled under his breath, wishing almost irrelevantly that he knew the original gender of Shoten Binayakya before the latter's cyborging. Njord Freyr, born in the Laddino Imperium of earth, had retained his masculinity even as he had undergone the customary implantations, excisions and modifications of pubescent cyborging.

Sri Gomati, of Khmeric Gondwanaland, had similarly retained her female primary characteristics in function and conformation even though she had opted for

the substitution of metallic labia and clitoris, which replacement Njord Freyr found at times irritating.

But Shoten, Shoten Binayakya, fitted with multiply-configurable genitalia, remained enigmatic, ambiguous as his or her own origin: earth-born, or claiming so, yet giving allegiance neither to the Laddino Imperium governed by Yamm Kerit ben Chibcha, as did Njord Freyr, nor to Khmeric Gondwanaland, ruled by Nrisimha, the Little Lion, where lay the loyalty of Sri Gomati.

"So," Njord grated. "So, the great planet thus announces its presence." He grimaced as automatic materials reclamation servos skittered futilely, seeking recoverable proteoids from the aborted congress.

Sri Gomati, enigmatic silvered cyber-optics glittering, turned to face the disgruntled Njord, the ambiguous Shoten. "Can you see it yet?" she asked. "Can you get a visual fix?"

Shoten Binayakya reached a cyberclaw, tapped a visual extensor control. Biotic brains keyed to obey any crew member activated the extensor, guided it toward one glittering optic. The shimmering field crept aside; input receptacles opened, ready for the insertion of fiber-optic conductors.

A click, silence.

D68/Y37/C22//FLASH

Yamm Kerit ben Chibcha's coronation was splendid. Never before had the South Polar Jerusalem seen such pomp, such display of pageantry and power. Thousands of slaves, naked and gilded and draped in jewelry and feathers paraded up the wide boulevard before the Imperial Palace. They drew, by ropes of woven gold and weizmannium, glittering juggernauts. Fountains

sprayed scented wine. Chamberlains threw fistfuls of xanthic shekels to cheering crowds.

The climax of the spectacle was the march of the anthrocyberphants, resplendent mutated elephants whose cerebellums had been surgically removed at birth and replaced with spheres of human brain material cultured from clone-cells donated (involuntarily in some cases) by the greatest scientists, scholars and intellectuals in Yamm Kerit ben Chibcha's realm. When the anthrocyberphants were well grown and into their adolescence, their gonads were surgically removed and replaced with a variety of electronic implants including inertial guidance computers, magnetic compass-gyroscopes, neural transceivers.

The anthrocyberphants pranced and tumbled down the grand boulevard before the Imperial Palace, trumpeting melodies from Wagner, Mendelssohn, Bach, Mozart, vain self-portraiture by Richard Strauss, erotic fantasies by Scriabin, extended lines from Britten, discordant percussives by Edgar Varese, all in perfect orchestral harmony, all punctuated by the sounds of tympani, timbales, kettledrums and cymbals held in writhing flexible tentacles that grew from nodes at the marchers' shoulders.

Upon the silken-draped and jewel-encrusted balcony of the Imperial Palace, the Ultimate Monarch of Laddino Imperium smiled and waved, bowed, applauded, turned to turbaned chamberlains and grasped fistfuls of commemorative favors to toss graciously upon the marchers and the cheering crowds come to celebrate the grand ceremonial.

The Laddino Imperium included all of the grand Antarctic domain of the former Israel-in-Exile and the expanded territory of Greater Hai Brasil that had extended to claim hegemony over all of the Americas, from Hudson's Bay to Patagonia, before falling under sway of the South Polar nation. The Ultimate Monarch, Yamm Kerit ben Chibcha, bowed, waved, tossed favors to the crowd. Deep in the bowels of the earth beneath once-frozen plains and mountains, huge gyroscopes throbbed into life.

The axis of the earth began to shift through a lengthy and carefully computed cycle. None but the servants and advisors of the Ultimate Monarch had been consulted, and none but the will of Yamm Kerit ben Chibcha, the Ultimate Monarch,

was considered. The ambition of Yamm Kerit ben Chibcha was to give every citizen of the planet earth, every square meter of territory, a fair and equitable access to the wealth, the beauty, the joy, the light, the warmth of the sun.

As the huge gyroscopes whirled their massive flywheels, the earth shifted its ancient tilt.

The fanatic hordes of Nrisimha, the Little Lion, poured from the city of Medina in the ancient Arabian desert, conquering all before them in the holy name of the Little Lion of God. The forces of Novum Romanum, the empire built by Fortuna Pales, and of the New Khmer Domain, created a century before by Vidya Devi, slaughtered the followers of the Little Lion Nrisimha, by the hundreds of thousands, then by the millions.

How could Nrisimha continue to replace the decimated armies? How many soldiers could the single city of Medina produce? What was the secret of the fanatical hordes?

No one knew.

But they poured forth, fearless, unstoppable, unslowable, unturnable. All that the forces of resistance could do was slaughter them by the million, and they fell, they fell, but their fellows only marched across their very bodies, their strange bodies that did not putrify like the corpses of normal soldiers but seemed instead to turn to an amorphous gel and then to sink into the very earth itself, leaving behind no sign of their presence, not even uniforms or weapons or equipment, but only, in the wake of their passage, fields of strange flowers and fruits that bloomed gorgeously into towering pillars and petals and berries the size of melons, that produced sweet narcotic fumes and brought to those who harvested and ate them dreams of haunting beauty and incomparable weirdness.

Strange messengers sped across the sands of the deserts of Africa and Asia bearing the word that the Little Lion Nrisimha had come to bring peace and glory and splendor to a new Empire, to Khmeric Gondwanaland, an absolute dictatorship of unparalleled benevolence that would stretch from Siberia to Ireland and from the Arctic Circle to the Cape of Good Hope.

It took remarkably few years for the followers of the Little Lion Nrisimha to complete their conquest, and few more for the establishment of an efficient infrastructure and the

appointment of regional satrapies under the absolute command of Nrisimha.

Khmeric Gondwanaland was a roaring success.

It was less than a century from the complete triumph of Yamm Kerit ben Chibcha throughout the Laddino Imperium and that of Nrisimha the Little Lion in Khmeric Gondwanaland, when the two great empires were driven into union by the eruption of attacking battrachian forces from beneath the seas of the planet. How long these strange, froglike intelligences had lived in their deep and gloomy metropoli hundreds of meters beneath the surface of the earth's oceans will remain forever imponderable.

What stimulated them to rise and attack the land-dwelling nations of the earth is also unknown, although in all likelihood the steady shifting of the earth's axis brought about by the gargantuan subterranean gyroscopes of Yamm Kerit ben Chibcha were in fact the cause of the attacks.

The Deep Ones emerged and waded ashore in all regions at once. They wore only strangely crafted bangles and ornaments of uncorroded metal. They carried weapons resembling the barbed tridents of marine legendry. They dragged behind them terrible stone statues of indescribable extramundane monstrosities before which they conducted rites of blasphemous abandon and unmentionable perversion.

The Laddino Imperium and Khmeric Gondwanaland combined their respective might to deal with the menace, to drive the strange Deep Ones back into the murky realms from which they had emerged. By the year 2337 a unified earth lay once more tranquil and prosperous beneath a glowing and benevolent sun.

The menace of the Deep Ones, at least for the time, was over.

And billions of kilometers from earth, humanity renewed its heroic thrust toward the outermost regions of the solar system.

MARCH 15, 2337

"Not yet," Shoten Binayakya's voice clattered.

"Soon," Gomati countered. She hooked into

Khons' radar sensor, letting cyborged biots convert incoming pulses into pseudovisuals. "Look!" she exclaimed. "It's a whole system!"

Njord Freyr stirred, determined to pull his attention away from frustration, direct it toward a topic that would involve. "There, there," he heard Gomati's voice, not sure whether it was organic or synthesized, "shift your input to ultra-v!"

Njord, hooking into *Khons'* external sensors, complied.

"Astounding!"

"Yet so."

"Not unprecedented. On the contrary," Shoten Binayakya interjected. "All the giants have complex systems of moons. Jupiter. Saturn. Uranus. Search your memory banks if you don't recall."

Surlily, Njord sped unnecessary inquiry to an implanted cyberbiot. "Mmh," he grunted. "So. Almost thirty significant satellites among them. Plus the trash. So." He nodded.

"And this new giant – ?"

"Not new," Njord corrected. "It's been there all along, as long as any of the others. You know the old Laplace notion of elder planets and younger planets was abandoned about the same time as the solid atom and the flat earth."

"Good work, Freyr," Shoten shot sarcastically.

"Well then?"

Sri Gomati said, "Clearly, Njord, Shoten meant newly discovered." She paused for a fraction of a second. "And about to be newly visited."

Njord breathed a sigh of annoyance. "Well. And that old European, what's-his-name, Galapagos saw the major moons of Jupiter seven hundred years ago.

All the others followed as soon as the optical telescope was developed. They didn't even need radiation sensors no less probes to find them. Seven hundred years."

"Seven hundred twenty-seven, Njord." Sri Gomati petted him gently on his genitals.

"You and your obsession with ancient history! I don't see how you qualified for this mission, Gomati, always chasing after obscure theorizers and writers!"

"It's hardly an obsession. Galileo was one of the key figures in the history of science. And he found the four big Jovian moons in 1610. It's simple arithmetic to subtract that from 2337 and get seven-two-seven. I didn't even have to call on a cyberbiot to compute that, Njord dear."

"Argh!" The flesh remnants in Njord's face grew hot.

Shoten Binayakya interrupted the argument. "There it comes into visual range!" he exclaimed. "After these centuries, the perturbations of Uranus and Neptune solved at last. Planet X!"

Njord sneered. "You have a great predilection for the melodramatic, Shoten! Planet X indeed!"

"Why," Shoten laughed, the sound fully synthesized, "it's a happy coincidence, Njord dear. Lowell applied the term to *his* mystery planet, meaning X the unknown. Until Tombaugh found it and named it Pluto. But now it is not only X the unknown but also X the tenth planet as well. Very neat!"

Njord began a reply but paused as the distant planet became visible through *Khons'* sensors. It was indeed a system like those of the inner giant planets, and radar sensings pouring through *Khons'* external devices, filtered and processed by cyberbiotic brains, overwhelmed his own consciousness.

A great, dark body swam through the blackness, reflecting almost no light from the distant sun but glowing darkly, menacingly, pulsating in slow, heartbeatlike waves, with a low crimson radiance that pained Njord subliminally even through the ship's mechanisms and the processing of the cyberbiots. Fascinated yet repelled, Njord stared at the glowing, pulsing globe.

About its obscene oblateness whirled a family of smaller bodies, themselves apparently dim and lifeless, yet illuminated by the raking sinister tone of their parent.

"Yuggoth," Sri Gomati's low whisper jolted Njord from his reverie. "Yuggoth," and again, "Yuggoth!"

Njord snapped, "What's that?"

"Yuggoth," repeated Sri Gomati.

The male hissed in annoyance, watched the great pulsating bulk loom larger in *Khons'* external sensors, watched its family of moons, themselves behaving like toy planets in orbit around the glowing body's miniature sun.

"The great world must be Yuggoth," Sri Gomati crooned. "And the lesser ones Nithon, Zaman; the whirling pair – see them, see! – Thog and its twin Thok with the foul lake where puffed shoggoths splash."

"Do you know what she is raving about?" Njord demanded of Shoten Binayakya, but Shoten only shook that ambivalent satiny head, two silvery eyes shimmering, stainless steel upper and lower monodont revealed by drawn-back organic lips.

Khons' remote sensors had accumulated enough data now, the ship's cyberbiots computed and reduced the inputs, to provide a set of readouts on the new

planetary grouping's characteristics. Shoten raised a telescoping cyber-implant and pointed toward a glowing screen where data crept slowly from top to bottom.

"See," the ambiguous, synthesized voice purled, "the planet's mass is gigantic. Double that of Jupiter. As great as six hundred earths! More oblate even than Jupiter also – what is its spin?" Shoten paused while more lines of information crept onto the screen. "Its rotation is even shorter than Jupiter's. Its surface speed must be – " He paused and sent a command through the ship's neurocyber network, grinned at the response that appeared on the screen.

"Think of resting on the surface of that planet and whirling about at 80,000 kilometers an hour!"

Njord Freyr rose from his rest-couch. In fact the least extensively cyborged of the three, he retained three of his original organic limbs. He pulled himself around, using *Khons'* interior freefall handholds to steady himself, hooked his strongly servomeched arm through two handholds and gestured angrily from Shoten to Sri Gomati.

"We can all read the screens. I asked what this Eurasian bitch was babbling about!"

"Now, dear," Shoten Binayakya purred ambiguously.

Sri Gomati's shimmering silvery eyes seemed for once not totally masked, but fixed on some distant vision. Her hands – one fitted with an array of scientific and mechanical implements, the other implanted with a multitude of flexible cartilaginous organs equally suited for technical manipulation and erotic excesses – wove and fluttered before her face. She spoke as much to herself or to some absent, invisible entity as to Njord Freyr or Shoten Binayakya. It

was as if she instructed the batches of cyberbiotic brains that populated the electronic network of the ship.

"March 15, 2337, earth standard time," she crooned. "It would please him. It would please him to know that he is remembered. That he was right in his own day. But how, I wonder, could he have known? Did he merely guess? Was he in contact with entities from beyond? Beings from this strange, gray world past the starry void, this pale, shadowy land?

"Dead four hundred years this day, Howard, does your dust lie in ancient ground still? Could some later Curwen not have raised your essential salts?"

"Madness!" Njord Freyr broke in. With his organic hand he struck Gomati's face, his palm rebounding from the hard bone and the harder metal implanted beneath her flesh.

Her glittering eyes aflash, she jerked her head away, at the same time twisting to fix him with her angry glare. A circuit of tension sprang into being between them, lips of both writhing, faces animated in mute quarrel. Beyond this, neither moved.

Only the interruption of Shoten Binayakya's commanding speech broke the tense immobility. "While you carried out your spat, dears, I had the cyberbiots plot our orbit through the new system."

"The system of Yuggoth," Gomati reiterated.

"As you wish."

The data screen went to abstract blobs for fractions of a second, then it was filled with a glowing diagram of the new system: the oblate, pulsating planet, its scabrous surface features whirling in the center of the screen; the smaller, rocky moons revolving rapidly about their master.

"We can land only once," Shoten purred. "We must carefully select our touchdown point. Then later expeditions may explore further. But if we choose poorly, the worlds may abandon this *Yuggoth*" – Gomati's name for the great planet was spoken sardonically – "forever." Shoten's cyborged head nodded in self affirmation, then the synthesized words were repeated, "Yes, forever."

15032137 – READOUT

The Asia-Pacific So-prosperity Sphere continued to evolve. It was, beyond question, the center of world power, economic development, political leadership. It was also a gigantic realm sprawling across continents and oceans, including scores of great cities and billions of citizens.

Its first city was Peking. Secondary centers of authority were established in Lhasa, Bombay, Mandalay, Quezon City, Adelaide, Christchurch, Santa Ana.

The first great leader of the Sphere, Vo Tran Quoc, had become a figure of legendary proportions within a century of his death. Schools contended as to his true identity. Despite his name he was not Vietnamese. That much was known. One group of scholars held that he was a Maori. Another, that he was an Ainu. A third, that he was a Bengali woman, the product of rape during the war of independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan, posing as a man (or possibly having undergone a sex-change operation involving the grafting of a donated penis and testes).

At any rate, Vo Tran Quoc died.

In the wake of his death a struggle broke out. Some who contended for the power of the dead leader did so on the basis of purely personal ambition. Others, from ideological conviction. The great ideological dispute of the year 2137 dealt with the proper interpretation of an ancient political dictum.

The ancient political dictum was: *Just as there is not a single thing in the world without a dual nature, so imperial-*

ism and all reactionaries have a dual nature – they are real tigers and paper tigers at the same time.

While political theorists in Peking quarreled over the meaning of this political dictum, a new force arose with its center in the eldritch city of Angkor Wat deep in the jungles of old Cambodia. The new political force brought about a world feminist order. Its leader, following the example of Vo Tran Quoc, took the name of a mythic personage from another culture than her own.

She proclaimed a New Khmer Empire stretching from the Urals to the Rockies.

She took the name Vidya Devi. This means *goddess of wisdom.*

The former Slavic domain and the Maghreb suffered rivalry that led, after a century, to convergence and ultimate amalgamation. The old Roman Empire was reborn. It included all of Europe, the Near East, Africa, and North America from the Atlantic to the Pacific. (Niagara Falls now poured its waters directly into the ocean; the former west bank of the Hudson River was choice seashore property. The Rockies overlooked pounding waves that stretched to the Asian shore.)

The empire was ruled by an absolute monarch under the tutelage of the world feminist order. She was known as the Empress Fortuna Pales I.

Latin America, from Tierra del Fuego to the southern bank of the Rio Grande (but excluding Baja), was the greater Hai Brasil. The empress claimed pure Bourbon ancestry. Her name was Astrud do Muiscos.

In the Antarctic a great land reclamation project had been undertaken. Geothermal power was used to melt the ice in a circle centered on the south pole. The cleared area measured 1.5 million square kilometers. The soil was found to be incredibly rich in minerals. It was hugely fertile. The scenic beauty of the region was incomparable. There were mountains, lakes, glaciers to shame New Zealand or Switzerland or Tibet. Forests were planted and grew rapidly and luxuriantly. Imported wildlife throve. The few native species – penguins, amphibian mammals, a strange variety of bird newly discovered and named the *tekili-li* – were protected.

The new country was called Yisroel Diaspora.

Its leader under the feminist world order was Tanit Shadrapha. This name means *the healer Ishtar.*

The feminist world order promoted scientific research, largely from bases in Yisroel Diaspora. Space exploration, long abandoned except for the development of orbiting weapons systems, was resumed. Bases were established on the planet Mars and among the asteroids. A crewed ship orbited Venus making close observations and sending robot monitors and samplers to the surface of the planet. Venus was found to be a worthless and inhospitable piece of real estate.

A landing was attempted on the surface of Mercury. The expedition was an ambitious undertaking. The lander was to touch down just on the dark side of the planetary terminator, be carried into the night. During the Mercurian night it would burrow beneath the surface. By the time the terminator was reached and the ship entered the day side, it would be safely entombed and would, in effect, estivate through the searing Mercurian day.

Something went wrong. The ship landed. Excavation work began. Then, almost as if the planet were eating the ship and its crew, all disappeared beneath the surface. They were never contacted successfully again.

On earth the dominant art form was something called *cheomnaury.* This involved a blending and transformation of sensory inputs. The most favored sensory combinations were sound, odor and flavor. The greatest *cheomnaurist* in the world was an Ecuadorian dwarf who found her way to the capital of Hai Brasil and obtained personal audience with Astrud do Muiscos herself.

The dwarf began her performance with a presentation involving the sound of surf pounding upon the rocks of the Pacific coast where Andean granite plunges hundreds of feet into icy foam. This was blended with the warm, rich odor of chestnuts roasting over a charcoal brazier. To this the dwarf added the subtle flavor of ground coriander.

Astrud do Muiscos was pleased.

The dwarf proceeded to offer a blend of a synthesized voice such as might come from a living volcano, to which she added a scent of natron and olive unknown outside the secret em-

balming chamber of Egyptian temples six thousand years old, to which was added the flavor of the *spithrus locusta.* The *spithrus locusta* is a marine arachnid, the flavor of whose meat is to that of ordinary broiled lobster as is that of the lobster to a common crab louse.

Astrud do Muiscos was very pleased.

The triumph of the dwarf was a combination of white noise in the ordinary range of audibility with subtle sub- and supersonics, mixed with the odor of a quintessential coca extract and the flavor of concentrated formic acid drawn from Amazonian driver ants.

Astrud do Muiscos named the dwarf her successor to the throne of Hai Brasil.

The religion of the day, as appropriate to the climate of political realities, was a mutated form of the ancient Ishtar cult, with local variations as Ashtoroth, Astarte, and Aphrodite. There was even a sort of universal Mamacy, with its seat in ancient but restored Babylon.

MARCH 15, 2337

"I don't see why it's taken so long to get here, anyway," Njord Freyr snapped.

"You mean from Pluto?" Shoten responded. "But we are on course. We are in free fall. Look." The cyberbiots superimposed a small box of course data beside the whirling diagram of the Yuggoth system.

"Not from Pluto!" Njord spat. "From earth! Why has it taken until 2337 to reach – Yuggoth? When space flight began almost as long ago as the era Sri Gomati babbles about. The first extraterrestrial landings took place in 1969. Mars thirty years later. Remember the stirring political slogan that we all learned as children, as children studying the history of our era? *Persons*

will set foot on another planet before the century ends! That was the twentieth century, remember?"

"Every schoolchild knows," Shoten affirmed wearily.

Gomati, recovered from the shock of Njord's blow, spoke. "We could have been here two hundred years ago, Njord Freyr. But fools on earth lost heart. They began, and lost heart. They began again – and lost heart again. And again. Four times they set out, exploring the planets. Each time they lost heart, lost courage, lost interest. Were distracted by wars. Turned resources to nobler purposes.

"Humankind reached Mars as promised. And lost heart. Started once more under Shahar Shalim of the old New Maghreb. Reached Venus and Mercury. And lost heart. Reached the asteroid belt and the gas giants under Tanit Shadrapha of Ugarit. And lost heart.

"And now. At last. We are here." She gestured with her flowing, waving tentacles toward the diagram that glowed against the ship's dull fittings.

"What course, Shoten Binayakya?" she asked brusquely.

The whirling bodies on the screen were marked in red, the pulsing red of Yuggoth's inner flames, the beating, reflected red of the madly dashing moons. A contrasting object appeared on the screen, the flattened cone-shape of the ship *Khons,* trailing in its wake as it wove among the bodies a line to show the course of its passage. Shortly the line had woven past, circled about, curved beyond each body in the diagram, leaving the stylized representation of *Khons* in perturbated circular orbit about the entire system.

"So," purred Shoten Binayakya. And Sri Gomati and Njord Freyr in turn. "So." "So."

Shoten Binayakya flicked a pressure plate with some limb, some tool. *Khons* bucked, slithered through a complex course correction. Shoten slapped another plate and the full exterior optics of *Khons* were activated; to the three members of the crew, hooked into the cyberbiotic system of the ship, it was as if they fell freely through the distantly star-sprayed night. Fell, fell toward red, glowing, pulsating Yuggoth and its family of gray dancing servants.

Khons, inserted into its new flight path, sped first past the outermost of Yuggoth's moons: a world of significant size. The ship's sensors and cyberbiots reported on the body: in mass and diameter not far from the dimensions of the familiar rock-and-water satellites of the outer planets. Close to 5,000 kilometers through its center and marked with the nearly universal cratering of every solid world from Mercury to Pluto.

The twins, dubbed Thog and Thok by Gomati, whirled at the opposite extremes of their interwoven orbits, so *Khons* flitted past the innermost of the four moons, another apparent replica of the familiar Ganymede-Callisto-Titan-Triton model, then dropped into equatorial orbit about the dully glowing, oblate Yuggoth.

Njord, Gomati, Shoten Binayakya fell silent. The sounds of *Khons'* automatic systems, the low hiss of recirculating air, the occasional hum or click of a servo, the slow breathing of Njord Freyr, of Sri Gomati, were the only sounds. (Shoten Binayakya's lungs had been cybermeched, whirred softly, steadily within the metal torso.)

Once more a limb flicked at a pressure plate, moved this time by feel alone. The ship, fully visible to any

hypothetical viewer outside its hull, was for practical purposes totally transparent to its crew. A circuit warmed instantly to life. Radiation sensors picked up the electrical field of the planet, converted it to audio range, broadcast it within *Khons:* a howl, a moan. With each pulsation of the planet's ruddy illumination, the sound modulated through an obscene parody of some despairing sigh.

"If only Holst had known!" the synthesized voice of Shoten whispered. "If only he had known."

Yuggoth's surface sped beneath the ship, its terrible velocity of rotation making features slip away as others rushed toward the viewers, flashed beneath and dropped away, disappearing across the sprawling horizon into interstellar blackness. Great viscous plates of darkly glowing semisolid rock hundreds of kilometers across rolled and crashed majestically. Between them red-hot magma glowed balefully, great tongues of liquid rock licking upward between the pounding solid plates, the heat and brightness of the magma growing and lessening in a slow, steady rhythm that *Khons'* cyberbiots and audio-scanners converted into a contrabass *throb-throb-throb-throb.*

"There can be no life there," Njord Freyr announced. "Nothing could live in that environment. Nothing could ever have lived there."

After a silence Sri Gomati challenged him. "The planet itself, Njord Freyr. Could it be a single organism? The sounds, the movement, the energy." She raised her organic hand to her brow, ran scores of writhing digits from the browline above her glittering silver eyes, across her satiny naked skull to the base of her neck.

"It could be a nascent sun," Shoten Binayakya

whispered. "Were Jupiter larger, more energetic – you know it has been suggested that Jupiter is a failed attempt at the creation of a partner for Sol, that our own solar system is an unsuccessful venture at the formation of a double star."

"And Yuggoth?" Gomati dropped her tentacular hand to her lap.

Njord Freyr's voice contained only a tincture of sarcasm. "Sent by some remote godling to undo Jupiter's failure, hey? How do we know that it's always been here? Before now we knew it existed at all only through courtesy of Neptune's and Pluto's perturbations. How do we know this Yuggoth isn't a new arrival in the system? Nobody knew that Neptune or Pluto existed until a few centuries ago!"

"Or perhaps," purred Shoten, "perhaps our system is a failed triple star. Ah, think of the show if we had three suns to light our worlds instead of one!"

Again Shoten Binayakya flicked at a pressure plate. Once more *Khons* shifted, jounced. There was a steady acceleration and the ship slid from its orbit around the ruddy, pulsating planet, fell away from Yuggoth and toward the spinning worldlets that occupied the central orbit around the planet.

"They must be," Gomati crooned softly, "they must be. Thog and Thok, Thog and Thok. How could he know, centuries past? Let some Curwen find the salts and let him tell!"

"You're babbling again!" Njord almost shouted. "I thought we were selected for stability for this mission. How did you ever get past the screening?"

Distracted, Sri Gomati slowly dragged her fascinated gaze from the spinning moons, turned silver eyes toward Njord Freyr. "Somehow he knew," she

mumbled. Her lips drew back in a slow smile showing her bright steel monodonts. "And somehow we will find the Ghooric zone where the fungi blossom!"

As if in a trance she turned slowly away, leaned forward, eyes glittering metallically, leaned and reached her hands, the cyborged and the genetically custom-formed, as if to touch the two red-gray worldlets.

"He wrote horror stories," Gomati said, her voice dead-level as if trance-ridden. "He wrote of an unknown outer planet that he called Yuggoth, and of others – Nithon, Zaman, Thog and Thok – and of horrid, puffy beasts called shoggoths that splashed obscenely in the pools of the Ghooric zone.

"He died four hundred years ago today, Howard did. But first he wrote of one Curwen who could restore the dead if only he could obtain their essential salts. What he called their essential salts." She paused and giggled. "Maybe he had a prevision of cloning!"

MAR 15, 2037 – A VIDEOTAPE

Open with a logo recognizable as representing world politics.

The old century ended with a definite shift of world power. The westward movement of two millenia continued. Mesopotamia, Hellas, Italia, Franco-Germania, England, America. Now the power in America shifted from an Atlantic to a Pacific orientation.

The new powers to contend with were Japan, China, Soviet Asia.

Western Europe and the eastern United States lapsed into terminal decadence as loci of civilization. Europe from the Danube to the Urals passed from Habsburg and Romanoff glitter to a brief democratic flicker to a drab gray dusk as Soviet Europe and then into Slavic night. Like its predecessor

of fifteen centuries, the Soviet Empire split in half; like the Western half of the predecessor, the Western Soviet Empire was overrun by barbarians. But it did not fall to the barbarians. Not really. It fell to its own internal rot. And like the eastern half of the predecessor, the Eastern Soviet Empire throve.

By the hundredth anniversary of that death in the Jane Brown Memorial Hospital, the land mass of the earth eastward from the Urals to the Rockies came under unified government. It included dozens of half-forgotten countries. Tibet. Afghanistan. India. Laos. Australia. Tonga. The Philippines. Manchuria. Mongolia. California. Baja.

It was called the Asia-Pacific Co-prosperity Sphere.

Europe from the Urals to the English Channel became a peninsula of forests and farms. What small vigor remained was concentrated in the region from the Danube to the Urals. Slavic influence, walled off in the East by the great and burgeoning Asian renaissance, spread northward and westward. After a pause at the limits of a region running from the Scandinavian Peninsula to the Iberian, the Slavic Empire launched its rude invasion fleet. It crossed the English Channel. There was little resistance. The few defenders of British sovereignty, under the leadership of a fellow called Harald, were defeated at a place called Runnymede.

The next westward hop was to America. It took the Slavs a while to prepare themselves for that. But when they made their move they were greeted with flowers and flags. They did not have to conquer. They only had to occupy and administer.

The third power of the world in this time took form to the south of the Slavic domain. Arab leaders, glutted with petrobux, bought arms and hired mercenaries. Governments could not achieve unity but a shadowy group known by the cryptic name of *opec* did. The governments as such withered. The shadowy *opec* exercised more and more power. It did so more and more openly.

Slowly the influence of *opec* spread westward and southward until all of the old Near East and Africa were under its sway.

Then was proclaimed the New Maghreb.

Cut to logo representing heroic leadership.

The most powerful person in the world was the Chairperson of the Asia-Pacific Co-prosperity Sphere, Vo Tran Quoc.

The leader of the second power, the Slavic Empire, was called Svarozits Perun. This name means *thunderbolt of God.*

The head of *opec* and de facto ruler of the New Maghreb was called Shahar Shalim. This name means *dawn of peace.*

Cut to logo representing sex.

The major sexual attitude of the time was androgyny, rivaled but not equaled by the cult of pansexuality. Androgyny implies a recognition of the full sexual potential of each individual. Former distinctions were abandoned. It was no longer regarded as improper to pursue a relationship of male to male or female to female; nor was it required to have two partners in a relationship. Practices from onanism to mass interplay were accepted.

The pansexualists held that androgyny was needlessly limiting in scope. If one could relate to any man or woman — why not to a giraffe? A condor? A cabbage? A bowl of sand? A machine?

The ocean?

The sky?

To the cosmos?

To God?

Cut to logo representing music.

The most popular musical composition as of Mar 15, 2037, was ironically a hundred-year-old tune, complete with lyrics. Searches of nearly forgotten records revealed the names of the composer and lyricist. An old 78-rpm shellac disk rendition of the tune was discovered in a watertight vault beneath a flooded city. The sound was transcribed and released once again to the world.

The original lyrics had been written by one Jacob Jacobs. A second version, in English, was used on the shellac disk. These words were by Sammy Cahn and Saul Chaplin. The music was by Sholom Secunda. The singers were Patti, Maxine and Laverne Andrews. The song was "Bei Mir Bist du Schön."

Cut to logo representing geodynamics.

The latter years of the twentieth century and the early decades of the twenty-first were marked by changes in weather patterns and geodynamics. Accustomed to the reliable round of winter and summer, rainy season and dry season, the flow of rivers and the currents and tides of the oceans, man had come to look upon the earth as a stable and dependable home.

He was mistaken.

A trivial shift in air patterns, a minor trembling of the planetary mantle, a minute increase or diminution of the sun's warmth received by the planet, and the mighty works of man crumbled like sand castles in the surf.

An example. Earthquakes were more or less expected in certain regions: the Pacific coast of North America, Japan and eastern China, a Eurasian belt running from Yugoslavia through Greece and Turkey to Iran. Tragedies were masked with heroism, fear hidden behind the false face of humor. "When California falls into the ocean this piece of Arizona desert will be choice waterfront property."

Nobody expected New England and maritime Canada to crumble, but when the big quake hit, they did. From the St. Lawrence to the Hudson. It started with a tremor and rumble, grew to a scream and smash, ended with a gurgle and then the soft, even lapping of the Atlantic waters.

Among the bits of real estate that wound up on the ocean floor – a very minor bit – was a chunk of old Providence-Plantations known as Swan Point Cemetery. Now the Deep Ones indeed swam over the single stone marker of the Lovecraft family plot. *Winfield, Susan, Howard,* the marker was inscribed. Currents could flow all the way from Devil's Reef and Innsmouth Harbor to far Ponape in the Pacific, and the Deep Ones visited Swan Point.

In the field of religion, there was a revival of the ancient cults of the sea-gods, especially that of Dagon.

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Khons slithered through another correction, took up a complex orbit that circled one moon, crossed to

the other, circled, returned, describing over and over the conventional sign for the infinite.

Shoten tapped a plate and the large viewing screen inside *Khons* glowed once more, seeming to stand unsupported against the background of the two moons and the distant star-sprayed blackness. Every now and again the progress of the two whirling moons and *Khons'* orbit around and between them would bring Yuggoth itself swinging across the view of the three crew members so that one or both of the worldlets and the ship's data screen swept opaquely across the dark, pulsating oblateness.

Shoten commanded and cyberbiots magnified the surface features of the moons on the data screen. The omnipresent craters sprang up, but then, as the magnification increased, it became obvious that they were not the sharp-edged features of the typical airless satellite but the shortened, rounded curves typical of weathering. Shoten gestured and the focus slid across the surface of the nearer body. Above the horizon distant stars faded and twinkled.

"Air!" Shoten declared. And Njord and Gomati, agreeing, "Air." "Air."

Shoten Binayakya dropped *Khons* into a lower orbit, circling only one of the twin moons, that which Gomati had arbitrarily named as Thog. Again the magnification of the screen increased. In the center of a crater outlines appeared, forms of structures reared ages before by purposeful intelligence.

Amazed, Njord Freyr asked, "Could there be life?"

Shoten turned a metallic face toward him, shook slowly that ambiguous head. "Not now. No movement, no radiation, no energy output. But once . . . . " There was a silence. Breathing, whirring, the soft clicks and

hums of *Khons*. "But once . . . . " Shoten Binayakya said again in that cold, synthesized voice.

Sri Gomati gestured. "This is where we must land. After all the explorations of the planets and their moons, even the futile picking among the rubbish of the asteroid belt by the great Astrud do Muiscos – to find signs of life at last! This is where we must land!"

Shoten Binayakya nodded agreement without waiting even for the assent of Njord Freyr. A limb flicked out, tapped. *Khons* bucked and started circling downward toward the reticulated patterns on the surface of Thog.

With a jolt and a shudder *Khons* settled onto the surface of the moon, well within the weathered walls of the crater and within a kilometer or less of the structured protuberances. Shoten quiesced the cyberbiots to mere maintenance level of *Khons*, leaving only the receptors and telemeters warm, then asked the others to prepare to exit.

Njord Freyr and Sri Gomati slipped breathers over their heads and shoulders. Shoten ordered a variety of internal filtration modifications within the recirculation system that provided life support. They took readings from *Khons'* external sensors, slid back hatches, made their way from *Khons*, stood facing what, it was now obvious, were relics of incredible antiquity.

Abreast, the three moved toward the ruins: Njord on motorized, gyrostabilized cyborged wheel assemblies; Shoten Binayakya rumbling on tread-laying gear, stable, efficient; Sri Gomati striding left foot, right foot, organic legs encased in puff-jointed pressure suit like some anachronistic caricature of a Bipolar Technocompetitive Era spaceman.

They halted a few meters from the first row of structures. Like the crater rims, the walls, columns, arches were weather-rounded, tumbled, softened. A metallic telescoping tentacle whiplashed out from the hub of one of Njord's cyborg-wheels. A crumbled cube of some now-soft stonelike material fell away to ashes, to dust.

Njord turned bleak silver eyes to the others. "Once, perhaps . . . . "

"Come along," Gomati urged, "let's get to exploring these ruins!" Excitement colored her voice. "There's no telling what evidence they may contain of their builders. We may learn whether these worlds and their inhabitants originated in our own system or whether they came from – elsewhere."

At Gomati's final word she turned her face skyward, and the others followed suit. It was the worldlet Thog's high noon or the equivalent of noon. The sun was so remote – sixteen billion kilometers, twice as far as it was from Pluto at the latter's aphelion and 120 times as distant as it was from earth – that to the three standing on the surface of Thog, it was utterly lost in the star-dotted blackness.

But Yuggoth itself hung directly overhead, obscenely bloated and oblate, its surface filling the heavens, looking as if it were about to crash shockingly upon *Khons* and the three explorers, and all the time pulsing, pulsing, pulsing like an atrocious heart, throbbing, throbbing. And now Thog's twin worldlet, dubbed Thok by the female crew member, swept in Stygian silhouette across the tumultuous face of Yuggoth, Thok's black roundness varied by the serrations of crater-rims casting a deep shadow on the pale, pink-pulsating gray rocks of Thog.

The blackness enveloped first *Khons,* then sped across the face of Thog, swept over the three explorers, blotting out the pulsing ruddiness of Yuggoth and plunging them into utter blackness.

Gomati's fascination was broken by the purring synthetic voice of Shoten Binayakya. "An interesting occultation," Shoten said, "but come, we have our mission to perform. *Khons* is taking automatic measurements and telemetering information back to Neptune. And here," the silvery eyes seemed to flicker in distant starlight as a cybernetic extensor adjusted devices on the mechanical carapace, "my own recording and telemetering devices will send data back to the ship."

MARCH 15, 1937 – A SNAPSHOT

Dr. Leet stood by the bed. The patient was semiconscious. His lips moved but no one could hear what he said. Two old women sat by the bed. One was his aunt Annie. The other was the patient's cousin Ethel.

Dr. Leet leaned over the bed. He checked the patient's condition. He stood for a while trying to understand the patient's words but he could not. From time to time the patient moved his hand feebly. It looked as if he was trying to slap something.

The old woman named Annie had tears on her face. She reached into a worn black purse for her handkerchief and wiped the tears away as best she could. She grasped Dr. Leet's hand and held it between her own. She asked him, "Is there any hope? Any?"

The doctor shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Gamwell." And to the patient's cousin, "Mrs. Morrish.

"I'm sorry," the doctor said again.

The old woman named Annie released the doctor's hand. The other old woman, Ethel, reached toward Annie. They sat facing each other. They embraced clumsily, as people must

when sitting face to face. Each old woman tried to comfort the other.

The doctor sighed and walked to the window. He looked outside. It was early morning. The sun had risen but it was visible only as a pale, watery glow in the east. The sky was gray with clouds. The ground was covered with patches of snow, ice, slush. More snow was falling.

gray with clouds. The ground was covered with patches of snow, ice, slush. More snow was falling.

The doctor wondered why it seemed that he lost patients only in winter, or during rain storms, or at night. Never on a bright spring or summer day. He knew that that was not really true. Patients died when they died. When their fatal condition, whatever it was, happened to complete the running of its course. Still it *seemed* always to happen in the dark of the night or in the dark of the year.

He heard someone whistling.

He turned and saw two young residents passing the doorway. One of them was whistling. He was whistling a popular tune that the doctor had heard on the radio. He couldn't remember what program he had heard it on. Possibly the program was "The Kate Smith Show" or "Your Hit Parade." The tune was very catchy even though the words were in some language that eluded Dr. Leet's ear. The song was called "Bei Mir Bist du Schön."

Three thousand miles away, the Spanish were engaged in a confusing civil war. The old king had abdicated years before and a republic had been proclaimed. But after the direction of the new government became clear, a colonel serving in the Spanish colonial forces in Africa returned with his troops – largely Berbers and Rifs – to change things.

He would overthrow the republic. He would end the nonsense of democracy, atheism, lewdness that the republic tolerated. He would restore discipline, piety, modesty. He would reinstitute the monarchy.

At the moment it appeared that the republican forces were winning. They had just recaptured the cities of Trijuque and Guadalajara. They had taken rebel prisoners. These included Spanish monarchists. They included African troops as well.

Strangely, some of the prisoners spoke only Italian. They said they were volunteers. They said they had been ordered to volunteer. And they always obeyed their orders.

In China, forces of the Imperial Japanese Army were having easy going. Their opposition was weak. The Chinese were divided. They had been engaged in a civil war. It was not much like the one in Spain. It had been going on much longer. It had begun with the death of President Sun Yat-sen in 1924. The Japanese were not the only foreign power to intervene in China.

Germany had owned trading concessions in China until the Treaty of Versailles ended them. Germany was burgeoning now and had ambitions to regain its lost privileges.

Other countries had felt their interests threatened by the Chinese civil war. England had sent troops. France had used her influence. France was worried that she might lose her valuable colonies in Indochina. Russia had tried to influence China's internal politics. There had been grave danger of war between Russia and China. Especially when the Chinese sacked the Russian Embassy in Peking and beheaded six of its staff.

The United States had intervened. American gunboats plied Chinese waterways. The gunboat *Panay* was sunk by aerial gunfire and bombing. The *Panay* was on the Yangtze river when this happened. The Yangtze is a Chinese river. But the *Panay* was sunk by Japanese forces. This pleased China. Japan apologized and paid compensation.

Joe Louis and Joe DiMaggio, two young athletes, were in training. Both of them had very good years in 1937.

A wealthy daredevil pilot named Howard Hughes flew across the United States in seven hours and twenty-eight minutes. This set off a new wave of excitement and "air-mindedness." In Santa Monica, California, the Douglas Aircraft Company was completing its new airliner. This would carry forty passengers. It had four engines. It would be capable of speeds up to 237 miles per hour.

More conservative people felt that the zeppelin would never yield to the airplane. The great airship *Hindenburg* was on the

Atlantic run. It was huge. It was beautiful. There was a piano in its cocktail lounge. The European terminus of its flights was Tempelhof Airdrome in Germany. The American terminus of its flights was Lakehurst, New Jersey.

On the morning of March 15, Rabbi Louis I. Newman found eleven large orange swastikas painted on the walls of Temple Rodeph Sholom, 7 West 83rd Street, New York. This was the third such incident at Temple Rodeph Sholom. Rabbi Newman suspected that the swastikas were painted in retaliation for Secretary of State Hull's protests against abusive statements in the German press.

At Turn Hall, Lexington Avenue and 85th Street, the head of the Silver Shirts of New York replied. His name was George L. Rafort. He said the swastikas were painted by Jewish trouble-makers. He knew this because the arms of the eleven swastikas pointed backwards. He said "This is a mistake no Nazi would make."

In Providence, Rhode Island, the snow continued to fall. The city's hills were slippery. There were accident cases in the hospitals.

In the Jane Brown Memorial Hospital on College Hill, Howard Lovecraft opened his eyes. No one knew what he saw. Certainly Dr. William Leet did not. Howard slapped the coverlet of his bed. He moved his lips. A sound emerged. He might have said "feather." He might have said, "Father, you look just like a young man."

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They rolled, clanked, strode forward a few meters more, halted once again at the very edge of the ancient ruins. Shoten Binayakya sent two core samplers downward from mechanized instrumentation compartments, one to sample soil, the other to clip some material from the ruins themselves. Carbon dating would proceed automatically within Shoten's cyborged componentry.

Sri Gomati gazed at the ruins. They had the appearance, in the faint distant starlight, of stairs and terraces walled with marble balustrades. Gomati ran her optical sensors to maximum image amplification to obtain meaningful sight in the darkness of the occultation of Yuggoth.

And then – it is highly doubtful that the discovery would have been made by the single brief expedition, working in the ruddy, pulsating light of Yuggoth; it was surely that planet's occultation by Thok that must receive credit for the find – Gomati turned at the gasp of Njord Freyr. Her eyes followed the path of his pointing, armor-gauntleted hand.

From some opening deep under the rubble before them a dim but baleful light emerged, pulsating obscenely. But unlike the crimson pulsations of Yuggoth above the explorers, this light beneath their feet was of some shocking, awful green.

Without speaking the three surged forward, picking their way through the ruined and crumbled remnants of whatever ancient city had once flung vaulted towers and fluted columns into the black sky above the tiny world. They reached the source of the radiance barely in time, for as the disk sped across the face of Yuggoth the black shadow that blanketed the landing site of the ship *Khons* and the ruins where the crew poked and studied, fled across the pale gray face of Thog leaving them standing once more in the red, pulsating glare of the giant planet.

In that obscene half-daylight, the hideous metallic glare of bronze-green was overwhelmed and disappeared into the general throbbing ruddiness. But by now Shoten Binayakya had shot a telescoping core-probe into the opening from which the light emerged,

and with mechanical levers pried back the marblelike slab whose cracked and chipped corner had permitted the emergence of the glow.

Servos revved, the stone slab crashed aside. Steps led away, into the bowels of the worldlet Thog. In the dark, shadowy recess the red pulsating light of giant Yuggoth and the baleful metallic green fought and shifted distressingly.

"The Ghooric zone," Sri Gomati whispered to herself, "the Ghooric zone."

They advanced down the stairs, leaving behind the baleful pulsations of Yuggoth, lowering themselves meter by meter into the bronze-green lighted depths of Thog. The track-laying cybermech of Shoten Binayakya took the strangely proportioned stairway with a sort of clumsy grace. Njord Freyr, his wheeled undercarriage superbly mobile on the level surface of Thog, now clutched desperately to the fluted carapace of Shoten.

Sri Gomati walked with ease, gazing out over the subsurface world of Thog. Seemingly kilometers below their entry a maze of dome on dome and tower on tower lay beside – she shook her head, adjusted metallic optics. There seemed to be a subterranean sea here within the depths of tiny Thog, a sea whose dark and oily waters lapped and gurgled obscenely at a black and gritty beach.

At the edge of that sea, that body which must be little more than a lake by earthly standards, on that black and grainy beach, great terrible creatures rolled and gamboled shockingly.

"Shoggoths!" Sri Gomati ran ahead of the others, almost tumbling from the unbalustraded stairway. "Shoggoths! Exactly as he said, splashing beside a

foul lake! Shoggoths!" Exalted, she reached the end of the stairway, ran through towering columns past walls of sprawling bas-relief that showed hideous deities destroying intruders upon their shrines while awful acolytes crept away toward enigmatic vehicles in search of morsels to appease their obscene gods.

Gomati heard the grinding, clanking sounds of Shoten Binayakya following her, the steady whir of Njord Freyr's undercarriage. She turned and faced them. "This is the year 2337," she shouted, "the four hundredth anniversary of his death! How could he know? How could he ever have known?"

And she ran down hallways beneath vaulted gambrel roofs, ran past more carvings and paintings showing strange, rugose cone-shaped beings and terrible, tentacle-faced obscenities that loomed frighteningly above cowering prey. Then Gomati came to another hallway, one lit with black tapers that flared and guttered terribly.

The air in the room was utterly still, the shadows of fluted columns solemn against walls carved and lettered in a script whose obscene significance had been forgotten before earth's own races were young. And in the center of the room, meter-tall tapers of Stygian gloom marking its four extremities, stood a catafalque, and on the catafalque, skin as white as a grave-worm, eyes shut, angular features in somber repose, lay the black-draped figure of a man.

Sri Gomati raced to the foot of the catafalque, stood gazing into the flickering darkness of the hall, then advanced to stand beside the head of the body. Her silvery eyes shimmered and she began to laugh, to giggle and titter obscenely, and yet to weep at the same time, for some cyber-surgeon long before

had seen fit to leave those glands and ducts intact.

And Sri Gomati stood tittering and snuffling until Njord Freyr rolled beside her on his cyborged power-wheels and the ambiguous Shoten Binayakya ground and clanked beside her on tread-laying undercarriage, and they took her to return to the spaceship *Khons*.

But strangest of all is this. The stairway by which they attempted to return to the surface of the worldlet Thog and the safety of their spaceship *Khons* had crumbled away under the weight of untold eons and that of the cybermechanisms of the exploration party, and when they tried to climb those crumbling stairs they found themselves trapped in the Ghooric zone kilometers beneath the surface of the worldlet Thog.

And there, beside the oily, lapping sea, the foul lake where puffed shoggoths splash, they remained, the three, forever.

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The most popular (if letters to the editor are any indication of popularity) series of stories in the most popular science fiction magazine are the "Callahan's Crosstime Saloon" stories by a guy named Spider Robinson. This popularity is well deserved, but Spider writes all kinds of things, ranging from hard sf to uproariously funny sf to serious social commentary to highly informative and uniquely entertaining book reviews for *Galaxy*. He was the co-winner, along with Liza Tuttle, of the John W. Campbell Award in 1974 and is a Hugo nominee for the best novella (1976). He and his wife Jeanne, along with their daughter Luanna Mountainborn and their trained watch-cat live on Phinney's Cove on the shore of the Bay of Fundy in Nova Scotia. In addition to his penchant for abusing naked chickens, Spider is well known to the science fiction world and his local community as an accomplished guitarist and singer – along with Jeanne. (My favorite is "Bova on my Mind.")

"The Magnificent Conspiracy" is Spider's finest story. It captures the essence of a very great man – Edgar Pangborn. Unfortunately (that is a very mild word) Edgar is no longer with us, except through his all too few works; but he had the unique ability to "touch" people and produce a warm feeling all over in even the most hardened reader. In "The Magnificent Conspiracy" Spider does this again. Reading the story will make you "feel" good about being a human being. Although it may not at first be apparent, "The Magnificent Conspiracy" is a story about a job interview. Determining the precise nature of the job, however, is left as an exercise for the reader. If we're ever going to get this world saved, it is *you* who must answer the protagonist's last question.

THE MAGNIFICENT CONSPIRACY

by Spider Robinson

It's not that I feel I owe you an explanation, Mr. Hakluyt. My inclination is to simply return your money and let it go at that. But I'm sure *you* will feel that I owe you an explanation, so I may as well save you the trouble of coming after it. It's just possible that reading this will do you some good, too.

But it's going to be difficult to make you believe it. You paid top dollar for the best in the business, and most of the following is going to make me look like

a bloody incompetent amateur. Most of that, of course, was clearly your fault; if you'd been candid with me, I'd have been on top of the situation from the beginning. Since you weren't, I faced the increasingly demoralizing awareness of my own strategic ignorance almost from the start.

Even so, I might well have pulled it off, because I *am* the best. It was only chance that dumped that particular song into the middle of things – perhaps the only thing on earth that could have cracked me open like a hollow Easter egg. Objectively, I suppose I should have pulled out the moment I heard it – but then, I had your (at least tacit) assurance that the job was a simple, straightforward assignment, one I could pull off on automatic pilot. So, instead of bailing out, I rode it all the way into the ground.

In a curious way, I'm grateful to you.

Here's how it went:

1.

By the time I had pulled in and put her in park, alarm bells were going off all over my subconscious, so I just stayed put and looked around. After a minute and a half, I gave up. *Everything* about the place was wrong.

Even the staff. Reserved used-car salesmen are about as common as affable hangmen – but I had the whole minute and a half to myself, and as much longer as I wanted. The man semivisible through the dusty office window was clearly aware of my arrival, but he failed to get up from his chair. So I shut off the ignition and climbed out into unairconditioned

July, and by God even the music was wrong. It wasn't Muzak at all; it was an old Peter, Paul & Mary album. How can you psych someone into buying a clunker with music like that?

Even when I began wandering around kicking tires and glancing under hoods he stayed in the office. He seemed to be reading. I was determined to get a reaction now, so I picked out the classiest car I could see (easily worth three times as much as my Dodge), hotwired her and started her up. As I'd expected, it fetched him – but he didn't hurry. Except for that, he was standard-issue salesman – which is like saying, "Except for the sun-porch, it was a standard issue fighter jet."

"Sorry, mister. That one ain't for sale."

I looked disappointed. "Already spoken for, huh?"

"Nope. But you don't want her."

I listened to the smooth, steady rumble of the engine. "Oh yeah? Why not? She sounds beautiful."

He nodded. "Runs beautiful too – now. Feller sold it to us gimmicked 'er with them pellets you get from the Whitney catalog. Inside o' five hundred miles you wouldn't have no more rings than a spinster."

I let my jaw drop.

"She wouldn't even be sittin' out here, except the garage is full up. Could show you a pretty good Chev, you got your heart set on a convertible."

"Hey listen," I broke in. "Do you realize you could've kept your mouth shut and sold me this car for two thousand flat?"

He wiped his forehead with a red handkerchief. "Yep. Couple year ago, I would've." He hitched his glasses higher on his nose and grinned suddenly. "Couple year ago I had an ulcer."

I had the same disquieting sensation you get in an earthquake when the ground refuses to behave properly. I shut the engine off. "There isn't a single sign about the wonderful bargains you've got," I complained. "The word 'honest' does not appear anywhere on your lot. You don't hurry. I've been here for three minutes and you haven't shaken my hand and you haven't tried to sell me a thing and *you don't hurry*. What the hell kind of used-car lot *is* this?"

He looked like he was trying hard to explain, but he only said "Couple year ago I had an ulcer," again, which explained nothing. I gave up and got out of the convertible. As I did so, I noticed for the first time an index card on the dashboard which read "$100."

"That can't be the price," I said flatly. "Without an *engine* she's worth more than that."

"Oh no," he said, looking scandalized. "That ain't the price. Couldn't be: price ain't fixed."

Oh. "What determines the price?"

"The customer. What he needs, how bad he needs it, how much he's got."

This of course is classic sales-doctrine – but you're not supposed to *tell* the customer. You're supposed to go through the quaint charade of an asking price, then knock off a hastily computed amount because "I can see you're in a jam and I like your face."

"Well then," I said, trying to get this script back on the track, "maybe I'd better tell you about my situation."

"Sure," he agreed. "Come on in the office. More comfortable there. Got the air conditioning."

I saw him notice my purple sneakers as I got out of the convertible – which pleased me. You can't buy them that garish – you have to dye them yourself.

And halfway to the office, my subconscious identified the specific tape being played over the sound system.

Just a hair too late; the song hit me before I was braced for it. I barely had time to put my legs on automatic pilot. Fortunately, the salesman was walking ahead of me, and could not see my face.

Album 1700, side one, track six: "The Great Mandella (The Wheel of Life)."

So I told him
That he'd better
Shut his mouth
And do his job like a man
And he answered

"**Listen** *(father didn't even come to the funeral and the face in the coffin was my own but oh God so thin and drawn like collapsed around the skull and the skin like gray paper and the eyes dear Jesus the eyes he looked so content so hideously* content *didn't he understand that he'd blown it blown it)* own it very long, Mr. Uh?"

He was standing, no, squatting by my Dodge, peering up the tailpipe. The hood was up.

If you're good enough, you can put face and mouth on automatic pilot too. I told him I was Bob Campbell, and that I had owned the Dodge for three years. I told him I was a clerk in a supermarket. I told him I had a wife and two children and an M.A. in Business Administration. I told him that I needed a newer-model car to try for a better job. It was a plausible story; he didn't seem to find anything odd about my facial expressions, and I'm sure he believed every word. By the time I had finished sketching my

income and outgo, we were in the office and the door was closing on the song:

Take your place on
The Great Mandala
As it moves through your brief moment of (click) time that Dodge of yours had a ring job too, Bob."

I came fully aware again, remembered my purpose.

"Ring job? Look, uh . . ." we seated ourselves.

"Arden Larsen."

"Look, Arden, that car had a complete engine overhaul not five thousand miles ago. It's . . ."

"Stow it, Bob. From the inside of your exhaust pipe alone my best professional estimate is that you are getting about forty or fifty miles to a quart of oil. Nobody can overhaul a slant-six that bad." I began to protest. "If that engine was even so much as steam-cleaned less'n ten thousand mile ago I'll eat my socks."

"Just a damned minute, Larsen . . ."

"Don't ever try to bamboozle a used-car man my age, son – it just humiliates the both of us. Now, it's hard to tell for sure without jackin' up the front end or drivin' her, but I'd guess the actual value of that Dodge to be about a hundred dollars. That's half of what it'd cost you to rent a car for as long as the Dodge is liable to last."

"Well of all the colossal . . . ! I don't have to listen to this crap!" I got up and headed for the door, which was a bit corny and a serious mistake, because when I was halfway to the door he hadn't said a word and when I was upon it he still hadn't said a word and I was so puzzled at how I could have overplayed it so badly that I actually had the door open before I remembered what lay outside it:

Tell the jailer
Not to bother
With his meal of bread and water today

He is fasting till the killing's over here and I'll get you some ice water, Bob. Must be ninety-five in the shade out there. You'll be okay in a minute."

"Yeah. Sure." I stumbled back to my seat and gratefully accepted the ice water he brought from the refrigerator in a corner of the office. I remembered to keep my back very straight. *Get a hold on yourself, boy. It's just a song. Just some noise . . .*

"Now as I was sayin', Bob . . . figure your car's worth a hundred. Okay. So figure the Dutchman up the road'd offer you two hundred, and then sell it to some sorry son of a bitch for four. Okay. Figure if you twisted his arm, he'd go three – Mid-City Motors in town'd go that high, just to get you offa the lot quick. Okay. So I'll give you four and a quarter."

I sprayed icewater and nearly choked. "Huh?"

"And I'll throw in that fancy convertible for three hundred, if you really want her – but you'll have to let us do the ring job first. Won't cost you anything, and I could let you have a loaner 'till we get to it. Oh yeah, an' that $100 tag you was askin' about is our best estimate of monthly gas, oil and maintenance outlay. I'd recommend a different car for a man in your situation myself, but it's up to you."

I didn't have to pretend surprise; I was flabbergasted. "Are you out of your *mind*?" Apparently my employer was given to understatement.

He didn't have the right set of wrinkles for a smile like that; he must have just learned how. "Feels like I get saner every day."

"But . . . but you can't be serious. This is a rib, right?"

Still smiling, he pulled out a wallet the size of a paperback dictionary and counted out one hundred and twenty-five dollars in twenties and fives. He held it out in a hand so gnarled it looked like weathered maple. "What do you say? Deal?"

"I say, 'You're getting reindeer-shit all over my roof, fatso.' What's the catch?"

"No catch."

"Oh, no. You're offering me a free lunch, and I'm supposed to just fasten the bib and open my mouth, right? Is that convertible hot, or what?"

He sighed, scratched behind his glasses. "Bob, your attitude makes sense, in a world like this. That's why I don't much like a world like this, and that's why I'm working here. Now I understand how you feel. I've seen ten dozen variations of the same reaction since I started working for Mr. Cardwell, and it makes me a little sadder every time. That convertible ain't hot, and there ain't no other catch neither. I'm offerin' you the car for what she's honestly worth, and if you can't believe that, why, you just go down the line and see the Dutchman. He'll skin you alive, but he won't upset you any."

I know when people are angry at me. He was angry, but not at me. So I probed.

"Larsen, you've got to be completely crazy."

He blew up.

"You're damn right I am! Crazy means out o' step with the world, and accordin' to the rules o' the world I'm supposed to cheat you out of every dime I smell on ya plus ten percent an' if you like that world so much that you wanna subsidize it then you get yer

ass outa here an' go see the Dutchman but what*ever* you do don't you tell him we sent ya you got that?"

Nothing in the world makes a voice as harsh as the shortness of breath caused by a run-on sentence. I waited until he had fed his starving lungs and then said "I want to see the manager," and he emptied them again very slowly and evenly, so that when he closed his eyes I knew he was close to hyperventilating. He clenched his fingers on the desk between us as though he were trying to pull it toward him, and when he opened his eyes the rage was gone from them.

"Okay, Bob. Maybe Mr. Cardwell can explain it to you. I ain't got the right words."

I nodded and got up.

"Bob . . ." He was embarrassed now. "I didn't have no call to bark at you thataway. I can't blame you for bein' suspicious. Sometimes I miss my ulcers myself. It's – well, it's a lot easier to live in a world of mud if you tell yourself there ain't no such thing as dry land."

It was the first sensible thing he'd said.

"What I mean, I'm sorry."

"Thanks for the ice water," I said.

He relaxed and smiled again "Mr. Cardwell's in the garage out back. You take it easy in that heat."

I knew that I'd stalled long enough for the cassette or record or whatever it was to have ended, but I treated the doorknob like an angry rattlesnake just the same. But when I opened it, the only thing that hit me in the face was the hot dry air I'd expected. I left.

I went through an arched gate in the plank fence that abutted the office's rear wall, and followed a wide strip of blacktop through weedy flats to the garage.

It was a four-bay job, a big windowless wood building surrounded with the usual clutter of hand-trucks, engine blocks, transmissions, gas cans, fenders, drive trains and rusted oil drums. All four bays were closed, in spite of the heat. It was set back about five hundred yards from the office, and the field behind it was lushly overgrown with dead cars, a classic White Elephant's Graveyard that seemed better tended than most. As I got closer I realized the field was actually organized: a section for GM products, one for Chryslers, one for Fords and so on, each marked with a sign and subdivided by model and, apparently, year. A huge Massey-Ferguson sat by one of three access roads, ready to haul the next clunker in to its appointed resting place. There was big money in this operation, very impressive money, and I just couldn't square that with Arden Larsen's crackpot pricing policy.

Arden seemed to have flipped the cassette to side two of *Album 1700.* I passed beneath a speaker that said it dug rock and roll music, and entered the garage through a door to the right of the four closed bays. Inside, I stopped short. Who ever heard of an air conditioned garage? Especially one this size.

Big money.

Over on the far side of the room, just in front of a Rambler, the floor grew a man, like the Wicked Witch melting in reverse. It startled the hell out of me – until I realized he had only climbed out of one of those rectangular pits the better garages have for

jobs where a lift might get in the way. With the help of unusually efficient lighting, I studied him as he approached me.

Late fifties, snow white hair and goatee, strong jaw and incongruously soft mouth. A big man, reminding me strongly of Burl Ives, but less bulky, whipcord-fit. An impression of enormous energy, but used only by volition – he walked slowly, clearly because he saw no need to hurry. Paradoxical hands: thin-fingered and aristocratic, but with the ground-in grime which is the unmistakable trademark of the professional or dedicated amateur mechanic. The right one held a pipe-wrench. His overalls were oily and torn, but he wore them like a not-rented tux.

I absorbed and stored all these details automatically, however, while most of my attention was taken up by the utter *peacefulness* of his face, of his eyes, of his expression and carriage and manner. I had never seen a man so manifestly content with his lot. It showed in the purely decorative way in which the wrinkles of his years lay upon his face; it showed in the easy swing of his big shoulders and the purposeful but carefree stride; it showed in the eager yet unhurried way that his eyes measured me: not as a cat sizes up another cat, but as a happy baby investigates a new person – with delighted interest. My purple sneakers *pleased* him. He was plainly a man who drank of his life with an unquenchable thirst, and it annoyed the hell out of me, because I knew good and goddam well when was the last time I had seen a man possessed of such peace and because nothing on earth was going to make me consciously acknowledge it.

But I am not a man whose moods and emotions are wired into his control circuits. I smiled as he neared,

and my body language said I was confused, but amiably so.

"Mr. Cardwell?"

"That's right. What can I do for you?" The way he asked it, it was not a conversational convention.

"My name's Bob Campbell. I . . . uh . . ."

His eyes twinkled. "Of course. You want to know if Arden's crazy, or me, or the both of us." His lips smiled, then got pried apart by his teeth into a full-blown grin.

"Well . . . something like that. He offered to buy my car for uh, more than it's worth, and then he offered to sell me the classiest looking car on the lot for . . ."

"Mr. Campbell, I'll stand behind whatever prices Arden made you."

"But you don't know what they are yet."

"I don't need to," he said, still grinning. "I know Arden."

"But he offered to do a free ring job on the car, for Chrissake."

"Oh, that convertible. Mr. Campbell, he didn't do that 'for Chrissake' – Arden's not a church-going man. He did it for his sake, and for mine and for yours. That car isn't worth a thing without that ring job – the aggravation it'd give you would use up more energy than walking."

"But – but," I sputtered, "how can you possibly survive doing that kind of business?"

His grin disappeared. "How long can any of us survive, Mr. Campbell, doing business any other way? I sell cars for what I believe them to be genuinely worth, and I pay much more than that for them so that people will sell them to *me*. What's wrong with that?"

"But how can you make a profit?"

"I can't."

I was shocked speechless. When he saw this, Cardwell smiled again – but this time it was a smile underlaid with sadness.

"Money, young man, is a symbol representing the life energy of those who subscribe to it. It is a useful and even necessary symbol – but because it is only a symbol, it is possible to amass on paper more profit than there actually is to be made. The more people who insist on making a profit, all the time, in every dealing, the more people who will be required to go bankrupt – to pour their life-energy into the system and get nothing back – in order to keep the machine running. That this analogy holds in emotional and spirtual terms as well only illustrates its basic validity. A profit is without honor, save in its own country – there is certainly nothing sacred about one. Especially if you don't need it."

I continued to gape.

"Perhaps I should explain," he went on, seeing my expression, "that I was born with a golden spoon in my mouth. A diamond-studded, platinum-mounted, emerald-encrusted spoon. My family has been unspeakably wealthy for twelve generations, controlling one of the oldest and most respected fortunes in existence – the kind that calls for battalions of tax lawyers in every country in the world. My personal worth is so absurdly enormous that if I were to set a hundred dollar bill on fire every minute of my waking life I would never succeed in getting out of the highest income tax bracket."

"You . . ." My system flooded with adrenaline. "You *can't* be *that* Cardwell."

BIG money.

"There are times when I almost wish I wasn't. But since I have no choice at all in the matter, I'm trying to make the best of it."

"By throwing money away?" I yelped, and fought for control.

"No. By putting it back where it belongs. I inherited control of a stupendous age-old leech – and I'm forcing it to regurgitate."

"I don't understand." I shook my head vigorously and rubbed a temple with my thumb. "I just don't understand at all."

He smiled the sad smile again, and the pipe-wrench loosened in his grip for the first time. "You don't have to, you know. You can take your money from Arden and drive home in a loaner and pick up your convertible in a few days and then put it out of your mind. All I'm selling is used cars."

He was asking me a question.

I shook my head again, more slowly. "No . . . no, I'd like to understand, I think. Will you explain?"

What the hell had I said that for?

He put the wrench down on an oil drum. "Let's sit down."

There were a pair of splendidly comfortable chairs in the rear of the garage, with foldaway armrests that let you select for comfort or elbow room at need. Beyond them stood an expensive (but not frostfree) refrigerator, from which Cardwell produced it-can't-be-holy-shit-it-is two frosty cold bottles of Dos Equis, the magnificent Mexican beer I had only had twice before in my life. I accepted one and sat in the nearer chair, ignoring the seductive comfort of its reclining back and keeping my spine as straight as I had in the office. Cardwell sprawled back in his and put his feet

up on a beheaded slant-six, and when he drank from his Dos Equis he gave it his full attention.

I regret to say I didn't. *Despite* all the evidence, I could not make myself believe that this grease-stained mechanic with his sneakers on an engine block was actually THE Raymond Sinclair Cardwell. If it was true, my fee was going to quintuple, and Hakluyt was fucking well going to pay it. Send a man after a cat, and forget to mention that it's a black panther . . . *Jesus.*

Cardwell's chair actually had a beverage-holder built tastefully into the armrest; he set his beer in it and folded his arms easily. He spoke slowly, thoughtfully; and he had that knack of observing you as he spoke, modifying his word-choice by feedback. I have the knack myself; but I wondered why a man in his situation would have troubled to acquire it.

I found myself trying as hard to understand him as he was trying to be understood.

I don't know (he said) if I can convey what it's like to be born preposterously wealthy, Mr. Campbell, so I won't try. It presents one with an incredible view of reality that cannot be imagined by a normal human being. The world of the very rich is only tangentially connected with the real world, for all that their destinies are intertwined. I lived totally in that other world and that world-view for thirty-six years, happily moving around mountains of money with a golden bulldozer, stoking the fires of progress. I rather feel I was a typical multibillionaire, if that conveys anything to you. My only eccentricity was a passion for working on cars, which I had absorbed in my youth from a chauffeur I admired. I had access to

the finest assistance and education the world had to offer, and became rather handy. As good as I was with international finance and large-scale real estate development and interlocking cartels and all the other avenues through which a really enormous fortune is interconnected with the world, I enjoyed manipulating my fortune, *using* it – in some obscure way I believe I felt a duty to do so. And I *always* made a profit.

It was in London that it changed.

I had gone there to personally oversee a large and complex merger involving seven nations. The limousine had just left the airport when the first shot killed my driver. He was the man who taught me how to align-bore an engine block and his name was Ted. The window was down; he just hurled sideways and soiled his pants. I think I figured it out as the second shot got my personal bodyguard, but by then we were under the wheels of the semi. I woke up eight weeks later, and one of the first things I learned is that no one is ever truly unconscious. I woke up speaking in a soft but pronounced British accent precisely like that of my private nurses, and it persisted for two days.

I discovered that Phillip, the bodyguard, had died. So had Lisa, a lady who meant entirely too little to me. So had Teal, the London regional director who had met my plane, and the driver of the semi. The rifleman had been apprehended: a common laborer driven mad by his poverty. He had taken a gun to traffic in the same way that a consistently mistreated Doberman will attack anyone who approaches, because it seemed to him the only honorable and proper response to the world.

Cardwell drank deep from his beer.

My convalescence was long. The physical crisis was severe, but the spiritual trauma was infinitely greater. Like Saint Paul, I had been smashed from my horse, changed at once from a mover and shaper to a terrified man who hurt terribly in many places. The best drugs in the world cannot truly kill pain – they blunt its edge without removing it, or its terrible reminder of mortality. I had nearly died, and I suddenly had a tremendous need to explain to myself why that would have been such a tragedy. I could not but wonder who would have mourned for me, and how much, and I had a partial answer in the shallow extent of my own mourning for Ted and Phillip and Teal and Lisa. The world I had lived my life in was one in which there was little love, in which the glue of social relationships was not feelings, but common interests. I had narrowly, by the most costly of medical miracles, avoided inconveniencing many hundreds of people, and not a damn thing else.

And of course I could not deal with this consciously or other wise. My world-view lacked the "spiritual vocabulary" with which to frame these concepts: I desperately needed to resolve a conflict I could not even express. It delayed my effective recovery for weeks beyond the time when I was technically "on my feet" – I was simply unable to re-enter the lists of life, unable to see why living was worth the terrible danger of dying. And so my body healed slowly, by the same instinctive wisdom with which it had kept my forebrain in a coma until it could cope with the extent of my injuries.

And then I met John Smiley.

Cardwell paused for so long that I had begun to search for a prompting remark when he continued.

John was an institution at that hospital. He had been there longer than any of the staff or patients. He had not left the bed he was in for twelve years. Between his ribcage and his knees he was mostly plastic bags and tubes and things that are to a colostomy bag what a Rolls-Royce is to a dogcart. He needed one and sometimes two operations every year, and his refusal to die was an insult to medical science, and he was the happiest man I have ever met in my life.

My life had taught me all the nuances of pleasure; joy, however was something I had only dimly sensed in occasional others and failed to really recognize. Being presented with a pure distillate of the thing forced me to learn what it was – and from there it was only a short step to realizing that I lacked it. You only begin to perceive where you itch when you learn how to scratch.

John Smiley received the best imaginable care, far better than he was entitled to. His only financial asset was an insurance company which grudgingly disbursed enough to keep him alive, but he got the kind of service and personal attention usually given only to a man of my wealth. This puzzled me greatly when I first got to know him, the more so when I learned that he could not explain it himself. But I soon understood.

Virtually every doctor, nurse and long-term patient in the hospital worshipped him. The rare, sad few who would have blackly hated him were identified by the rest and kept from him. The more common ones

who desperately needed to meet him were also identified, and sent *to* him, subtly or directly as indicated.

Mr. Campbell, John Smiley was simply a fountain of the human spirit, a healer of souls. Utterly wrecked in body, his whole life telescoped down to a bed he didn't rate and a TV he couldn't afford and the books scrounged for him by nurses and interns and the Pall Malls that appeared magically on his bedside table every morning – and the people who chanced to come through his door – John made of life a magnificent thing. He listened to the social and sexual and financial and emotional woes of anyone who came into his room, drawing their troubles out of them with his great gray eyes, and he sent them away lighter in their hearts, with a share of the immeasurable joy he had somehow found within himself. He had helped the charge nurse when her marriage failed, and he had helped the head custodian find the strength to raise his mongoloid son alone, and he had helped the director of the hospital to kick Demerol. And while I knew him, he helped a girl of eighteen die with grace and dignity. In that hospital, they sent the tough ones around, on one pretext or another, to see John Smiley – and that was simply all it took.

He had worked for the police as a plainclothesman, and one day as he and his partner were driving his own car into the police garage, a ten-ton door had given way and come down on them. Ackroyd, his partner, had been killed outright, and so Mrs. Ackroyd received poundage equivalent to half a million dollars. John's wife was less fortunate – his live was saved. They explained to her that under the law she would not collect a cent until he was dead. Then they added softly that they gave him a month at the outside.

Twelve years later he was still chain-smoking Pall Malls and bantering with his wife's boyfriend when they came to visit him, which was frequently.

I wandered into John Smiley's room one day, sick in my heart and desperately thirsty for something more than thirty-six years had taught me of life, seeking for a reason to go on living. Like many others before and since, I drank from John Smiley, drank from his seemingly inexhaustible well of joy in living – and in the process, I acquired the taste.

I learned some things.

Mostly, I think, I learned the difference between pleasure and joy. I suppose I had already made the distinction, subconsciously, but I considered the latter a fraud, an illusion overlaid upon the former to lend it respectability. John Smiley proved me wrong. His pleasures were as restricted as mine had been unrestricted – and his joy was so incandescently superior to mine that on the night of the day I met him I found myself humming the last verse of "Richard Corey" in my mind.

Cardwell paused, and his voice softened.

He forgave me my ignorance.

He forgave me my money and my outlook and my arrogance and *treated me as an equal,* and most amazing of all, he made me forgive myself.

The word "forgive" is interesting. Someone robs you of your wallet, and they find him down the line and bring him back to you, saying, "We found your wallet on this man," and you say, "That's all right. He can have – can have had – it; I fore-give it to him."

To preserve his sanity, John Smiley had been forced to "fore-give" virtually everything God had given him. In his presence you could not do less yourself.

And so I even gave up mourning a "lost innocence" I had never had, and put the shame he inspired in me to positive use. I began designing my ethics.

I interrupted for the first and last time.

"A rich man who would design his own ethics is a dangerous thing," I said.

Damn right (he said, with the delight of one who sees that his friend really *understands*). A profit is without honor except in its own country – but that's a hell of a lot of territory. The economic system reacts, with the full power of the racial unconscious, to preserve itself – and I had no wish to tilt at the windmill.

I confess that my first thought was of simply giving my money away, in a stupendous orgy of charity, and taking a job in a garage. But John was wise enough to be able to show me that that would have been as practical as disposing of a warehouse full of high explosive by setting fire to it with a match. You may have read in newspapers, some years back, of a young man who attempted to give away an inheritance, a *much* smaller fortune than mine. He is now hopelessly insane, shattered by the power that was thrust upon him. *He did not do it to himself.*

So I started small, and very slowly. The first thing I did was to heal the ulcers of the hospital's accounting department. They had been juggling desperately to cover the cost of the care that John Smiley was

getting, so I bought the hospital and told them to juggle away, whenever they felt they should. That habit was hard to break; I bought forty-seven hospitals in the next two years, and quietly instructed them to run whatever loss they had to, to provide maximum care and comfort for their patients. I spent the next six years working in them, a month or two each, as a janitor. This helped me to assess their management, replacing entire staffs down to the bedpan level when necessary. It also added considerably to my education. There are many hospitals in the world, Mr. Campbell, some good, some bad, but I know for certain that forty-seven of them are wonderful places in which to hurt.

The janitor habit was hard to break, too. Over the next ten years I toured my empire, like a king traveling incognito to learn the *flavor* of his land. I held many and varied jobs, for my empire is an octopus, but they all amounted to janitor. I spent ten years toiling anonymously at the very borders of my fortune, at the last interface between it and the people it involved, the communities it affected. And without me at the helm, for ten *years*, the nature and operation of my fortune changed in no way whatsoever, and when I realized that it shook me. I gave up my tour of inspection and went to my estate in British Columbia and holed up for a few years, thinking it through. Then I began effecting changes. This used-car lot is only one of them. It's my favorite, though, so it's the first one I've implemented and it's where I choose to spend my personal working hours.

But there are many other changes planned.

The silence stretched like a spring, but when at last I spoke my voice was soft, quiet, casual, quite calm.

"And you expect me to believe that none of these changes will make a profit?"

He blinked and started, precisely as if a tape-recorder had started talking back to him.

"My dear Mr. Campbell," he said with a trace of sadness, "I frankly don't expect you to believe a word I've said."

My voice was still calm. "Then why tell me all this?"

"I'm not at all sure. But I believe it has much to do with the fact that you are the first person to ask me about it since I opened this shop."

Calm gone. "Bullshit," I roared, much too loud. "Bullfuckingshit, I mean a kingsize meadow-muffin! Do you goddammit," I was nearly incoherent "think I was fucking born yesterday? Sell me a free lunch? You simple sonofabitch *I am not that stupid!*"

This silence did not stretch; it lay there like a bludgeoned dove. I wondered whether all garages echoed like this and I'd just never noticed. *The hell with control, I don't need control, control is garbage, it's just me and him.* My spine was very straight.

"I'm sorry," he said at last, as sorrowfully as though my anger were truly his fault. "I humbly apologize, Mr. Campbell. I took you for a different kind of man. But I can see now that you're no fool."

His voice was infinitely sad.

"I don't mind a con, but this is stupid. You're giving away cars and you and Larsen are plenty to handle the traffic. I'm your only customer – what do you take me for?"

"The first wave has passed," he said. "There are

only so many fools in any community, only a few naive or desperate enough to turn out for a free lunch. It was quite busy here for six months or so, but now all the fools have been accommodated. It will be weeks, months before word-of-mouth gets around, before people learn that the cars I've sold them are good cars, that my guarantees are genuine. Dozens will have to return, scream for service, promptly receive it and numbly wander home before the news begins to spread. It will get quite busy again then, for a while, and probably very noisy too – but at the moment I'm not even a Silly Season filler in the local paper. The editor killed it, as any good editor would. He's no fool, either.

"I'm recruiting fools, Mr. Campbell. There was bound to be a lull after the first wave hit. But I believe that the second will be a tsunami."

My voice was a whip. "And this is how you're going to save the world? By doing lube jobs and fixing mufflers?"

"This is one of the ways, yes. It's not surgery, but it should comfort the patient until surgery can be undertaken. It's hard to concentrate on *any*thing when you have a boil on your ass."

"What?"

"Sorry. A metaphor I borrowed from John Smiley, at the same time I borrowed the idea itself. 'Ray,' he said to me, 'we're talking about using your money to make folks more comfortable, to remove some of the pointless distractions so they have the energy to sit down and think. Well, the one boil on *every*body's ass is his vehicle – everybody that has to have one, which is most everybody.' Everywhere I went over the next decade, I heard people bitterly complaining about

their cars, pouring energy and money into them, losing jobs because of them, going broke because of them, being killed because of them. So I'm lancing the boil.

"It makes an excellent test-operation, too. If people object too strongly to having their boils lanced, then I'll have to be *extremely* circumspect in approaching their cancers. Time will tell."

"And no one's tried to stop you from giving away cars?"

"I don't give away cars. I sell them at a fair price. But the effect is similar, and yes, there have been several attempts to stop me by various legal means. But there has never been a year of my life when I was being sued for less than a million dollars. Six requests for injunctions have been taken under permanent advisement, by the cheapest judge I ever bought. I don't advertise my prices in the papers only because I deem it more prudent not to.

"Then there were the illegal attempts. For a while this lot was heavily, and unobtrusively, guarded, and twice those guards found it necessary to break a few arms. I've dismissed them all for the duration of the lull between waves, but there'll be an army here if and when I need it.

"But until the next wave of customers hits, the only violence I'm expecting is a contract assassination or two."

"Oh?"

The anger drained from my voice as professional control switched in again; my adrenals went on time-and-a-half. I noted that his right hand was out of sight behind his chair – on the side I had not yet seen. I sat bolt upright.

"Yes, the first one is due any time now. He'll probably show up with a plausible identity and an excellent cover-story, and he'll probably demand to see the manager on the obvious pretext. He'll wear strikingly gaudy shoes to draw the attention of casual witnesses from his face, and his shirt will have a high collar and he'll hold his spine very straight. He'll be completely untraceable, *very* expensive and quite good at his work, but his employers will almost certainly have kept him largely in the dark, and so he'll underestimate his opposition until it is too late. Only then will he realize that I could have come out of that pit with an M-16 as easily as with a pipe wrench if the situation had seemed to warrant it. What *is* that thing, anyway? It's too slim for a blow-gun."

If you've lost any other hope of misdirecting the enemy, try candor. I sighed, relaxed my features in a gesture of surrender, and *very* slowly reached up and over my shoulder. Gripping the handle that nestled against my last few vertebrae, I pulled straight up and out, watching the muscles of his right arm tense where they disappeared behind the chair and wishing mightily that I knew what his hand was doing. I pointedly held the weapon in a virtually useless over-hand grip, but I was unsettled to see him pick up on that – he was altogether too alert for my taste. *Hang on, dammit, you can still pull it off if you just hang on.*

"Stiffened piano wire," I said, meeting his eyes, "embedded in a hardwood grip and filed sharp. You put it between the right two ribs and shove. Ruptures the heart, and the pericardial sac self-seals on the way out. Pressure builds. If you do it properly, the victim

himself thinks it's a heart attack, and the entry wound is virtually indetectible. A full-scale autopsy would pick it up – but when an overweight car dealer in his fifties has a heart attack, pathologists don't generally get up on their toes."

"Unless he happens to be a multibillionaire," Cardwell noted.

"My employers will regret leaving me in ignorance. Fluoroscope in the fence gate?"

"The same kind they use in airports. If that weapon hadn't been so damned interesting, you'd never have reached the garage."

"I wanted to do the usual research, but they were paying double for a rush-job." I sighed. "I knew better. Or should have. Now what?"

"Now let go of that thing and kick it far away."

I did so at once.

"Now you can have another beer and tell me some things."

"Sorry, Cardwell. No names. They sent me in blind and I'll speak to them about that one day, but I don't give names. It's bad for business. Go ahead and call the man."

"You misunderstand me, sir. I already know Hakluyt's name quite well, and I have no intention of calling police of any description."

I knew the location of every scrap of cover for twenty yards in any direction, and I favored the welding tanks behind me and to my left – he looked alert enough not to shoot at them at such close range, and they were on wheels facing him. If I could tip my chair backwards and come at him from behind the tanks. . .

". . . and I'd rather not kill you unless you force me too, so please unbunch those muscles."

There was no way he was going to let me walk away from this, and there was no way I was going to sit there and let him pot me at his leisure, so there was no question of sitting still, and so no one was more surprised than me when the muscles of my calves and thighs unbunched and I sat still.

Perhaps I believed him.

"Ask your questions," I said.

"Why did you take this job?"

I broke up. "Oh my God," I whooped, "how did a nice girl like me wind up in such a profession, you mean?" The ancient gag was suddenly very hilarious, and I roared with laughter as I gave the punchline. "Just lucky, I guess."

Pure tension-release, of course. But damned if he didn't laugh at the old chestnut too – or at himself for all I know. We laughed together until I was done, and then he said "But why?" and I sobered up.

"For the money, of course."

He shook his head. "I don't believe you."

What's in your right hand, old man? I only shrugged. "It's the truth."

He shook his head again. "Some of your colleagues, perhaps. But I watched your face while I told you my story, and *your* empathic faculty seems to be functioning quite nicely. You're personally involved in this, involved with me. You're too damn mad at me and it's confusing you as you sit there, spoiling your judgment. Oh no, son, you can't fool me. You're *some* kind of idealist. But *what brand?*"

There isn't a policeman in the world who knows my name, none of my hits have so much as come to the attention of Homicide, that's how good I am, and the reason for it is that when I'm in Combat-Alert

mode my control is flawless, I am an unflappable killing machine, like I said, my emotions aren't even in circuit, and well yes, I had gotten hot under the collar a couple of times this afternoon for reasons I would certainly think about when I got a chance, but now of course it was killingfloor time and I was in total command, and so I was again surprised and shocked to find myself springing up from my chair and, not diving behind the welding tanks, or even leaping for his right hand, but simply running flat out full tilt in plain sight for the door.

It was the most foolish imaginable move and a half of my mind screamed *Fool! Fool! At least run broken field your back is a fucking perfect target you'll never get halfway to the door* with every step until I was halfway to the door and then it shut up until I had reached the door and then the other half said quietly *I knew he wouldn't shoot* but then I had the door open and both halves screamed. It hadn't occurred to any of us that the sound-system might be antiquated enough to use those miserable eight-track tapes.

Eight-tracks break down frequently, they provide mediocre sound quality under the best playback, their four-program format often leaves as much as ten minutes of dead air between programs, and you can't rewind or cue them. And they don't shut themselves off when they're done. They repeat indefinitely.

Hunger stopped him
He lies still in his cell
Death has gagged his accusations
We are free now
We can kill now

We can hate now
Now we can end the world
We're not guilty
He was crazy
And it's been going on for ten thousand years!

It is possible for an unrestrained man to kill himself with his hands. I moved to do so, and Cardwell hit me from behind like a bag of cement. One wrist broke as I landed, and he grabbed the other. He shouted things at me, but not loud enough to be heard over the final chorus:

Take your place on the Great Mandala
As it moves through your brief moment of time
Win or lose now: you must choose now
And if you lose you've only wasted your *(life is what it really was even if they called it five years he never came out the front door again so it was life-imprisonment, right? and maybe the Cong would've killed him just as dead but they wouldn't have raped him and they wouldn't have starved him not literally we could have been heroes together if only he hadn't been a fucking coward coward coward . . .)*

"Who was a coward?" Cardwell asked distantly, and I took it the wrong way and screamed *"Him!* Not me! HIM!" and then I realized that the song had ended and it was very very silent out, only the distant murmuring of highway traffic and the power-hum from the speakers and the echo of my words; and I thought about what I had just said, and seven years' worth of the best rationalizations I ever built came thundering down around my ears. The largest

chunk came down on my skull and smashed it flat.

Gil, I'm sorry!

4.

Ever since Nam I've been accustomed to coming awake instantly – sometimes with a weapon in my hand. I had forgotten what a luxurious pleasure it can be to let awareness and alertness seep back in at their own pace, to be truly *relaxed*. I lay still for some time, aware of my surroundings only in terms of their peacefulness, before it occurred to me to identify them. Nor did I feel, then, the slightest surprise or alarm at the defection of my subconscious sentries. It was as though in some back corner of my mind a dozen yammering voices had, for the first time within memory, shut up. All decisions were made.

I was in the same chair I'd left so hastily. It was tilted and reshaped into something more closely resembling the acceleration cradles astronauts take off in, only more comfortable. My left wrist was set and efficiently splintered, and hurt surprisingly little. Above me girders played geometric games across the high curved ceiling, interspersed with diffused-light fixtures that did not hurt to look at. Somewhere to my left, work was being done. It produced sound, but sound is divided into music and noise and somehow this clattering wasn't noise. I waited until it stopped, with infinite patience, in no hurry at all.

When there had been no sound for a while I got up and turned and saw Cardwell again emerging from the pit beneath the Rambler, with a thick streak of grease across his forehead and a skinned knuckle.

He beamed. "I love ball joints. Your wrist okay?"

"Yes thanks."

He came over, turned my chair back into a chair, and sank into his own. He produced cigarettes and gave me one. I noticed a wooden stool, obviously handmade, lying crippled near a workbench. I realized that Cardwell had sawed off and split two of its legs to make the splints on my wrist. The stool was quite old, and all at once I felt more guilt and shame for its destruction than I did for having come to murder its owner. This amused me sourly. I took my cigarette to the front of the garage, where one of the great bay doors now stood open, and watched nightsky and listened to crickets and bullfrogs while I smoked. Shop closed, Arden gone home. After a while Cardwell got up and came to the door too, and we stepped out into the darkness. The traffic too had mostly gone home for the night, and there was no moon. The dark suited me fine.

"My name," I said softly, "is Bill Maeder."

From out of the black Cardwell's voice was serene. "Pleased to meet you," was all he said.

We walked on.

"I used to be a twin," I said, flicking the cigarette butt beneath my walking feet. "My brother's name was Gil, and we were identical twins. After enough people have called your twin your Other Half, you begin to believe it. I guess we allowed ourselves to become polarized, because that suited everyone's sense of symmetry or some damned thing. Yin and Yang Maeder, they called us. All our lives we disagreed on everything, and we loved each other deeply. Then they called us in for our draft physical. I showed up and he didn't and so they sent me to

Nam and Gil to Leavenworth. I walked through the jungles of hell and came out a hero. Gil died in his cell at the end of a protracted hunger strike. A man who is starving to death smells like fresh-baked bread, did you know that? I spent my whole first furlough practically living in his cell, arguing with him and screaming at him, and he just sat there the whole time smelling like whole wheat right out of the oven."

Cardwell said nothing. For a while we kept strolling. Then I stopped in my tracks and said, "For seven years I told myself that *he* was the coward, that he was the chump, that he had failed the final test of survival. My father is a drunk now. My mother is a Guru Maharaj Ji premie." I started walking again, and still Cardwell was silent. "I was the coward, of course. Rather than admit I was wrong to let them make me into a killer, I gloried in it. I went free-lance." We had reached my Dodge, and I stopped for the last time by the passenger-side door. "Goodness, sharing, caring about other people, ethics and morals and all that – as long as I believed that they were just a shuck, lies to keep the sheep in line, I could function, my choice made sense. If there is no such thing as hope, despair can be no sin. If there is no truth, one lie is no worse than another. Come to think of it, your Arden said something like that." I sighed. "But I hated that god damned Mandala song, the one about the draft resister who dies in jail. It came out just before I was shipped out to Nam." I reached through the open car window and took the Magnum from the glove compartment. "Right after the funeral." I put the barrel between my teeth and aimed for the roof of my mouth.

Cardwell was near, but he stood stock-still. All he said was, "Some people never learn."

My finger paused on the trigger.

"Gil will be glad to see you. You two tragic expiators will get on just fine. While the rest of us clean up the mess you left behind you. Go ahead. We'll manage."

I let my hand fall. "What are you talking about?"

All at once he was blazing mad, and a multibillionaire's rage is a terrible thing. "You simple egocentric bastard, did it ever occur to you that you might be *needed?* That the brains and skills and talent you've been using to kill strangers, to play head-games with yourself, are scarce resources? Trust an assassin to be arrogant; you colossal jackass, *do you think Arden Larsens grow on trees?* A man in my kind of business can't recruit through the want ads. But I need people with *guts*."

"To do what?" I said, and threw the pistol into the darkness.

This is Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's twenty-first published work of short fiction. Two of her novels have been published and four more novels and a collection of short stories are scheduled for publication in 1978-79. Before becoming a full-time writer, Quinn worked as a counselor with mentally disturbed children, as manager (and occasional playwright) for a children's theatre company, and as a statistical demographic cartographer. She is also a serious composer and, purely for the hell of it, reads tarot cards and palms at the Magic Cellar in San Francisco.

"Allies" is about the most consciously directed writing Quinn has ever done. It is actually an adventure story, for adventure is simply "Someone else far away being scared and uncomfortable." Also, adventure is essentially sexless, because what is uncomfortable and frightening for males is usually uncomfortable and frightening for females. In this story both sexes participate to a more or less equal degree; as such, there is no way to tell when the action involves men, women, or both. Clearly, the characters are not all the same sex, but their *individual* genders are never assigned. Only Quinn knows, and she isn't telling.

ALLIES

by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro

Something was out there.

Chris Tuttle shifted the patrol gun, forcing it tight to the shoulder, feeling the bite of the metal through the heavy surface uniform. It was hard, reassuring.

Overhead two of the rumpled moons shed their wan light on the vast emptiness of Scranton's Marsh. Stiff reeds rattled in the lonely wind, their endless tatoo restlessly beating out the long hours, their sound spreading like gossip.

But something was out there. Beyond the reeds, something moved, making silence where there should have been sound. It moved, vast and unseen over the sodden waste, pulling mystery with it.

Now Chris had the gun at the ready, wishing Sidney or Robin, someone else from the station had also stood watch. Chris had often stood watch alone, since Gabe died. But this time, there should have been someone else, so that there would not be this terrible silence, this strangeness that filled Scranton's Marsh. Chris would never have felt the thing moving, had another person been in the shelter, someone to talk to, someone familiar.

Something moved nearer.

It was not just for Gabe that Chris was nervous, it was because of Dana and Evelyn. Chris remembered the way they looked, lying together, their uniforms slimed by the Marsh, his face smoothed in death, and hers with a half smile that haunted Chris now, out here alone at the edge of the Marsh.

But Chris was not alone. There was something else. Involuntarily Chris slid further back in the patrol shelter, making a futile gesture to shut away the images of Evelyn and Dana, and their deaths.

Nearby the reeds were still, and the hushed winds failed. A shadow touched the pale tracks of the moons.

Chris Tuttle hated to be touched. The nearness of another person brought a deep kind of panic which had been with Chris since childhood. People, nearness, touching, small places, all of them caused fear. Now something, perhaps the something that had killed Evelyn and Dana, was coming nearer, nearer.

If it came closer, they would touch.

The bright flame of the patrol gun lanced into the dusk, making stark shadows among the reeds, making the oily water sleek, clothlike, unreal. The light was protection; it would fend off whatever was coming. It would hold the ghosts at bay.

Nothing showed in the glare. The Marsh lay unnaturally still as the light of the patrol gun faded and its efficient crackle died. There was no echo.

Breathing harder now, Chris waited, hugging the patrol gun as if its metal was proof against the thing coming nearer. The gun was light and strength and power. As long as Chris touched the gun, nothing else would have to be touched. Nothing. No . . . thing.

The feeling, the sensing, the sureness of something coming grew stronger, and Chris's eyes widened in terror. It was nearer. It was there. It would reach out, invisible, and they would touch . . .

And then it was gone. Scranton's Marsh rippled and clattered in the night wind and the potato-shaped moons blundered along the sky.

In the watch shelter Chris felt tightened muscles relax, fingers falling away from the patrol gun of their own volition. Stifled laughter loosened them still more until the whole episode seemed foolish, nothing more than the result of being in the shelter too long, of thinking too much about Dana and Evelyn. It was always hard on a station when part of its staff died, particularly when the death was sudden, terrible. Gabe had died gently, letting go of life as easily as water slid away on the night tides.

That was it, Chris was sure. It was the long hours of patrol, and the deaths. Evelyn, tall, blond, with eyes bright, never far away from the cool, dark Dana.

A man and a woman, not yet thirty, either of them, and they were dead.

"I must be getting squirmy. It's the strain," Chris said aloud, and ignored the hollow sound the words made in the shelter. It was the shelter that had caused the feeling, and the memory of Dana and Evelyn. Not Gabe. Chris had got over that months ago.

There was nothing moving on Scranton's Marsh.

Later, when Jecks came for the next watch, Chris almost mentioned the strange moment as a casual warning, in case Jecks, too, found the shelter disturbing, filled with memories; then, embarrassed by the weakness this showed, decided not to. There was no reason to give another member of the Squad a case of the spooks.

"Anything happening?" Jecks asked in a raspy, bored voice, knowing that nothing ever happened on Halverson's Stopover except when one of the Squad died.

"No. Nothing."

Jecks chuckled. "Sure, what else?" and took over the patrol gun, laconically waving Chris away, uncaring.

"What else?" Chris said in agreement. Dreary planets like this one were of use only to the Rare Resources Board, and then at some distant date, far in the future. In the meantime, Chris reflected on the long walk back to the squad station, they were being paid generously to keep an eye on it, and a few dozen other planets like it. All because the R. R. B. had the uncomfortable suspicion that somewhere, sometime, they might run into outside opposition that would want the place for themselves.

Opposition? Chris knew better. The hours of

tedium, the long hours of staring into nothing until you conjured visions to offset the unending sameness. Only imagination born of boredom would flourish on Scranton's Marsh. Or Tidwell Marsh. Or the Shallow Sea. Or Halverson's Slough. There was nothing to do but watch the place. Or you could die. Evelyn had died. And Dana. And, oh, God, Gabe.

Chris glanced once more at the boggy waste before going into the squad station, and back into a world of color and light.

They sat apart from each other, like slow private snails on different leaves of a plant. Between them the shiny walls were bright with the warm colors of home: here orange, there marigold, with panels of lime and olive to separate them. The room was large, light and airy. It was filled with all sorts of recreational equipment. The Squad hated it.

Chris had discarded the outer layer of the surface uniform and left it for the jeeves to clean. Regulations required that all Squad members remove their inner suit lining while in the station, but no one ever did, and the R. R. B. did not complain.

They sat alone in the dull green coverings – it was all part of the routine, part of being a staffer with the Squad, part of the life they shared on Halverson's Stopover. Chris, like all the others, had been living this way for so long that the routine was automatic.

"Busy day?" Jes Northrup asked derisively as Chris came into the bright, sterile rec room.

"Same as always." Chris had come to ignore the constant jibes Jes offered. There was no way to respond that did not bring more scorn, and Chris had

learned that the truth was as acceptable to Jes as any other answer.

"Just right for you, then. No tax on the brain."

On the other side of the room, Tracy Lexington cracked out a laugh. There was anger in the sound: Tracy had been set to retire in a year, but now faced departure on the next R. R. B. supply ship, after three years as station chief.

Jes turned. "Heard from the Bureau?" The question was poisonous. "What was their excuse? Or did they bother to give you one? Maybe they hold you responsible for Evelyn and Dana dying."

Like Chris, Tracy had learned to tell the truth to Jes. "I heard from Tenning on Markley Four. The R. R. B. is pulling the same thing there. You get fired six months before they retire you. They aren't out any money that way, and you have no claim against them."

"Think what you've got to look forward to, Chris," Jes said with satisfaction. "You retire in eight months, right? In two, look for the axe."

Chris often wondered why it had to be Jes, why of all the Squad staffers since Gabe's death Jes was the one, sharp words and all, who was part of those lonely dreams. Privately Chris admitted that it might be self-protection, for as long as Jes was involved elsewhere, there was no chance for Chris. And even if this were not the case, Jes's merciless tongue would excoriate love from their talk – Jes's tongue and the memory of Gabe.

"What about the axe, Chris? You ready for it?" Jes had come up slyly.

Chris nodded without answering, then took a much-used viewer and found a spot on the wall away from Jes and Tracy.

"That won't make us go away," Jes mocked, and Chris felt the power of his presence. Jes filled a room, was a palpable thing in the air. "It's coming, Chris, and you're going down with the rest of us, fired, broke, and on the beach."

Chris couldn't resist saying, "So yours came today in the mail. Sorry to hear it, Jes."

For a moment the rec room was silent. Then Jes rose as if each bone were made of china; fragile, brittle, too precious to be clothed in flesh, and the aura of presence shrunk. "That thing in the Marsh. I hope it gets you."

Surprised, Chris looked up, but saw only Jes's back. "Jes?" Chris half-rose to follow, then stopped, feeling too naked under Tracy's keen, inquisitive gaze.

"The thing in the Marsh?"

"That's just Jes. It doesn't mean anything," Chris said, wishing that Jes had not been so acute. "I guess I'm not over Evelyn and Dana, that's all." The thing, whatever it was, had been a private matter. Jes should have no part in it. Nor should Tracy.

"Something bothering you, Chris?" Tracy asked, not letting go, one eyebrow raised in punctuation.

"Um?" It was too late to hide a case of nerves. "A little. I'm getting jumpy is all. Like I said, Evelyn and Dana, they haven't been dead long, and before they died, she told me a lot of things – I liked her better than the other women at this station, and I miss her. I miss him, too, because of her."

"Do you?" Tracy Lexington hardly moved.

"And then the shelter. Sometimes the shelter gets to me, you know? It's too much the same out there: you start seeing things, after a while."

"I know what you mean," Tracy said, no longer

truly interested. "I thought I saw an orchard out there one time. An orchard, blooming in the middle of Scranton's Marsh."

A buzzer sounded in the mess, and the sound rattled around the rec room like a marble. Chris welcomed it as a distraction.

"You coming?" Tracy said perfunctorily before leaving.

"In a bit. I'm not hungry."

"Suit yourself."

When Tracy had gone, Chris let a frown appear. What was happening here? Did the others see things as well? Tracy said there'd been an orchard, but that was not the same thing as the moving silence that had crowded Chris in the shelter. An orchard was part of a memory, a toy to help pass the dull hours spent in solitude. Could the silence be that, only that?

But Jes had implied something more. Jes spoke as if there were a preying thing that would lure Chris out into the sucking darkness of the Marsh . . .

The sound of the second buzzer broke through Chris's thoughts. The pierre would stop serving food in ten minutes. There would be nothing to eat after that for at least six hours.

Putting all the disturbing thoughts aside, Chris went in to supper and, sniffing the meal that waited, wished that the old model pierre was still in operation. This new one was much faster, but the food tasted terrible.

No one paid much attention to the change of watch. Squad members came and went without supervision. Mostly they were loners, willing to do the boring job, and asking little or no assistance, preferring the solitude and privacy of the Squad to

the incredible crowding of the usual habitable planets.

So it was hardly strange when Lee Jecks did not show up to relieve Chris's watch the next day. Lee was fairly responsible, but schedules were not too rigid.

Chris waited, frowning a little, thinking that Jecks would not be too long. But the minutes stretched on and no one came.

The Marsh shivered under a cold wind and the reeds scraped each other and clattered as if they, too, felt cold.

Finally Chris called that station. "Tuttle here. Where's Jecks?"

"This is Tracy, Chris. What do you mean, where's Jecks?"

"I'm still at the watch shelter, Jecks was supposed to relieve me almost fifteen minutes ago. What happened?"

There was a pause before Tracy said, "I haven't seen Jecks since yesterday. Just before the change of watch. Here in the rec room. Jecks was going out to the shelter."

Chris felt that coldness which had nothing to do with the wind or the Marsh. "Since then? What about the rec room now? What about the mess?"

"Jecks isn't in the rec room; didn't use it much." Already Chris could tell Tracy thought of Jecks in the past tense. "I'll order a search. Maybe Jecks got sick, or hurt."

Or dead, Chris thought, but said dryly, "Sure. In the meantime, who's going to take over my watch?"

Again Tracy hesitated. "Can you keep on there for a little longer?" Then, hurrying to explain, "Look, we can check out the station in half an hour. I'll try to send someone out to you, but it'll take a little time.

I'll get back to you." The connection was broken, leaving Chris alone with the Marsh.

The wind picked up, as if acknowledging its victory. The reeds got louder, almost angry, their clickings turning to a persistent buzz, like derisive applause. Out there the water stood in brackish pools, the surface wrinkling, hidden eyes narrowing into sinister smiles, their malicious green depths lost in the movement of the water.

"Shit," Chris said, feeling the danger of the place. At times like this the Marsh was almost human, almost alive, with a feeling like hatred.

Then there came a silence that did not stop the wind, but rode with it across the Marsh. It was huge, powerful . . .

Sentient.

Something was out there.

The hostility of the thing was almost cloying, like a terrible embrace. It reached out for Chris and Chris watched, fascinated as the soundlessness spread. The reeds still rattled – Chris could see them tapping on themselves and one another – but the sound did not reach to the watch shelter. It was swallowed, absorbed, as if it had never happened.

The nearness of the thing was suffocating, suffocating.

"It's my imagination," Chris said aloud, hoping it were so. "I am alone here: there is nothing on the Marsh."

A soft rumble, like laughter or thunder shook the air. Chris gripped the gun tightly and wished that someone would call or come.

Along the edge of the Marsh there was a glow in the sky, at the limit of the stagnant water there was

the promise of dawn. Only one moon rode in the night and it paled with the advancing light. Scranton's Marsh shone in the early dawn, the wind once again quickening. Where the light touched there was noise, the familiar rustle and rattle of the reeds, the gentle sucking of the water. But in the green shadows the silence lingered, promising, waiting.

Even as Chris watched, the shadows were banished, the world grew suddenly brighter as the distant pale star that was Halverson's Sun poked itself like a finger over the edge of the Marsh. The night fled in long tattered shadows before it.

"Tuttle!" The communicator snapped on, very loud.

Wincing, Chris answered. "Here. What about Jecks? What about my relief?"

"We're going to have to extend the search beyond the station. There's no sign of Jecks in the station; there hasn't been since watch yesterday."

"Have you asked Jes Northrup?" Chris wished the words unsaid, wished that Jes did not have the power to touch other lives, to touch Chris's own life.

"Jes doesn't know anything. We're breaking out the prowlers now and setting them to hunt."

"Good idea," Chris said, fighting back new fright. They had lost two already. Of the twelve women and eleven men who staffed the station, the squad could not afford to lose another one.

"We're sending Jean DeEtoil out there now. You can come back in."

"All right." Chris felt the relief like a cold shower. It would be good to get out of the shelter and back to the station. Chris knew now that too long in the shelter and your mind played tricks on you, you

started seeing things, remembering things, people, fearing things . . .

The Marsh was brightening now, long slender lines of shadow marking the path of the sun. The water made even the shadows bright, casting the rays into pools, seeking out the hidden world below the Marsh in the shallow green depths which the light made deep. Motes hung over the water, shining like tiny halos, making the water glisten. The world was toy-bright, attractive, touchable. It called, and the call was pleasant, promising.

"Tuttle!"

Chris did not hear the cry from behind. The Marsh was too important. There was something out there, after all, that had to be checked; something that *was not* too far away, not dangerously far away; Chris knew it would be an easy thing to check, a problem simply solved. The water was shallow here, safely shallow.

"Don't." DeEtoil's arm shot out, pulling Chris back from the soft, oozing edge of the Marsh. "You know better than that, Tuttle."

Chris leaned dizzily against the rim of the shelter, suddenly breathing very hard. "Sorry. I don't know what happened. I thought I saw something. I was going to check it out." It was not true. Chris could not remember leaving the shelter.

"Check it out? There's nothing you want out there," DeEtoil said, with a gesture toward the Marsh, as if wishing it away from them. "It's horrible, this place. Isn't it?"

"Yes," Chris answered uncertainly. Yes, of course it was horrible. It had taken Dana and Evelyn. But for that moment it had been incredibly beautiful, like a

jewel lit from within. And Chris knew now that just below the surface rare beauty indeed lay hidden. Under the horror there was a loveliness that ached to be seen. "I better go in now."

DeEtoil didn't argue. "Watch out for the prowlers. They're all over the place. Tracy put them out ten minutes ago. They're on close pattern search. You could run into one."

"They haven't found Jecks." It wasn't a question.

"Be careful," DeEtoil said, taking over the shelter.

Jecks was found lying in the shallows, headgear off, gloves torn. Under the mud Jecks's face smiled tranquilly, shining a little with the swamp phosphorescence.

"How long?" Tracy asked Lou Wellington.

"It's hard to say. I'll have to do an examination first. Maybe a day." Wellington glanced uncomfortably at the others standing uneasily on the boggy hillocks. "You'll have to bring the body back. We can't leave it out here."

"Tracy, this happened to Dana and Evelyn," Robin Clay said, voicing what the others thought.

"We don't know that yet," Tracy snapped.

"It'll kill us all."

Tracy looked at the Squad staffers. "You don't know that. Now, who was sleeping with Jecks?"

There was a pause, then Jes Northrup surprised them all but Chris by saying, "I was. Off and on. It wasn't a regular thing."

"Do you want to make the arrangements?" Tracy asked gently. "You have the right, Jes."

Jes looked down at the body as if it were an alien and repulsive life form. "I don't know. It's not like

Lee anymore. Lee's gone. Being nice to that thing there won't change it."

Tracy looked over the others. "Who then? Merriwell? Oxford? Who?"

Chris said, "I will," and wondered why. Was it for Jes? Or for Lee Jecks because Jecks's watch had come after his own?

"Tuttle?" Tracy was surprised.

"I'll do it." There. The words were firmer. Chris looked at Wellington for instructions, bending to lift the body.

"Not over the shoulder. Get someone to help you. Leland," Wellington rapped out the order, "give Tuttle a hand there. You take the feet."

Sandy Leland swallowed uncomfortably. "Uh, Lou . . . Do I have to?"

Wellington glared. Leland was young, and unused to Squad work. "You're going to have to do it sometime. You might as well start now."

Between them Leland and Chris slung what was left of Lee Jecks, carrying it with careful detachment back to the station. Along the way, Chris felt the heaviness of the corpse; the weight was not figured in pounds alone.

"Why'd you volunteer? Did you like Lee?" Sandy Leland asked as they picked their way along the edge of the Marsh.

"I don't know. No, I didn't like Lee at all. Lee was a rat, an animal that gnaws. But it's a lousy way to die, out here all alone. Dana and Evelyn . . . they died out here . . . "

"Did you see the face? It doesn't look like . . . you know . . . like it was very bad. I don't think Lee suffered, do you?"

"I saw the face," Chris said, and would have said more but thought better of it. Leland was still very young, and might not understand.

Lou Wellington looked awkward, standing there in front of the Squad in the absurd brightness of the rec room. There was a tightness about the mouth that made Wellington look uncharacteristically grim. "May I have quiet, please." When there was no lull in the conversation, Wellington spoke louder. "Quiet! Please!"

This time the words took effect. The drone of conversation faltered and came to a ragged stop. Almost two dozen anxious eyes turned to the raised platform in the expectant hush.

"All right. I've done the workup on Jecks. First, let me assure you there was no sign of violence. It was not murder." Wellington paused to let that sink in.

"What about Evelyn and Dana? Did they die the same way?"

Wellington scowled and told the truth. "Yes. They died the same way."

Chris wanted to shout "Why?" but did not.

Wellington coughed, and went on. "I'm speculating, of course, but there's reason to think we might have a clue to the deaths. As most of us know, the Bureau has a new policy of firing Squad staffers six months before they are to retire. Now, a staffer leaving the Squad at thirty has a right to expect some money from the Bureau, but this new policy has eliminated that right. On the other hand, those of you who have actually read your contract know that if you die on Squad assignment, your heirs must receive double your retirement benefit for a period not to exceed

fifty years. Dana and Evelyn were both twenty-nine, and would have been fired soon. Lee Jecks was twenty-eight. All but four of the men and three of the women at this station are over twenty-five."

"Are you saying this was suicide?" Jes Northrup jeered.

"I say it's a possibility," Lou Wellington admitted. "Not many of us can afford to go home and start over at thirty."

"People don't die, don't kill themselves for a few extra bucks for the family. They die for revenge, maybe, but not for the money. It isn't worth it."

"Do you know something you aren't telling us, Jes? Did Lee Jecks tell you about this?" Tracy Lexington spoke rapidly, almost too rapidly.

"I'm not going to help you kiss the Bureau's ass," Jes said languidly. "When they really investigate the deaths here, then talk to me."

Taking a deep breath, Lou Wellington went on. "In Jecks's quarters we found notice of firing. There is reason to believe that Jecks might have suicided. Or perhaps just given up. Rather than be stranded out here in the pioneering belt, Lee Jecks decided to die." Wellington waited, expecting further challenges.

"Lou," Sandy Leland spoke up. "Jecks was smiling. I remember. It was the happiest smile I've ever seen."

Wellington nodded. "I know. It probably happened as a result of suffocation. Jecks was in the mud, not in water, and died of suffocation, not drowning. Sometimes suffocation does strange things. Jecks might have had a hallucination then. There's no way to be sure, but a hallucination would account for the smile. It's the same case with Dana and Evelyn."

Chris listened, not believing. Jecks had not died

feeling the joy of a beautiful vision in place of fear, Jecks had died because the thing in the Marsh had wanted it that way. Jecks had gone willingly, and had become part of the thing.

"Is there any objection to the report being submitted in this form? Accidental death? A misadventure?" Tracy asked for the sake of ritual. No one would object, not in a matter of this nature. "Very well, then. This report will be faxed to Dutton at planet control immediately. Relevant additions, alterations and observations may be appended to the fax." That was all there was to it. One more casualty out in the middle of nowhere, one more Squad staffer dead for no reason.

"Tracy." Chris had not meant to speak. "I think we should request an investigation. Dutton can send a crew over. Three deaths in ten days is too much. We could all die out here . . . "

"Investigation? Things aren't that bad, Tuttle. There's no call for it yet." Tracy could not meet Chris's eyes. "Investigations are very expensive, Chris."

"Maybe so. But the peculiar circumstances . . . The way Jecks died . . . And Evelyn and Dana . . . " It had seemed to be a good idea when Chris first thought of it, but saying the words made the whole proposal sound foolish. "Never mind," Chris mumbled. "It really doesn't merit that kind of attention, I guess. Investigations are only for important matters, like stealing from the R. R. B."

Tracy looked upset, but went on smoothly, "If anyone else here feels that a formal investigation is in order . . . ? No? Then this report is adopted by this R. R. B. Squad and will be filed in form."

"What made you say a fool thing like that, Tuttle?" Tracy wanted to know later that day.

"I don't know. Sometimes the Marsh gets spooky and then maybe one of us will go crazy. I just thought something like that might have happened to Jecks, that there might be something about the Marsh we don't know. Maybe the Marsh gas gives hallucinations sometimes, or maybe there's some kind of real life out there. It's not impossible." Bright blue eyes met Tracy's cold gray ones.

"I'm going to let Sidney take your watch with you for a while, Chris," Tracy said measuredly. "You're pretty spooked yourself. You could use the company." There was something in Tracy's manner that brooked no opposition.

"All right," Chris said slowly. "But you better put doubles on all the watches, at least for a while."

"You tell me why?" This was Tracy's last indulgence. Chris sensed it, and said, "If I can get spooked after twelve years out here with the Squad, then so can the younger ones, and a lot worse because they are newer to this. Better give it some thought. One death is just bad luck, Tracy, but three is something else. If we have any more the Bureau will start asking questions, even if you don't request it."

Tracy nodded once. "You're right. Double watches. You're with Sidney."

Chris did not particularly like the ebullient Sidney Peterson, but accepted the assignment without protest. Tracy would not listen if Chris balked now. "Sidney it is, then. Now, what about communication with the station? Do we leave the shelter channel open?"

Tracy said coolly, "I don't think that will be necessary. This isn't a first order emergency, Tuttle.

No R. R. B. property's been damaged. There's no reason for me to authorize such a procedure."

Tracy had been pushed too far, Chris realized. "You're the boss, Tracy. It's your decision." And for the first time, Chris wished it were not so.

Sidney Peterson was the sort who filled up places – a large, enthusiastic puppy, big-footed, good-willed and clumsy. In the cramped shelter Chris found it hard to take.

"Do you know what we're guarding? I mean, what's so precious out there? What's the Marsh got?" Sidney rumbled, moving restlessly in the confines of the shelter. "What does the Bureau want out here? I asked once, but they wouldn't say a word about it . . . "

"That's the Bureau's business," Chris said automatically, hoping that the last hour of watch would go quickly.

"You'd think they'd let us know what we're taking care of. You'd think they'd want us to know so we'd do a better job. Wouldn't you? I mean, if I were in charge here, I would want everyone to know. I'd make sure they took an interest, and had all the information they needed."

"We can't talk about what we don't know about, Sid." In the last month or so, Chris had seen the wisdom of the Bureau policy that kept the rare resources a secret. With termination coming up, and no pension, Chris knew that there would be offers from other people interested in the secrets of the R. R. B. that would get fabulous prices. And Chris, after working for the R. R. B. for fourteen years, had nothing to sell.

"But it's silly of them to think we would talk

about our jobs. I mean, who would we talk to? And besides, the Squad isn't like that." Sidney laid an anxious hand on Chris's shoulder. "Tuttle? You mad or something?"

Flinching at the touch, Chris stepped farther back into the shelter. "That's not our business, Peterson. You haven't been here long enough to understand. You will, some day."

"I've been here three years. I've been on station assignment almost five years now." This was a point of pride with Sidney, who was only twenty-three.

"You wait until you're ready to retire and they send you notice. No more pension, no more pay and no place to go. Wait until you're twenty-nine and see if that's the way you still feel about the Squad and the Bureau." Chris wished the words unsaid, seeing the alarm on Sidney's face, the eager smile hanging distortedly on that fresh young face.

"Then it's happened to you, too. Lee Jecks saw it, and the others, and that's why . . . " Sidney broke off awkwardly. "I don't blame you for being upset, Tuttle. It's a bad thing to do, this firing. But when we were in training, we were assured that all deserving staffers would be looked after. If they don't give you the pension, you can always apply for hazard pay. That'll give you some money. The thing is, the Bureau's making a mistake about us. They've probably got their records confused again. That happens, you know. You wait a year or so, you'll find out this was all a mistake and your pension will come through like that."

"Peterson, do you mind if we don't talk about it?" Chris had the watch gun now and was holding it between them.

"Oh. Oh, sorry, Tuttle. I forgot Jecks was a friend of yours. So was Dana . . . or was it Evelyn? Lovers get upset when things like this happen, don't they? I read Lou Wellington's evaluation . . . "

"Jecks and I were never lovers." No, Jecks had been Northrup's lover, and Chris could not forget that. "But we were stuck on this damn mudball for seven years. That's a long time, Peterson." Chris turned away, hoping to end their conversation.

"That's too bad, you know? It hurts when the Squad gets reduced, like with Dana and Evelyn. I mean, any way is bad, but somehow, suicide, that's a lot worse. It reflects on the Squad staffers. you know? You think the Bureau would do something about it . . . "

"Peterson," Chris said shortly, "shut up."

Chris did not go to the rec room that day. Four hours of Sidney had taken away any desire to see other squad staffers. Instead Chris stayed alone in the tape room, going over viewzines that were years old. Chris had reached the reports of the three-year-old Pan-African Boycott when Tracy knocked at the door.

"Come," Chris said automatically, not turning from the screen.

"Oh, it's you, Tuttle. Have you seen Pat Felton? Or Robin Clay?"

"At the shelter when Felton and Clay relieved us. Why?"

"Nothing. I'll ask Oxford."

"Terry hasn't been in all afternoon."

"Terry Oxford is in the mess room right now." There was a hesitancy about Tracy, who lingered a

moment longer than necessary. Chris looked up. "Is there trouble, Tracy?"

"Oh, I don't think so," Tracy forced a smile. "You know Felton and Clay. They probably wandered off for an hour or so. They're both interested in plants. Sometimes they get carried away. That's probably what happened. Jes Northrup saw them earlier outside the shelter." From the sound of it, Tracy needed to be reassured.

"Well, give it an hour, and if Felton and Clay haven't shown up by then, I'll take Terry Oxford and we'll go looking." Chris did not want to go with Oxford. For Chris felt a sickening certainty that they would find Felton and Clay as they had found Jecks, as they had found Evelyn and Dana.

"That's good of you, Tuttle. I'll let you know if we need you." With those words Tracy was gone, leaving Chris to stare unseeing at the tapes of the Pan-African Boycott.

The prowler went ahead of them, marking out the safe ground, leaving a trail of flares that would guide them back to the station, or, if they failed, bring others to them.

"Pat and Robin didn't usually go this far," Terry Oxford said uneasily, eyeing Chris as they followed the prowler. "There's plenty of strange plants near the station. Most of the time they kept close in."

"I know. But maybe they weren't looking for plants." Chris knew what Pat and Robin had sought, what had called, lured, tempted Pat and Robin out into the Marsh. The silence was heavy, like a lingering afterscent. Through it Chris could sense the thing that rose in the silence, beckoning.

"But what else would bring them out all this way?" Oxford slid on a hillock, cursing softly as Chris reached out a steadying hand.

"What got Pat and Robin out here isn't important." At least, it wasn't important to Chris, who knew they would not find Pat and Robin now, not alive. They were already too late. Whatever it was in the Marsh had done it again. And two more Squad staffers were lost to it.

"You don't think . . . Dana and Evelyn came out this way . . . " Terry Oxford looked sick behind the face protector.

Ahead the prowler stopped, signaling a dead end. Beyond the busy machine the ground was unsafe.

"Maybe they didn't go this way. Though Jes said . . . " Terry began tentatively.

"Then whose tracks are we following?" Chris broke free of Terry and scrambled along the hillocks to the prowler. Beyond, the ground sank into slick pools. In the fading light the whole Marsh was a monochrome of tarnished silver. Even the occasional humps of rock, tufted with reeds, shone the same dull color, dark in the shadows, bright to whiteness where the light struck. The reeds clacked nervously to one another.

"We should get back," Terry said urgently. "We'll need more prowlers. And more staffers."

Chris motioned for silence. There was something, part of the hillock several yards beyond. Its silvery color was like the rest, but it was not silver from the sun. Even at a distance, the surface uniform was unmistakable. "I don't think we need look any further, Oxford. Pat's out there, and Robin. Look. See that mound?"

"What mound?"

"There. Two beyond this."

Terry peered with shaded eyes into the glare. "That's just a rock. Like the other rocks."

"No." Chris took the communicator off its belt catch. "Station? This is Tuttle. We've got Felton and Clay in sight. Better tell Wellington to be ready. There's work to do."

"Dead?" The voice was Tracy's, tight with strain.

"Yes. Like Lee Jecks and Dana and Evelyn. Dead." There was nothing more Chris could say.

Lou Wellington's brows were worried over tired green eyes. "I don't understand it. Tracy, I don't. This is just like Jecks and Dana and Evelyn. Suffocation. No sign of struggle or violence. What made them do it?"

"Felton and Clay?"

"Felton and Clay and Jecks and Dana and Evelyn. All of them. Any of them."

"I don't know. Jecks was fired. So were Dana and Evelyn. But Felton had two years to go. Clay had four." Tracy stared gloomily at the service records of the staffers. "No hint there. They had good records, good health, families on earth or pioneering. Clay had two lovers once, but the arrangement was amiable. Felton won out. There's no reason for Pat or Robin to have died."

"There was no reason for Lee or Dana or Evelyn to die, either. But they're dead." With slightly shaking hands Wellington covered the bodies on the surgical table. "Damnit, there's something wrong at this station. If you don't know it, Tracy, I do. Order an investigation. Call Dutton. We have to have help here before we lose another one."

"Do you think we will have more?" Tracy looked

at Lou Wellington, some of the steel returning, saying, "If you think we will, tell me now. I'll have to break it to Dutton carefully. The Bureau isn't going to like this."

Chris had been sitting with Terry Oxford, listening. "I'll warn Dutton, if you like," Chris said softly. "I brought it up first. I'll stick my neck out now, if that's what has to be done to bring help." Inwardly, Chris wanted Tracy to do the job, but feared that it would seem too irrational to insist. And someone had to convince Dutton of the urgency; Chris was not sure that Tracy would, or even wanted to.

"If I need help, I'll ask for it," Tracy said sharply. "It's my risk, Tuttle. This is my station."

Chris stared down at the shapes under the sheets. "Then you should have taken it before now. There may be others, Lexington. And we might be too late. Dutton will have to believe we're in trouble, believe it enough to ignore all the Bureau's red tape. It might be hard to show a real emergency, one that Dutton would understand."

"Are you through, Tuttle? I said I would handle it. That should be enough." Tracy's eyes held no touch of sympathy now.

"All right. I'll leave it to you. But do it, will you Tracy, before there's another death? We've lost five, five staffers. That's too many."

"It's not your worry."

"You don't know that," Chris shot back, giving in to anger. "You don't stand watch out there in the shelter. You haven't felt the silence that comes through the Marsh, that calls out to you. It's like a living thing, that silence, and it pulls you to it . . . I remember what it felt like, the times it's happened

to me. And I know it's what happened to them."

"When it happened to you? Why the hell didn't you say something then?" The suspicion in Tracy's voice was blatant. "If you're making this up, Tuttle, or trying for an effect. . ."

"When have I made things up, Tracy? Especially about standing watch? You know I don't do that." Chris turned helplessly to Wellington. "You're the medic here, Lou. You've seen my psych profile. You know that I don't imagine things. It's there in my record. You've seen it." The frightened, anxious words spilled out and Chris did not stop them. Somehow, somehow Tracy had to be made to realize that they were all in danger. "You can check me again, right now, if you think I'm making this up. Use the stress machine or anything else you want."

Wellington turned to Tracy. "Tuttle's right. There's no history of hysterics or grandstanding in any staffer's medical records, and you know it. Chris is telling you the truth."

"And you say you've felt this thing?" Tracy asked, skeptical but withholding judgment.

"Once very strong. A couple of other times, a touch. It's not like what you might imagine, Tracy, it's like a cloud – a clear cloud with all the force in the world in it. It draws you to it. . . " Chris could not touch the bodies on the table. "Look what it's done already. And think about Jecks and Dana and Evelyn."

Tracy nodded decisively. "I'll talk to Dutton. Today."

With a grunt Meredith Dutton put down the last of the reports from the station. "Right. You've had

some peculiar happenings here. But I don't see what the investigation team can do about it. Five deaths, that's bad. Looks like your people are getting sloppy."

Tracy kept a rigid self-control. "My staffers are getting killed. You heard what Tuttle there had to say. You know that something is going wrong. It's your responsibility to investigate."

"We'll see what the Bureau has to say." Dutton looked longingly at the empty cup on the desk. "You wouldn't have any more tea, would you? We've been out of it at central and we won't be getting more for another two months. The requisition didn't get filed."

"If you hear me out, Leland will bring you your tea," Tracy bargained, casting an anxious look at Chris and Sandy.

Dutton sighed. "Very well. But I'm warning you, Lexington, you have not given me enough information to recommend anything to the Bureau, except perhaps your replacement. They're going to look into their firing records and come to the conclusion that you have a lot of malcontents here waiting for the axe."

"Pat Felton wasn't old enough for the axe and neither was Robin Clay. Jecks had been fired, but so has Tuttle over there, and Northrup. We're all in the same fix, Dutton. But we aren't all dead yet."

"But a story like this – 'Something in the Marsh' . . . it's ridiculous, Lexington. You can't blame me for questioning it. Now, if there had been love trouble, hell, we all have love trouble on these stations, it's expected. But this business about some force out there lurking and leading your staffers into the Marsh. Come off it, Lexington. That's crazy."

Tracy said through clenched teeth, "I admit it sounds far-fetched. I didn't buy it myself when Tuttle

first told me about the thing. But Northrup has felt it, too, and Northrup doesn't invent things, either."

"At least nothing that would interest you," Jes Northrup said acidly.

Dutton ignored Northrup, gesturing to Chris. "You. Tuttle. Come here."

Chris rose slowly. The room felt enormous for the ten steps it took to get to Dutton's desk. "Inspector Dutton?"

"Lexington says you brought this Marsh thing up. Suppose you tell me what it is, and what it's doing out there?"

Once again Chris described the sensation of silence and the menace it brought. "It's got to be stopped, Inspector. If it can reach us here, it can reach other stations. It's learning all the time."

"And we don't want it to get the edge on us," Jes sneered.

How Chris wanted to hate Jes for that cynicism, to deny the attraction that was as compelling as the thing in the Marsh. "Not now, Jes."

Ignoring this, Meredith Dutton remarked, "You're still alive, Tuttle. The others are dead. How do you account for that. Does the Marsh have a soft spot for you or what?"

Chris hesitated, looking covertly at Jes, then said, "I'm a tangiphobe. I hate being touched. I think that thing has to touch you to work. I think that's how it makes people go into the Marsh. It fascinates them, and then it touches them."

Dutton gazed steadily at Chris, an unreadable expression masking any thoughts; then suddenly Dutton laughed. "Well, that's one explanation, and it's original. A tangiphobe. Well, why not."

"Do you think I'm lying?" Chris asked with dangerous quiet.

"Let's say I don't think you know the whole truth." It was plainly a dismissal, for Dutton turned back to Tracy. "See here, Lexington. I am putting your station on partial alert, with a patch through to central open all the time. If you run into any trouble, I want you to buzz us immediately, and we'll authorize an inspecting team at once. Personally, I think this is nothing more than a contagious dose of the spooks, with some of your staffers panicking and going off into the Marsh. But for the time being, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. If you can't come up with any solid evidence in, say, ten days, I'll call off the alert and we'll get back to business as usual."

"By solid evidence, you mean another corpse." Tracy was openly angry now. "If enough of our staffers die, you'll take this station seriously; that's what you're saying."

Dutton started to say "Of course not," but was cut short by Jes Northrup. "I know people like you, Inspector. You get the whip hand, and that makes the rest of us peons. Oh, you'll show your ass and pull your forelock quick enough for the Bureau, but we get the boot here. Anything the Bureau says is great and dead staffers are an inconvenience, a blot on your record. I get it. I get it." With those bitter words Jes Northrup left the room.

"Is Northrup always like that?" Dutton asked genially. "Sounds like you've got a morale problem at this station. You said Jecks and Northrup were lovers."

"Jes is always like that, lovers or no lovers," Tracy said.

"Charming. Well, you appear to be able to handle that. I'm looking forward to your report. Say day after tomorrow for final filing." Dutton gave Chris a broad wink. "If you run into any more bogies out there, make a note. See if you can get it to stick around long enough to answer some questions." When Tracy and Chris were silent, Dutton supplied the polite laughter. "You staffers in these watch stations: you lose your perspective. Damn shame."

"Chris." Jes Northrup had waited in the hall after Tracy and Dutton had left.

The few seconds Chris hesitated made Jes smile. "That's right. You can't quite walk away from me, can you?"

Fighting an inner panic, Chris thought wildly, trying to think how Jes could know. Or perhaps Jes's malicious tongue had instinctively found the one weak spot in Chris's armor. "What is it?"

"You've been close to that thing a couple times now, and you're still alive. I was just wondering why. I wouldn't have picked you for the survival type." This was said with an unpleasant smile.

"Maybe I'm immune. Maybe I'm lucky."

"I'd say lucky," Jes decided. "You sure as hell aren't immune."

"Stop it."

"I wonder," said Jes speculatively, nastily, "I wonder if you'd say that if we were the same sex?"

Chris moved back as if slapped.

Laughing now, Jes said, "So that's not it either. We've got a fucking romantic staffing the Squad. Oh, pardon me. Not fucking. You don't do that, do you?" adding maliciously, "No fucking since Gabe."

"I don't have to listen. . ." Chris yearned to find the word that would hurt Jes. "You're as bad as that thing. You're as poisonous. . ."

Jes's laughter deepened, not sounding like laughter anymore.

Chris stared, and when the sound did not stop, fled.

"Wellington wants me in half an hour," Sid announced to Chris two hours into their watch. "Can you manage, or should I send someone out to you? I mean, if you're feeling jumpy, it would be easy to get someone. But we're short-handed."

"Who's available?" Chris asked, glad to turn away from the Marsh.

"Jes. Maybe Leslie in an hour or so. But Jes is willing."

"Never mind. I'll take the last alone. It's only ninety minutes. I can hack that." Ninety minutes, with room in the shelter, with space enough to breathe without Sidney's enthusiasm spilling over, taking up the shelter, taking up space and thought and air.

"I hate to go off and leave you out here. Tracy was pretty firm about doubles on watch, you know. It's only reasonable, to take this precaution now, when you think what's been going on. The Bureau doesn't require us to take unnecessary risks . . . You could insist on a replacement for me, that's in the regulations." The concern in Sid's face was almost as amusing as the constant chatter was annoying.

"If there's any trouble, I'll take the blame." Chris looked past Sidney into the Marsh, now bright with a low haze hanging over it, shining with the green light of the water. "Look for yourself, Peterson. There's

nothing out there. I'll be safe. You don't have to worry."

Sidney's pleasant, open face showed doubt, but nothing more was said. Changing the subject, Sidney said, "I hear Tracy's real mad at Inspector Dutton. You were there, weren't you? You think the inspector would have been more interested, wouldn't you? I mean, five staffers dead, that's a lot. The Bureau doesn't like its staffers to die."

Because then it has to pay double to the heirs, Chris thought, saying "I guess the Inspector figures this is the way to handle the problem: ignore it and it will go away. And no R. R. B. property has been damaged. Things would be different if the shelter were wrecked, wouldn't they?"

Nearby a few of the reeds clicked, a sound like clapping.

"You know, Pat and Robin's death bothered me a lot more than Lee's. I mean, it's not like I didn't know Jecks, or anything like that. It was that Pat and Robin were after three other deaths. Somehow, that made it worse, like we're being picked off one at a time."

"Or two at a time." Chris wanted to be alone, to be free from the constant run of words, from the encroaching friendliness.

"You and Terry Oxford found them, didn't you? That must have been really horrible. I don't think I could have done it. Even if you knew what to expect, well, you don't expect things like that, do you? But you thought they were dead, didn't you? You warned Tracy about it, I remember."

"Do you mind if we don't discuss it?" Chris asked gently.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't think. I mean, it would be hard on you, remembering, I guess. Really, I didn't mean it Chris." The urgency of the words brought Sidney closer to Chris. "And it's not like you have anybody. You don't, do you? That must make it worse. It's easier if you have a lover."

"Until you lose them," Chris said with deliberate cruelty. "Then it's much worse."

Stung, Sidney retreated. "You didn't have to say that."

When the wounded silence became unbearable, Chris said, "Look, why don't you leave a couple of minutes early and get over to Wellington on time. Who knows? You might have time enough to come back for the rest of the watch if you make it quick."

Sidney's irrepressible grin widened. "Hey, you know, that's a good idea. I think I'll do that, if you're sure it's okay with you, Chris. I mean, you're not doing this just to be nice, are you?"

"It's fine with me," Chris said, adding sarcastically, "I'm glad you thought of it."

"What? Oh." Sidney laughed. "Say, that's great. Really, that's a good joke. Me, think of it when you did. I mean, that's great."

Chris was ready to scream. "You can leave now, Sidney. It won't take you long." Chris thought with luck Wellington would keep Sidney all afternoon.

"You're right. I think I'll go around the back way. It's faster, you know? That way I don't have to go through the station and all."

"Good idea."

"Well, if you're sure you're safe, I mean, if you don't think you'll need me." Peterson put out one big hand which Chris managed to avoid without being

too obvious. "Well, if you're sure, then I'm on my way." Sidney clambered out of the shelter and waved before disappearing among the tall reeds and hillocks.

When Sidney was safely out of earshot, Chris moved to the edge of the shelter. "All right. You're out there: where?" The words came through clenched teeth, a muffled shout. "I know you're out there. You're waiting for another one of us to come to you. You're stalking us. Why?"

Far out in the Marsh the reeds rattled in derision. No wind touched them, yet they rattled while the water stood shiny as glass. Daylight had spread itself over the place like butter, making the Marsh shine like polished metal.

"Where are you? You're out there. I know you are." Chris was outside the shelter now deliberately vulnerable. "Here I am. Try to get me." The challenge rang over the Marsh, unanswered. Chris waited, the watch gun leaning against the shelter. At the farthest edge of the Marsh there was a ripple of what might have been silence, mocking. After a while Chris went back into the shelter, slumping against the turtle-shell wall, at once relieved and disappointed. It would have been easy now, for Chris was ready and would fight it. But it had not come.

"Peterson?" Wellington's voice crackled from the wall speaker.

"Not here, Lou," Chris said.

"That you, Tuttle?" Wellington sounded worried. "When did Peterson leave?"

"A while ago. Sidney was going around the back way; probably went straight to your lab." Tension was draining from Chris, being replaced with a watery

fatigue. Thank goodness there was less than an hour left of watch.

"I'm in my lab now. There's no sign of Peterson."

"Try the rec room. Could be Sidney came in that way, after all."

"I've just been there." Wellington said the next words as if each had a noxious taste. "Jes Northrup thought it was funny, losing Peterson."

Chris was ready to protest the idea, then remembered the lip of silence on the far side of the Marsh. "Shit. Oh, shit."

"I'll get Tracy to send out a search party," Wellington said, breaking the connection.

Scranton's Marsh shimmered as the wind went over it. Then it was still again, even the reeds were hushed. The still water was ice-bright, slick, its perfect stillness impenetrable.

Chris glared at it through slitted eyes. "It isn't fair," Chris said softly, forced by the reflected light to turn away. "I was ready. I could have fought you. It isn't fair."

Search parties and prowlers hunted for two days, but there was no trace of Sidney Peterson. Scranton's Marsh remained shiny and still.

"Dutton can object, the Bureau can raise hell, but I want an investigation team here. We've done all we can. Without their equipment we'll never find Peterson." Tracy flung a breath support unit across the rec room. "That's all there was, that unit. Why do they take them off?" Tracy asked the ceiling. "Out there, with that damn drifting gas, why do they take off their breathers? Why?"

Lou Wellington sank tiredly onto a chair. "They all have. Dana, Evelyn, Lee, Pat, Robin, and now Sidney.

It's the same. You can't suffocate properly with a breather on. You can't drown, either." Absently Wellington reached out, fingering the breather. "No damage. No gas. It wasn't pulled off, it was taken off. Willingly. They knew the dangers. They knew them and they took the breathers off. I've warned them about the gases here. I've warned them repeatedly."

"Dutton will see that as proof of suicide. They knew about the gas, they understood the risk, and they died," Tracy said glumly. "No other explanation makes sense."

Jes Northrup interrupted, "Unless one of us is a maniac, and is getting jollies out of killing us."

"Shut up, Jes," Tracy ordered, but without emotion.

"Take Chris Tuttle," Jes went on, paying Tracy no heed. "Chris could be doing it. It was Chris, wasn't it, who brought the whole thing up? Maybe this is all a clever cover for murder. We know Chris hasn't got a lover, and that's not normal. Maybe this is revenge for being alone? Hum?"

"You mentioned the thing, too, before I ever did. And maybe you're getting even with someone," Chris said petulantly, wishing that Jes had not spoken.

"Then maybe I'm a murderer. You'd like that, Chris. So would the rest of you. You'd love to put the blame on me, not on the Bureau where it belongs. They don't even trust us enough to tell us what we're guarding. What is the gas out there? You can't tell me we're guarding methane, because I won't believe it. It's the Bureau's fault the staffers are dead."

"Look, Jes, you know there's nothing we can do about the Bureau. We've got to look after our own."

Jes's face turned white with rage. "You're all snot-licking cowards. You want the Bureau to run rough-shod over you. You're all bashful virgins like Tuttle,

waiting around for your unicorn. You accept whatever drek is handed to you. And you think because we get to screw in our spare time that everything is okay." Jes turned on Chris. "You! You should know better. At least you aren't playing that game. But no, you're as bad as they are. Well, Gabe died seven years ago, so what are you waiting for?"

No one else had ever mentioned Chris's one lover. Gabe had been the first victim of Halverson's Stopover, when the breathers were optional. Gabe had been caught by a gas cloud without protection, and had died weeks later, skin and lungs rotted.

"You'd better leave," Tracy said quietly. "Now."

When Jes was gone Wellington started to apologize, but Chris interrupted. "About the murder part, that's what we're all thinking, at least part of the time. We can't help it. I know I can't help it. It's frustrating, dealing with something you can't see or touch or locate. So it's easier to look for the nearest thing . . . One of us."

Wellington nodded. "I know. I wish it weren't so. And about Gabe."

"Never mind about Gabe. Gabe's been dead a long time. And it wasn't this that did it."

"Maybe not, but whatever it is, it's as bad. Dutton's got to know about Peterson now," Tracy went on, heading for the door. "Maybe this time they'll listen to me at central. I wish to hell Gee Andrews hadn't retired last year. Andrews listened when you talked."

Chris turned to Wellington when Tracy had gone. "What do you think, Lou? Do you think Dutton will believe any of us?"

"Do you want an honest answer?" Wellington asked.

"Of course. What else is there?"

"I think Dutton figures us for psychos."

For a moment Chris was still. "Would it help to bring up Gabe?"

"Not with Dutton." Though Wellington was no older than Chris, there was age in the words that followed. "Dutton's figured it out. And that's that. No matter how many of us die." Wellington turned suddenly, grabbed the breather and threw it across the room.

Chris remembered the expression on the Investigator's face, the frank incredulity of Dutton's remarks. "We don't matter, Wellington. The deaths don't prove anything."

Wellington nodded. "Deaths never do."

"Dutton's people will be here tomorrow," Tracy announced to the Squad that night. "They're sending a full investigation team down. It'll be crowded, but we can handle that with a little planning."

"What about the shelter? Are we still going to use it?" Sandy Leland sounded frightened, as if the shelter shared in the responsibility for the death of each Squad staffer.

"Not if you don't want to. Standing watch will be voluntary." How Tracy hated saying that. It was a contradiction of the whole philosophy of the Squad, but it had to be done. There was no choice now. "Those of you who do not wish to stand watch, report to me and appropriate arrangements will be made."

"But they can die as easily in here as out there," Jes remarked to no one in particular.

"So we might as well all stand watch," Chris countered. "I'm going to." There was no need to tell the others that the challenge had failed, that the thing

in the Marsh had not answered Chris when called outright.

"Who're you doubling with?" Terry Oxford asked.

"I don't need a double. If that thing can separate us out there, there's no sense in doubles." Chris's raised hand forestalled objections. "It just increases the chance of more of us getting it."

Tracy gestured for quiet. "We'll assign doubles to those who want doubles. That should settle that."

"You're all bloody fools," Jes said dispassionately. "As if any of this made a difference."

"Much more out of you, Northrup, and you'll find yourself at central until you have to leave."

When the whispers died down, Tracy went on. "We'll be expected to give the Investigation Team our full cooperation. I know you'll want to do that, and you'll make yourselves available to the team if they request it."

Chris felt a quiet elation. This time the thing would not have to choose between the doubles. This time Chris would meet the thing alone and would understand it.

"You're as bad as the rest of them," Jes murmured to Chris before leaving the room.

The shelter was dark, no moon being in position to give it its wan light. In the night Scranton's Marsh was restless, shifting its weight like a child jogging from one leg to the other. The reeds made sporadic noises, like social small talk, sending out ripples as they moved in the wind.

Chris sat alone in the shelter, waiting. If the thing were coming, it would find Chris and no one else. Watch had been lengthened to six hours because most

of the Squad was waiting for the investigating team, and did not want to venture out until they knew they would be guarded. In six hours, Chris would learn a lot.

But the hours went over slowly and Chris was almost asleep when the silence began, hovering at the far side of the Marsh, out of reach, tantalizing. With a shake of the head, Chris was awake, watching anxiously for the approach of the thing.

Even though the movement, the spreading silence, had become familiar, its terror had not lessened. It was too vast, too present to be invisible, and yet only the reeds marked its progress.

The reeds near the shelter clacked in a gust of wind, and were quiet.

Chris forced sleep back, and made sure the breather was securely fastened in its helmet clips. "What are you? What do you want?"

The silence seemed to change shape, but kept its distance.

"What are you?" Chris demanded, louder, climbing out of the shelter. "Why are you here? Why are you hunting us?"

From the distances more vast than the wide Marsh, an answer touched Chris's mind, like a voice lost and unused. *I am not hunting you. It is you that hunt me.*

Around Chris the night trembled, as if a sigh had echoed there.

"You're crazy," Chris started to protest, then stopped. "Hunting you? Guarding you? Are you what the R. R. B. wants? How do we hunt you?"

That is meaningless to me. You have pursued me, your kind. I have tried to ally with one of you.

"That's how you killed them," Chris said, thinking

of the others following the thoughts farther and farther into the Marsh, sure that they had come on the one thing that made Halverson's Planet valuable. "You led them out and you killed them." No wonder they had smiled, no wonder they had gone easily, thinking they had at last done something of worth.

No. I am allied with one. The others, they are gone now.

"Gone?" Chris said. "They're dead. Do you know what that means?"

The ally says that there is no harm in this death.

"Shit," Chris said. Who would be mad enough, stupid enough to . . .

This one is wrong?

Slowly the silence moved forward, menace increasing as it came, spreading over Scranton's Marsh like a shadow that was not a shadow. Chris watched it come, unflinching. They would touch, they would touch very soon, but Chris was no longer frightened. What was the touch of a shadow, the caress of silence? It would not be the touch of flesh, which wounds. No, this would be different. This would be alien, entirely different.

"Who is your ally?" Chris asked, realizing that the ally would be part of the shadow, its human component, its soul.

The silence spread out, chilling the Marsh, waiting expectantly a few yards beyond the shelter.

"Come nearer. I can't see you."

You are the hunter. You come to me.

Recklessly Chris grinned. "All right. I will." Slowly, deliberately, Chris stepped out into the bog of Scranton's Marsh, going to the thing that waited, going without fear.

The ally is satisfied. The thought licked at Chris's mind, and again Chris wondered who the ally was? Who would even want to take the Squad down to death, each one, until . . . "Jes."

Underfoot the ooze sucked and pulled, and where Chris stepped phosphorous lit the water so that the Marsh glowed emerald green. It was beautiful down in the water where the light lived. The thing beckoned, offering the beautiful silence of the green light.

Jes beckoned. Jes.

Now the silence engulfed Chris, stilling conflicts and quieting doubts. This was the easy way, the touch that Chris had dreamed of. It brought peace, where there was no worry about reasons and answers.

Then someone had clapped a breather into place over Chris's face, and there was grit in Chris's mouth from the mud.

Jes Northrup dragged Chris back toward the shelter, shouting for help from the others who watched from the edge of the Marsh.

The silence was gone. A cold wind snapped over Scranton's Marsh, making the reeds chatter like teeth.

Wellington pulled Chris from Jes's arms, instruments ready.

As Lou Wellington set to work, saying, "You're damn lucky," Jes stared enigmatically down at Chris. "I was looking for you."

"Lucky."

"If Jes hadn't seen that cloud coming, we might have lost you. Funny about those gas clouds. They're weird to see."

"Cloud?" Chris asked, bewildered. There had been no cloud, only the silence and the knowledge. The ally . . .

"Tracy thinks it was some kind of marsh gas, maybe like the gas that killed Gabe." Lou studied the monitor. "You had a hallucination. Jes came out when the cloud appeared. It's a good thing we checked."

Chris looked up sharply, seeing the cynical smile Jes wore, and the hard brightness in Jes's eyes. "Swamp gas." The tone was light. "Wouldn't you know it?"

"Are you sure?" Chris said, coughing. "Did you see it, Jes?"

"If it were anything else, Tuttle, you wouldn't have been so lucky," Jes said, and the warning was plain.

Chris sat up, panting, thinking of being fired at twenty-nine, of the long, poor years ahead, and realized that Jes had found the way to revenge the Bureau's callousness. It was a terrible solution, but before Jes was through, Chris knew that the Bureau would lose a lot of money.

"Dutton's asking the Bureau to keep me here on the research team, for the investigation coming up", Jes added, smiling cruelly. "And you're fired, anyway, Tuttle."

Wellington looked uneasily at Jes, saying to Chris, "You know, Jes is right. Think of the power that force must have. You're very lucky."

So that was why Jes had relented: there was no need yet for another body. There had been deaths enough – the R. R. B. would investigate. *Only* Jes would be left here, the ally. With careful consideration, Chris studied the sardonic lines of Jes's face, saying, "I guess you're right. I guess I am lucky. It would be foolish to ask why, wouldn't it, Jes?"

Thomas F. Monteleone has been writing science fiction and fantasy/horror stories for a little over five years, with thirty short stories, four novels and one anthology to his credit. The writers he admires most are Ray Bradbury, Robert Silverberg, Roger Zelazny and . . . someone who just happens to have a story in this anthology. (Not wishing to be accused of forming a mutual admiration society, this person will remain nameless.) In the relatively brief span of five years, Tom was nominated for the Nebula Award two times and was a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award. Having to keep body and soul together, he has a full-time job outside of writing. But, through frugal preparation (some people suspect a carefully planned bank heist) he will be able to devote his full efforts to writing early next year. Tom's a real sweet guy who wears a smile on his face most of the time. His wife, Natalie, probably has a lot to do with this euphoric state. She's dynamite, and a most accomplished flamenco dancer.

"The Curandeiro" is based on fact. Some time ago articles appeared in the newspapers about a South American peasant who was able to perform miraculous feats of healing. Tom read one of these articles, which ascribed some kind of spiritual explanation for these abilities. Being a science fiction writer, Tom couldn't buy spiritual explanations and, after researching this type of phenomenon, he logically (*diabalogically* might be the right word) rationalized them. Here is Tom's explanation of those "miraculous" events.

THE CURANDEIRO

by Thomas F. Monteleone

Musante had seen it done before, but it still made him uneasy to watch.

There were no operating table, no anesthetics, no surgical instruments except for a small tin pan which held a pair of scissors, tweezers, two kitchen knives, and a folding penknife. A young, smallish woman lay on the floor, a dirty newspaper lay crumpled beneath her. She wore a robe and gown that was hiked up above her waist, but she did not seem to mind the indignity.

When a person is dying of cancer, priorities have a way of rearranging themselves.

Aside from Musante, there were three other spectators: the woman's brother, a tall hatchet-faced man who nervously fingered his mustache; Dario's assistant, Francesco, who was said to be an ex-convict from the Brazilian penal system; and Bergmann, the corpulent journalist from *Die Zeit*.

And of course there was Dario Altimiras, the *Curandeiro*.

Musante watched closely as Dario approached the woman and stood above her to softly mutter a prayer. The moment passed and the *Curandeiro* picked up the penknife while studying the woman's right side. Just above her waistline, the skin was swollen like a piece of diseased fruit, and it was at this place that Dario touched the skin with the partially rusted knife. He ran the blade across the distended skin, leaving a thin red line to trace his movement. Then grabbing a larger kitchen knife from the unsterilized dish, he plunged deeper with the serrated edge. Aside from the initial trickle, there was no blood, and Musante looked quickly to the patient's face where there was no indication of pain. The woman was completely conscious, yet she was totally unfeeling of the brutal attack on her body. To Musante, it seemed that she now radiated an expression of peacefulness. Such was the effect of Dario upon his patients.

By this time, the *Curandeiro* had opened the incision to approximately eight inches in length and the two sides had split apart another three inches. Dario, working so deftly that his hands resembled those of a magician flicking cards in and out of view, then plunged his right hand into the incision so

deeply that it was consumed all the way up to his wrist. Several seconds passed as he probed about in the viscera, touching and gauging the size of the tumor that had attacked the woman's liver. Withdrawing his hand, which glistened with a scarlet patina, he grabbed the scissors and again thrust into the incision. Still there was no hemorrhaging. With several quick movements of his wrist, Dario snipped at the offending tissue while the small, stucco-walled room echoed the muffled clicks of his scissors.

Musante looked away from the operation to the faces of the others. The brother was stoically watching; Bergmann, whose face was like bleached flour, was unsuccessfully trying to hide his discomfort.

Just at that moment, Dario said something in what sounded like French – certainly not Portuguese – as he removed the scissors from the body cavity. Roughly, he shoved his bare hand back into the incision and probed about. Then with a flourish, he pulled out his hand, which now held a gray convoluted mass the size of a grapefruit. Francesco was at the *Curandeiro*'s side holding a soup plate, into which Dario slapped the pulplike tumor. Turning back to the woman, he immediately began pulling the edges of the incision back together. He ran his fingers over the wound, and it seemed to seal itself without benefit of stitches. Then Dario pulled a swab of cotton from his breast pocket, wiping away all traces of blood, before placing a small crucifix over the incision. He mouthed the words to a silent prayer and then commanded the woman to sit up. She did so, and, although she seemed a trifle weak, exhibited no serious effects from the experience. The woman's brother helped her to her

feet and held her in his arms as Dario spoke words of encouragement in Portuguese.

As she was led from the room by the brother, who repeatedly blessed and thanked Dario for his work, Francesco was already ushering in the next patient – a blind man whose cataracts were so severe that his eyes resembled snowballs.

Musante had already seen Dario's eye operations on numerous occasions, so he decided to leave the room. It was, in fact, one of the *Curandeiro*'s "eye checkups" that initially introduced Musante to Dario's bizarre, but amazingly effective, medicine. Musante still recalled the disbelief as he watched Dario jam a penknife into the unflinching eye socket of a patient, prying up the eyeball, almost pulling it out of the man's head while examining it with the detachment of one who would muse over the indentations of a golf ball. All of this without the slightest indication of pain from the patient.

Outside the building, which at one time had been the maintenance garage for the village's taxi station, there was a line of more than one hundred fifty people. Musante gave them little notice since they resembled all the other lines of infirm, disfigured, and diseased that gathered there three days a week. Instead, he walked across the street to an alfresco cafe where an awning-shaded table awaited him.

Once he had seated himself, he looked up to see Bergmann approaching the cafe, mopping his sweaty brow with a dingy handkerchief.

"May I join you?" asked the journalist in heavily accented English.

"Please do," said Musante, gesturing towards a chair.

"Thank you," said Bergmann, seating himself.

"Doctor Musante, I would like to have a few words with you . . . about Altimiras."

"Of course. An incredible display, isn't it?"

Bergmann grimaced as he prepared to answer, but he was interrupted by the appearance of the waiter, who accepted Musante's order and then returned to the cafe. When the waiter had disappeared from view, Bergmann spoke. "All right, let me tell you something. Once I was in the Philippines to see something like this. The villages have some witch-doctor types there who claim to be able to do these kinds of things. They are nothing more than sleight-of-hand magicians using chicken blood and gizzards to put on a good show."

Musante laughed. "You're not saying that what you saw in there was chicken's gizzards, are you?" Musante did not care for the fat German. Even in the heat of midday, the man wore a stiff-collared shirt and necktie which only served to emphasize the fleshy overflow of his abundant neck and jowls. The man's eyes were small, like musketballs, and his mouth was round and thick-lipped. He looked very much like a pig.

"I don't know," said Bergmann, obviously flustered by Musante's laughter. "I've seen out-and-out magic shows that were no less astounding."

"You see those people out there?" Musante pointed to the queue of patients, peasants and Brazilian bourgeois alike. "Do you think Dario's putting on a performance for them, too?"

"I don't know, Doctor Musante. But I will get quickly to the point. I think that you *do* know, am I correct?"

"Let's say I have my own ideas, yes. But I'm not

prepared to share them with you or anyone else at the moment."

Bergmann's face reddened by several shades, but he did not speak as the waiter had returned with two mugs of frothy *chopp*, the indiginous beer of the countryside.

"Please, don't get angry with me," said Musante after the waiter had again become a fixture within the cafe. "Why should I give you in an hour what's taken me six months to discover for myself? You've already told me that you were sent here to cover a story that you don't give a damn about. Well, that's your problem, not mine. I care about Dario and what he is doing for his people."

Bergmann smiled and the foam of his *chopp* dripped down his porcine chin. "Yes, Musante, you *are* very friendly with the *Curandeiro*, aren't you? I've heard stories about you. Dario takes no money for his services, but you . . . what about you? Is there something in it for you?"

"You *would* think in terms of money," said Musante. "No, there's no money here. Wisdom, maybe. Truth, perhaps. But I am beginning to realize that you aren't very interested in either of those."

Bergmann finished off his mug and pushed himself away from the table. "Very noble, Doctor," he said. "I am sorry that we could not have had a more profitable conversation." He then stood up, slapped down enough to cover the drinks, and walked away from the table. Musante smiled as he mentally filed the journalist's reaction to the miraculous cures into one of the two categories that described Dario's witnesses: either they completely rejected his efforts as chicanery, or they embraced his cures as proof of some occult truth.

Neither camp, Musante suspected, was correct.

Finishing his beer, Musante walked up the main avenue of the subdued village of Nanja de Belo, away from Dario's "clinic" and towards the town's only hotel. The lobby was empty except for Tarcescio, the desk clerk, who smiled at Musante with the intimacy that comes from knowing a lodger for more than six weeks. When Musante reached the door to his room on the top floor he deactivated the security devices that would dissuade anyone from entering the quarters uninvitedly. It was a precaution, he learned, that was not really necessary among the gentle souls of Nanja de Belo; but old habits were hard to break.

Locking the door behind him, Musante pulled out one of his suitcases, opened it and rigged the complex array of communication gear that was stowed there. He dispatched a hailing signal to H'lagian on board the ship. A quick calculation told him that it would be approaching perihelion within the next planetary revolution; this might be the last communication before the ship eased behind the sun. Despite such transmissions problems, Musante had felt that it was wise to place the ship in such a masking orbit alongside an asteroid called Icarus. There were many nations on Earth that scanned the heavens with instruments, and Musante did not want to risk detection.

The small screen on the console blinked on, illuminating the smooth features of the dark-haired H'lagian. "I've been expecting you," he said.

"I know. Sorry, but I ran into a journalist – an inquisitive sort – a few days back. He's been bothering me. Coming around to the room and such. I think I put him off for good today though."

"What about B'jorg?"

"We're getting there. All the pieces seem to fit. The last profile you sent just about clinches it. I'll find him."

"You're sure he's there."

"Positive."

"You've got to get some kind of fix on him, then."

"Relax, I'm going to Dario's home tonight. It's a good sign . . . he trusts me."

"He suspects nothing?" H'lagian seemed to dislike the idea.

"Dario? No, of course not. How could he? He's just a simple peasant. It's B'jorg that I've got to worry about," said Musante as he reached for a cigarette.

"But if he was aware of your presence around Dario, he'd have taken off already. You're safe."

"Perhaps. But if he catches on too fast, we've lost him."

H'lagian frowned. "Do you think he's dangerous?"

"He might try something. You remember when he escaped from the Konzerhull . . . killed three guards, the hypocrite."

H'lagian nodded. "All right, listen. I've got some new scenarios from the contingency program. You want them?"

"Of course," said Musante, realizing that the scenarios had been instrumental in tracking down his fugitive across hundreds of light-years. "I'm switching over to the databank circuits. See you when you come out on the other side."

H'lagian nodded as Musante punched a digital key and the screen darkened. The console clicked appreciatively as it gobbled up the bits of information that Musante would later study as an aid to his pursuit. When the transmission had ended, the console auto-

matically shut itself down. In the meantime, Musante had showered, changed clothes, and was prepared to hail a taxi for the rolling countryside of Nanja de Belo.

As Musante tumbled about in the backseat watching the driver negotiate twisting curves of the rural Brazilian roads, he tried to anticipate his interrogation of the *Curandeiro.* Although he had spent many weeks with Dario, witnessing countless examinations, operations, and even prescription sessions, Musante had actually spent little time in conversation with the peasant-healer. When Dario wasn't working at his regular job three days a week at the textile mill, he was putting in long hours the remaining three days at his "clinic." Dario never worked on Sundays, spending that morning in church, and the rest of the day with his family.

And so Musante's conversations were limited to the few minutes each morning before Dario and Francesco opened the clinic, and the scant moments that marked the intervals between patients. What Musante had learned was considerable, especially with regard to the limiting circumstances. Dario had been performing his miraculous cures for almost four years; he had been investigated by much of the South American press, the medical establishment, and some of the Continent's most esteemed university people. It was interesting to note that all three groups – never known to find many things upon which they could agree – generally felt that Dario's feats were authentic. Unfortunately but understandably, the only news of Dario's accomplishments that reached the American and European press was couched in the language of the occultist or the sensationalist. This resulted in his story being told in bold print headlines that

competed with the most recent salacious activities of movie stars.

Hence, Dario was immensely honored and pleased when Musante introduced himself as a surgeon from Johns Hopkins who was interested in studying the peasant's methods for a report to the American medical establishment. That Musante had never set foot within the illustrious medical institution (he doubted if he could commit such an act!) did not deter him from putting on a convincing act. H'lagian's research and the computer scenarios were extremely helpful in carrying out the ruse.

What other information Musante had been able to gather had come from the local officials and townspeople of Nanja de Belo. This was very helpful, if not sometimes contradictive. Dario was immensely popular, having assumed the mantle of a mythic hero-in-the-flesh to masses of Brazilians, but he was not without some enemies. Although he claimed to be a fervent Catholic, the Church officials were very much agitated by his works and what he intimated was the cause of them. It seems as if the peasant had let it be known that he was at times plagued by nightmares or hypnogogic trances in which he was in communication with the "soul" of a French physician by the name of Rene Moreau, who had been dead since the early years of the present century. Such words smacked of spiritism – something that the Catholic clergy were very much opposed to. But the ideas were very appealing to a sect of believers called *Kardecists,* who were largely a group of Brazilian intellectuals who believed that medicine and the concept of curing were integrally related to the untapped powers of the human mind. Although Musante had at first found

the talk of cures and medicine something of an obscenity, he continued to research the phenomenon of Dario.

Aside from theological discontent, Dario had also stirred up the local medical establishment because of his odd practice of accepting no money for his services. This understandably cut the professional competition by an unbeatable margin. Injunctions were pushed through the Brazilian courts in an attempt to stop the peasant from practicing medicine without a license, and this resulted in a large public outcry against the bureaucrats and the establishment physicians. Eventually, Dario was put on trial for his "crimes," but he was acquitted of all charges. It seems as if the prosecution was unable to find any witnesses that could testify to malpractice, nor was it possible to select a jury of peers within the entire state of Minas Gerais that would convict him. Although victorious in the courts, Dario still made an effort to reach some sort of agreement with the Brazilian doctors: he would only accept patients at his clinic who could not obtain treatment from licensed physicians. In other words, Dario only accepted the terminally ill, or only those who had been deemed incurable by the medical establishment.

And still he cured them.

Or so believed his followers. Not that Musante did not believe that the patients were healed; it was just that he felt that Dario was as much of an instrument in the process as one of his rusty knives.

Musante's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the voice of the cab driver demanding his fee. Climbing from the vehicle, Musante paid the driver and stepped onto the driveway which led to a falling-

down, clapboard house. Dario's Jeep rested on the loose gravel, rose bushes crowded about the windows which glowed with warm yellow light. Musante stepped up to the door and knocked.

Within seconds, he was greeted by Dario's broad smiling face. The man was of average height, perhaps two meters, but powerfully built – especially across the chest and shoulders. His complexion was a golden brown like that of a sun-baked almond; his dominant features were large velvet-brown eyes and a thick, unruly mustache that completely covered his upper lip. The peasant touched Musante's arm and gestured him inside.

"Come in, *Señor Doctor.* Please come in," he said as he closed the door. "And let me introduce you to my family."

Musante turned towards a sparsely furnished parlor to see a well-proportioned female of perhaps thirty-five years and two tall and handsome adolescent boys. They were standing in an orderly line as if awaiting a military inspection, and Musante was somewhat taken back by the utter formality of the introduction. The woman, whom Dario introduced as his wife, Magdelena, was short and dark; her features were angular and strikingly attractive: large eyes, full lips and bright teeth, a prominent Indian nose, and high cheekbones. Both of Dario's sons had inherited their father's comely characteristics: dark, furious eyes, broad shoulders, and engaging smiles. All three spoke to Musante in flawless, albeit slowly delivered, English. Hands were offered and shook all around, then Dario offered Musante a chair and a drink.

Although Musante thoroughly enjoyed the planet's intoxicants, he hesitated in accepting, since he did

not wish to be under false influence during his talk with the peasant-healer.

But Dario would not hear of it, saying, "You cannot refuse me, *Señor Doctor.* I will not be denied the honor!"

"Very well," said Musante, smiling. "Some scotch, perhaps?"

Dario slapped him roughly on the arm, laughing. "You *are* an American, aren't you? Magdelena! Bring the doctor some scotch. And wine for me."

His wife quickly appeared with a carved wooden tray bearing two earthen cups and two bottles – a dusty fifth of cheap American scotch and a green glass of unlabeled *veenasita,* a local wine made from wild strawberries. Dario filled both cups and proposed a fitting toast: "To our health and long life!"

Musante touched glasses and drank slowly while Dario tossed down the contents of his cup in one lusty quaff. After which he drew in a great breath, exhaled, and muttered a semi-obscene expression to show his appreciation of the wine's strength.

"We will have some time, a few minutes perhaps, before dinner. Time to talk, if you wish, *Señor.*" The peasant sat back in his chair, poured himself another full glass of *veenasita,* then smiled expectantly.

"All right," said Musante. "I've heard from others that you've had . . . dreams. Dreams about a French doctor. Is this so?"

"*Madre Dias!* Oh yes, it is true. In the beginning, before I open the clinic, Doctor Moreau would come to me in my sleep."

"Could you see him? Hear him?"

Dario shrugged. "Sometimes I would hear him, in my head, like thought perhaps. But I never really saw

him. He is a man who stands in shadow. You could not see his face."

"I see. But you did hear him. He spoke to you, then, in Portuguese?"

"Oh no, *señor.* In a foreign tongue."

"French?"

Dario finished his second glass of wine, belching lightly but quite unabashedly. "Who is to say? I do not know. Perhaps."

"Do you understand the doctor when he speaks to you in the foreign tongue?"

"Ah, this is difficult to explain in your language, *señor,*" said Dario, leaning forward and staring directly into Musante's eyes. He drew his hands together and Musante studied them. They were like fat links of sausage – hardly the hands of a surgeon. "No, I do not understand the Doctor Moreau's words . . . they are so much gaggling to me. But afterwards, when I have woken from his visits, I *know* what he has said to me. Can you understand that?"

Musante nodded. "I think so. What about these things that you know he's told you? What does he tell you?"

"Many things. Many things I do not understand. The names of chemicals, types of surgery, the location and description of abnormalities . . . sicknesses in the body. Things like that."

"So you feel that only through Doctor Moreau are you able to treat your patients?"

"Most definitely," said Dario, nodding his head to emphasize the point. "As you may have heard, I have little memory of what I do during the exams and operations. It's like working with a veil over my mind's eye. At first this was very frightening."

"Yes, I can understand that," said Musante, nodding slowly. "Now some other things . . . Do you have any idea why Doctor Moreau has chosen you to perform these miracles? Rather than some skilled surgeon or physician at Brasilia Generale?"

Dario's brow became furrowed and his eyes looked suddenly wan. "I am sorry, *Señor Doctor,* but I cannot say." The peasant paused to point upwards to a crucifix hanging on the wall. "He works in strange ways. It is impossible to question the mind of God."

"Of course," said Musante, trying to feign reverence for Dario's words. But inwardly, the alien picked up the signal that Dario was not prepared to answer such questions. The peasant did not fear incriminating himself as much as perhaps subconsciously desiring to leave such motivations in a mysterious light. Dario's attitude, thought Musante, was common among primitive cultures which preferred mythic or mystical explanations to empirical ones. If you tear away the shrouds of mystery from someone who has little else of interest in his life, the will to live may falter and die.

"What about the visitations again," said Musante after a slight pause. "Are you still experiencing them?"

"Sometimes. Only not very often. Once, maybe twice, in several months."

"Was it Doctor Moreau who suggested that you do not charge a fee for your services?" This was an important question since an affirmative answer would confirm yet another aspect of B'jorg's personality.

"Oh yes," said Dario, nodding quickly. "He made that clear from the earliest visits."

"Did he say why this must be so?"

"I am sorry, but he did not." Dario paused to belch before pouring and drinking another cup of wine.

Musante, still sipping his first glass of scotch, nodded, saying, "I see. I see. Well, then, let me ask you something else. And pay attention, because this is very important to me. When I return to the United States and report my findings to my colleagues, they will want *proof* of what I will tell them about you. You understand that, don't you?"

"Oh yes, Señor Musante, Doctor Musante." Dario attempted to look deeply serious.

"All right then, listen to me. I would like to have your permission to make some films of your operations at the clinic."

Dario's expression changed from one of concern to that of mild surprise. Slowly, he placed his cup on the wooden tray and then stared intently into Musante's eyes. "You know," he said finally, "that I have never allowed pictures . . . ?"

Musante nodded. "Yet this practice of yours has been the biggest source of ammunition for your detractors – few though they may be. Remember, my American friends – the ones with power and money that could be used to build you a new clinic – will not have the opportunity to observe as I have. I must have proof."

Sitting back in his chair, Musante sipped at his drink as he awaited the peasant's reply. Although it was not absolutely necessary that the alien use his detecting equipment in close range, it would make the task of locating B'jorg immensely easier if Dario agreed to allow the proximity of the bogus camera.

The peasant looked away from Musante and stared absently at the wall crucifix for a few seconds. Wiping his mouth on his shirtsleeve nervously, he prepared to speak: "I cannot tell you why I have never allowed

pictures, *señor.* Superstition, perhaps? I do not really know. It is just something that I have always felt would be like . . . like a sacrilege. I do not know. It is something that I will have to think about. On Friday, when you come to the clinic, perhaps I can tell you then?"

"Of course," said Musante. "I can understand how you feel. But, please, think hard upon this thing. It is very important to me and my whole . . . mission here." Musante smiled, both to disarm the peasant and to amuse himself, since he knew that for a moment, at least, he had spoken the truth.

Musante continued to question Dario about other aspects of his curing techniques and the semitrance that he entered into when examining and treating patients. The peasant was somewhat inarticulate about the experiences, and Musante was not unpleased when the conversation was interrupted by a call to the table.

The remainder of the evening was spent in the enjoyment of Magdelena's cooking, fine wine, and the family's engaging small talk. Musante was besieged by questions about the United States – especially by the two sons – and he spoke at great length on the subject, thanks to previous study of H'lagian's scenarios.

When the evening drew to a close, Dario accompanied Musante to the door where a taxi awaited him. Just before the alien left, Dario touched his arm and spoke softly to him: "*Señor,* many have called me a *Curandeiro.* You know that's our word for a . . . quack, a fake." Dario paused to swallow and wet his lips. "I am no fake, no quack, *señor.* I only do the bidding of Someone greater than myself."

Musante smiled at the irony of his words, yet he also felt a strange compassion for the peasant-healer. Dario had obviously felt that it was important that

Musante understand him and his odd ways.

And oddly enough, the alien was beginning to understand.

When he reached the hotel, night had thrown its dark velvet about the village. The street was almost deserted as Musante stood rummaging through the rear deck of his rented Land Rover. Finding the necessary crates, he struggled to carry them through the lobby and up to his room.

The Tau-wave transponder was ingeniously disguised within the shell of a Beaulieu R-16B; its film magazine contained a crystal databank that could record the coordinates of any telepathic wave-pattern and obtain an accurate fix on the source. Musante lifted the camera/transponder from the crate and hefted it in his hands, smiling. Then, placing it carefully on the bed, he removed the small Nikon FTN from the smaller crate and primed its energy chamber; by pressing its shutter, he could unleash a disruptor beam that was accurate up to 500 meters.

Satisfied that his equipment was in order, Musante prepared for sleep. But his mind was crowded with anticipation and images of his long mission soon ending. He could not sleep and, instead, sat up with a paperback copy of a book called *Crime and Punishment,* which he had begun reading shortly before arriving in Brazil. Originally he had been drawn to the book by its apt and tantalizing title, but once he had begun reading it he had become disillusioned, since it was not a treatise upon what he had expected. But the book seemed to have some power over him, because he continued to read it. The convoluted

thoughts of the mad Russian protagonist kept echoing through Musante's mind, influencing him in subtle ways. These humans of Earth seemed to perceive the quality of life quite differently than those of his homeworld. It was things like the Russian novel that brought these facts to light to Musante. Absently, he reached for a cigarette, simultaneously feeling a strange desire for a cup of steaming coffee. He had become quite attached to the caffeine/nicotine syndrome, he noted casually to himself.

He read for several hours until his eyes grew finally heavy and sleep came to him. As he drifted into dreamy incoherence, Musante wondered about B'jorg: was it possible that his mind was similar to that of the tormented Raskolnikov?

Breakfast in the hotel was pleasant until Musante saw the German journalist approaching his table. Bergmann squeezed in between the table and a vacant chair, using a napkin to mop the sweat from his puffy face.

"I hope you don't mind the intrusion, Doctor Musante, but I must have a few words with you," said Bergmann in his abrupt but well-pronounced English.

Musante frowned but said nothing, instead sipping his coffee through an indifferent mask.

"I have spent the last day trying to compose my article," said Bergmann as he drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "And I have been thinking that perhaps I have been unfair in my evaluation of Dario Altimiras."

"How so?"

"He is no quack. Something else is responsible," said the German with conviction.

"Why the sudden change of heart?"

"I don't know. As I tried to write . . . my skepticism did not have the ring of quality that I am accustomed to. I felt as if I wasn't being true to myself . . . as a journalist."

"Why, Bergmann, I wouldn't have expected such sensibilities from a man like yourself." Musante smiled as Bergmann momentarily bridled at the remark, then continued.

"I do not believe in this spiritism thing, Doctor Musante. You yourself, I am sure, cannot abide by it. After this life – I fear there is nothing. Dario's story about the French doctor must be a cover for something else."

"Do you have any interesting alternatives?"

"I have one, but I don't think you would like it very much." Bergmann smiled beneath the folds of flesh that was his face.

"Please, the suspense is getting to be too much," said Musante, trying to sound disinterested, although quite the opposite was true.

"Suppose some group of American physicians or scientists had come upon a startling new technique for diagnosing and treating disease? Suppose they wanted to test this technique without the prying eyes of the American press on their necks? The technique itself is unimportant. It could be anything – some combination of sophisticated equipment and some untapped power of the human brain perhaps? I don't know and could care less."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you," said Musante.

"Oh I am sure that you do. I have heard the

stories of your country's attempts to draw humanitarian effects from atrocity. An entire county of Negro farm-workers was once unwittingly engaged in a long-term study of syphilis. Your country's prisons are filled with convicts who are subjected to all measure of bizarre experimentation against their will. Your medical institutions are powerful, Musante. I do not doubt that they would use the Brazilian peasants as guinea pigs."

Musante paused for a moment, both admiring the fertility of Bergmann's imagination and laughing silently at his extreme paranoia. "Your thesis is interesting, but also absurd," he said at last.

"Of course, you would deny it. But that is no matter. I simply wanted you to know that I have begun to pay close attention to you, *Herr Doctor.* I believe that there is much I could learn from you, yes?"

"Believe what you want. I can't stop you. But I can tell you that I doubt if you will learn any so-called truths from me such as the ones you are talking about." Musante lit a cigarette and blew the smoke in Bergmann's direction.

"You are a strange man, Doctor Musante," said Bergmann as he rose to leave. "And you are also a bit foolish. It was your own behavior – your own arrogance and self-confidence – that has made me interested in this story. Altimiras has become secondary. I want to know what *you* are doing here. Good day, Doctor."

Bergmann affected a curt, satirical bow, then turned and left Musante alone with his thoughts. Somehow he had caused the journalist to become too interested, and that was bad. If H'lagian had heard the conversation, Musante knew what his partner would do:

eliminate the man. That was H'lagian's way, but Musante couldn't seem to agree with such coarse methods.

Not now, anyway.

That evening, after a light dinner, Musante rechecked his equipment and smiled once convinced that all was ready. Later he contacted the ship as it emerged from the farside of the sun, and told H'lagian about his meeting with Dario and, as an afterthought, his encounter with Bergmann.

"You should eliminate him," said H'lagian.

"I know," lied Musante. "Perhaps . . . " he continued the deception, although inwardly he knew that it would be difficult to take the German's life. As much as he found the man a boor, he also felt responsible for stimulating the man's curiosity. He wondered if he would be justified in killing a man for that.

"Something wrong?" said H'lagian, his voice interrupting Musante's thoughts.

"What? No. I was just thinking about something, that's all."

"You sure? You look strange, Musante. Perhaps the work is getting to you. Are you sure you don't want me to join you? I could put the ship on – "

"No," Musante cut him off. "No, it's all right. I'll contact you tomorrow, after I've gotten a fix on our man."

H'lagian nodded as the screen darked out.

Musante collapsed the equipment and prepared for sleep. It did not come quickly, though. His mind wrestled with a parade of conflicting images.

* * *

The next morning, in the bright clear light of the Brazilian sun, Musante felt better. His thoughts were clear; his determination renewed. After coffee and a cigarette in the hotel, he went directly to the clinic, carrying his equipment. A line of people had already queued up by the door, anticipating the *Curandeiro*'s arrival; within several minutes Musante spotted him churning up the main street in his open-cabbed Jeep. Dario wore his usual attire: an open-necked tan work-shirt and baggy brown pants; his deeply tanned face was gleaming with perspiration although the heat of the morning was still quite temperate.

"Ah, Doctor Musante," said the peasant as he jumped from the cab and fumbled with his keys to open the clinic door. "Good morning to you."

Musante nodded and returned the greeting as he saw Dario's eyes pause for a moment upon the 16mm camera. The alien felt a twinge of apprehension when Dario looked away without speaking to help Francesco unload supplies from the back of the vehicle. Musante imagined that he must be quite nervous, since he had not seen the small-boned assistant join them.

Once inside, Dario and Francesco immediately began setting up the clinic for the first wave of patients. The peasant-healer unwrapped the package of crude instruments while Francesco unfolded a rickety card table and placed it near the door, where he could record the name and vital statistics of each patient. There was also an old typewriter where the assistant could prepare prescriptions if Dario felt them necessary. On the stucco walls behind Dario's head were several signs written in a simple Portuguese scrawl: *PENSE EM JESUS* and *ESPERE E OPER-ANDO.*

The preparations finally complete, Dario turned and faced Musante, who said softly: "I would like to know what you have decided, about the films." Musante hefted the Beaulieu, emphasizing his words.

"Yes, *Señor Doctor,* I know," said Dario, suddenly breaking out in his infectiously charming grin. "It will be all right. I spoke with Magdelena about it and we agreed that with such films you may be able to have your American friends study me and learn. Learn so that many others all over the world can be helped."

Musante nodded, smiling with considerable difficulty. He felt guilty about his deception, especially since Dario spoke with such sincerity and belief.

"But there is one thing I must ask you," said Dario after a pause. "Please stay as far away from the patients as possible. It would not be wise to cause them discomfort."

"Of course," said Musante, who immediately carried his camera to the far corner of the dingy little room.

Francesco admitted the first patient – an old woman with a large goiter on the side of her neck. The growth was hopelessly entwined about her carotid artery and several major nerves. After the assistant had recorded the necessary data, Dario motioned the woman to a chair in the center of the room. Musante started the camera, holding it up on his shoulder, where he could hear the slight hum of the transponder searching out the telltale Tau waves.

Dario's eyes became cold and glassine, his voice became crisp and authoritarian. His movements were quick and confident and Musante noticed that he was not at all like himself. As the peasant-healer reached for a small fish-knife on the table, the old woman

seemed to visibly relax. Her face became placid and still like a piece of sculpture; she showed no emotion as Dario touched the knife to her throat. With several flicks of his wrist, Dario had sliced deeply into the skin around the goiter, after which he jerked the blade roughly about, probing and cutting at the roots of the growth. A small trickle of blood appeared below the incision, but nothing more. The *Curandeiro* then pushed his other hand into the wound, sliding the precious arteries and nerves away from his blade. Two more flashes of the knife and the goiter fell into his waiting hand. Dario passed the growth to Francesco as he closed the edges of the incision with his fingers. The edges sealed themselves, as usual, and it was only then that Dario pulled a small crucifix from his pocket and held it momentarily over the scar. A few moments of silent prayer and it was over. As if snapping out of a trance, the old woman stood up and smiled into the camera. After thanking Dario profusely, she was escorted from the room by Francesco.

Checking his watch, Musante noted that scarcely two minutes had passed during the operation. Nevertheless, he knew that his equipment had already obtained an accurate fix on B'jorg's position. He wanted to leave the room immediately, but was forced for appearances' sake, to record several more operations. Musante let the camera drone on as he stood through two "eye checkups," another growth removal, the drainage of a huge testicular hydrocele, and one demonstration of corrective bone surgery on a child with a club foot.

After the little boy was led from the room, walking normally for the first time in his life, Musante felt himself smiling at the joyous scene. He stopped him-

self, becoming self-conscious, and announced to Dario that he was finished for the day. The *Curandeiro* paused to shake Musante's hand and smile graciously.

Leaving the clinic, Musante lugged the heavy camera across the main avenue to the front of the hotel. Despite his eagerness to check the databanks, he thought of Bergmann and his prying ways. Musante searched about the nearby streets and the sweeping front porch of the hotel for any sign of the large mass constricted by a tropical suit. Seeing no one, he entered the lobby and climbed the stairs to his room, where he locked the door behind him and laid the camera carefully on the bed.

Musante opened the film magazine and unsnapped a small amethyst pyramid from its fittings and locked it into place on the computer console. The holographic decoder probed the crystal and fed the results to a display grid. Musante patched in a map overlay of the Minas Gerais area and pinpointed the coordinates of the Tau wave source. Slowly, he increased the magnification until he could spot recognizable landmarks.

B'jorg's position was fixed at the base of the mountains far west of the village of Congohas d'Umbamba. Pulling out another map from his valise, Musante estimated the distance from Dario's town to be about 20 kays. This was very odd since he had never known B'jorg's powers to be so effective over such great distances. However, the transponder had picked up the Tau wave transmission; B'jorg must have grown more powerful since their last encounter.

There were still many hours of daylight left to him, so Musante decided to begin his hunt immediately. Stripping, he redressed in a tight-fitting jumpsuit of high-tensile fibre. He packed a hand-weapon on

his thigh and pulled his regular clothes over the jumpsuit. Inside his briefcase he placed a disassembled disruptor and a small, palm-sized homing device that he had primed with the databank crystal. Thus armed, Musante left his room, locked the door carefully behind him, and walked down to the street. He climbed into the Land Rover and headed down several side streets before taking the major highway out of the town.

He had scarcely driven one kilometer when he rounded a bend in the road to see a car lying on its side, crushed into the cliff face on the side of the road. Musante slowed to stop and got out to inspect the wreckage; he saw skid marks where the vehicle had obviously lost control coming out of the curve ahead of him. The driver of the car was mangled badly, the column from the steering wheel jammed into his chest and his blood seeping out of the car and onto the road. The only other occupant was a small girl who had been tossed about in the back seat. Musante could hear her whimpering like a small animal. Without thinking, he climbed through the open window and pulled her frail body from the wreckage. There was a deep gash over her left eye and both legs seemed to be broken; there was much blood, which Musante tried to sop up with his handkerchief.

As he stood in the road, holding the semiconscious child, he debated furiously what to do. He should never have stopped, he thought angrily. Images of Dario, sweating and working in his close little room, entered his mind. A shiver ran through the girl's body and Musante looked down at her dark face, listened to her life-breath wheeze in and out.

Turning, he walked back to the Rover and placed her gently on the rear seats.

Musante drove quickly back into Nanja de Belo and stopped in front of Dario's clinic. A crowd gathered quickly and Musante handed the injured child to someone who immediately carried her into the small stucco building. He told them of the wreck and advised them to call the local authorities, then slipped away from the confusion as efficiently as possible.

Once back on the road, Musante pondered what he had just done. He played a philosophical game with himself, wondering whether or not he had committed a crime. On his own world, even accident victims were left to die. The species had to be strengthened by any and all means. But this was another world, he told himself as he negotiated the twisting turns in the road; it was another culture. Things were different here.

He drove on, trying to banish his self-doubts, trying to concentrate on his mission. After covering twelve kays, the terrain had become more hostile, and he knew that he would soon have to abandon the vehicle and begin walking through the thick Brazilian forests. Pulling off the highway, he rammed the Rover as deeply into the underbrush as the land would allow; then he burned down some foliage with which to camouflage it. After discarding his outer clothing and assembling his disruptor, he took another fix with the homing device and set out on B'jorg's trail.

As the hours passed, the land became less foliated and more jagged and rocky. Musante was forced to scramble down into small ravines and scale minor promontories, and he grew tired from the effort. The

sun began to kiss the far horizon, burning there like a great carnelian disc, just as Musante reached the edge of the bluff overlooking a heavily forested basin. Beyond the basin, perhaps 30 kays, were the foothills of the Caatingas Range, and somewhere before that point in the twisted forest was B'jorg.

Musante cautiously descended into the basin and began cutting his way through the tangled mass of roots and vines and limbs. His progress was slow, but he welcomed it since it gave him the opportunity to be more wary of any outer perimeter traps that B'jorg may have planted. The air was still and quiet, only occasionally punctuated by the shrill cry of a bird or the furtive rustlings of some small forest creature. Formations of insects swarmed about Musante as he walked, but he could not afford the distraction of swatting them.

His vigilance soon paid off.

Somewhere to his right, he heard an odd sound – a metallic click that repeated itself several times. Stopping quickly, Musante listened for it again. Presently it came; louder, probably closer. Huddling down slowly, he checked the primer on his disruptor and watched the area of green from which the sounds had come. Musante was perspiring freely and the grip of the weapon became slippery in his hands.

He waited. . .

Until a thin beam of energy lanced over his head, striking a large tree and vaporizing it instantly. The stench of steaming sap reached his nostrils just as he saw the thing: six legs that were long and spindly like a heron, an oval-shaped body with two small sensor-blisters near the front. It was a medium-weight

sentry-mech with a weapons nodule slung under its belly like a gravid egg-sack.

The machine stood motionless amidst the tangle of branches, recomputing Musante's position, as he rolled to his left and discharged a beam of negative matter into its body.

There was a white blossom of energy that blinded him for an instant. When it faded, and Musante could see once again, there was only a scorched swath in the forest where the sentry-mech had stood. Musante walked into the still-warm area and inspected the smoking fragments of the thing; he cursed the chance encounter since B'jorg would now be alerted to someone's presence in the vicinity.

Running quickly from the site in case other sentries would be converging upon it, Musante wondered if B'jorg would be changing locations. After the alien had moved cautiously forward for another half kay, he paused to take another fix on B'jorg's coordinates. Strangely, they had not changed. Musante wondered why the fugitive had remained stationary. Musante checked his watch; it was late afternoon, which meant that Dario was still in the clinic. That could be the reason, Musante thought. If B'jorg was guiding the peasant through the series of examinations and operations, he could not leave his base/headquarters for several more hours yet. This encouraged Musante, and he increased his pace through the forest, closing in on the fugitive B'jorg.

As he wedged through the thick underbrush he noticed a new stillness, an odd quiet that had suddenly surrounded him. There were no more bird-shrieks or insect-hums; the lower life-forms instinctually knew to avoid the area into which he now entered. Three

hundred meters ahead, Musante came to the edge of a river-sluiced gorge, perhaps two hundred meters deep, with steep sloping sides.

His transponder was bleeping urgently, but Musante calmly switched it off for he had just seen the shining hull of B'jorg's ship.

It was wedged between the converging slopes of the gorge, perhaps ten meters above the river itself, and appeared to be partially crushed like a cracked egg. Musante imagined that B'jorg, having experienced trouble during the descent into the planet's atmosphere, had skillfully guided the ship into the gorge. B'jorg had probably intended to use the river to absorb the shock of the crash, but the ship had been too wide to finish the descent.

Musante scanned the area about the edge of the gorge, hoping that no mechs were close by. Satisfied for the moment, he studied the slope of the cliff's edge, trying to map out a sure-footed passage towards the ship. If B'jorg had detected his presence, he gave no sign. It was too late to consider such things anyway, thought Musante. His disruptor would not penetrate the alloys of the ship's hull, and Musante was faced with a choice: either he call in H'lagian with their own craft's heavy armaments, or he must go in alone and attempt to capture the fugitive alive. Musante disliked the former choice for reasons of pride, and that prompted him to enact the latter by sliding over the edge of the gorge.

As he tapped his boots lightly about the rocks for support, he remembered that he had forgotten to call H'lagian and inform him that he had located B'jorg's huddling place. The incident with the girl in the car plagued his memories. That was why he'd

forgotten and he cursed the moment for it. But there was little time for hindsight; his hands struggled for purchase as he scrambled downwards and laterally towards the ship. Musante felt terribly vulnerable and he tried to keep the ship in view should B'jorg come out to chance a shot. Twilight was encroaching upon the gorge, and thick shadows had begun to creep over him, making the passage more treacherous.

There was a scrabbling of loose stones above Musante's head; looking up quickly, he saw the blistered head of a sentry-mech craning out and over the edge. Slowly the machine extended grabbers and began to attach itself, insectlike, to the side of the cliff, inching itself downward.

Musante was pressed tightly against the wall of rock, balanced on a slight ledge. There was little room to maneuver as he struggled to unsling the disruptor from his shoulder. It was odd, he thought in a moment of inappropriate calmness, that the machine did not simply pick him off with an easy shot. Instead, it was attempting to capture him with one of its clawed legs. When the machine had come within several meters, Musante gambled by leaning out, away from the wall, trying to bring his weapon into play in one quick motion. The machine's sensors reacted to the sudden movement by lunging for him, and its most forward grabber clicked against the snout of Musante's weapon.

There was a brief instant in which Musante and the mech remained locked together, struggling for position; then he felt himself falling. He discharged the weapon and briefly saw its beam spray harmlessly into empty space. But then the gorge and the sky and the river below were pinwheeling past his eyes as he plummeted downward.

He was going to die, he thought. And then the darkness came.

"That was quite foolish of you," said the voice that was forcing its way into Musante's mind. "And with your reputation, yet."

Musante opened his eyes slowly, trying to focus on a dark shape that seemed to be looming over him. Slowly it resolved itself into some sort of servo-machine. Behind it were panels and displays of a starship's bridge. He tried to move, but discovered that he was strapped down, on his back, to a cushioned slab.

"You would have killed me, wouldn't you?" asked the voice.

Before answering, Musante noticed that the servo was doing something to his right leg, although he could feel nothing from the pelvic region downward.

"B'jorg?" he said slowly.

"At your service. Quite literally."

"Where are you?"

"In the next compartment, Musante. I cannot come to you, as you will soon see. But you will be coming to me."

"I don't understand."

But the voice said nothing. Five minutes passed as Musante searched about the cabin for some clue to what was happening. He felt as if he had been under the influence of a drug. It was difficult to remain alert. Clicking sounds emanated from the servo, and the slab upon which Musante lay began to move. It slid through an irising hatch and into an amber-lit compartment. The servo touched a point beyond Musante's periphery of vision and the slab tilted

forward, bringing him to a sitting position, face to face with B'jorg.

Or rather, what was left of B'jorg.

Directly in front of Musante was a large transparent tank, filled with a pale yellow colloid. Floating placidly, without weight or movement, was B'jorg's tattered body. The arm and leg on the left side were twisted so terribly that the bones were clearly visible beneath the shredded flaps of remaining muscle and skin. The torso was caved in like a piece of decayed fruit from which seeping body fluids stained the colloidal liquid with wisps of crimson. Only the head, which was little more than wrinkled flesh clinging to a skull, seemed intact. Musante could see a complex tangle of wires snaking into the back of the head at the base of the neck.

"Malfunction of the gee-force repellors," said the voice, which Musante now perceived to be coming from a speaker array above the tank. "Almost ripped me to pieces as I was bringing her in."

"How did you . . . survive?" Musante used the word tentatively.

"The advance-time computer predicted the failure. I had just enough time to instruct my servos to prepare the suspension tank, in the event that I survived. I did, although just barely."

"So I see." Musante paused for a moment to study his quarry. In his present condition, B'jorg looked anything but formidable. "How long will you be like this?" he said finally.

The speaker produced a crackling semblance of a laugh. "Indefinitely, I'm afraid. In this case, the physician cannot heal himself. My servos can keep me alive for as long as the ship's power cores hold out.

This sort of thing uses very little voltage, so I should last for several Earth-centuries."

"How nice," said Musante. "But why did you save *me?*"

"Force of habit, I suppose. You get used to doing things in a certain way after a while. You were dying, I saved you. That simple."

"It's always been simple for you," said Musante with some bitterness. "But you were wrong. You weakened the gene pool! You started up the old ways again. The species had almost died out because of meddlers like you!"

"Is it meddling to save someone's life, to eradicate disease?"

"On our world, yes it is."

"Perhaps," said B'jorg, pausing for dramatic effect. "But I could not stand by and watch my people die when I had the power to intervene."

"You'd never have had that 'power' if you hadn't violated the Archives of the Ruins. You stole your power, B'jorg. You deserved your punishment."

"I'm afraid that's a moot point at this stage of the game," said B'jorg.

"What?"

"Simply this: do you want to die, Musante?"

The question jolted him out of his anger, and he sat staring into the tank at the grotesque form, turning over the meaning of its words. "What kind of question is that?" he finally.

"Just curious. You see, you *will* die unless I intervene. Both your legs are broken and you have massive hemorrhaging in the peritoneal cavity. You feel no pain for the moment because my servo administered a spinal-bloc on the proper pathways. But just the

same, you'll be dead by sunrise without my help."

Musante had no way of knowing if B'jorg was lying or not, but he did indeed feel weak. "How can you do it?"

"It's complicated, but it's basically a combination of mechanical and telekinetic procedures. My servos can do the plumbing, while I direct the delicate stuff."

"Like with Dario?"

"Essentially, yes. Of course with a human being as my instrument, the process is somewhat more complex. It requires immense concentration – an exhausting experience."

Musante sought to delay answering B'jorg's vital question. He needed time to assess things. "Why did you choose the peasant? Any special reasons?"

"Not really. A few factors, of course: he is intensely religious, very moral, strong . . . things like that. But of course there are many like him in this region. It didn't matter. As long as I found an outlet for my services, I knew I would be content."

"You are a sanctimonious ass," said Musante, just before breaking into a sharp coughing spasm.

"Flattery will get you nowhere," said B'jorg. "Now, please, answer my question."

Musante gasped for a breath. "All right. No. I don't want to die. But – "

"But you don't think you can allow me to heal you, is that it? Now who's being sanctimonious, Musante?" The speaker crackled with computer-constructed laughter.

Perhaps it was true, thought Musante. It was difficult to think clearly and he wondered if it was an effect of the pain-killer, or perhaps some ancillary influence of B'jorg. The differences of Earth's culture

had been touching him in subtle ways during the long months he had remained on the planet. Musante's unspoken, unthought admiration for Dario, the seeming obligation to bring the injured child to his clinic, the subconscious reluctance to wish for B'jorg's destruction, all these things crowded for attention in his mind.

"Are you all right?" said B'jorg, after no immediate response came from Musante.

"Yes. Yes, I'm okay."

"Well, what's your decision?"

"If I want to live, I've got to let you heal me," said Musante. "All right. I'll agree to that." Oddly enough, his words did not leave him with the throbbing, gripping sensations of guilt, as he might have expected. He mouthed them, instead, with an air of resignation.

"I thought you would say something like that," said B'jorg with no trace of sarcasm in his voice. "But first, a few more things I must make clear."

"Such as . . . ?"

"You didn't follow me to Earth alone, did you, Musante?"

Musante shook his head. "There's another agent aboard the ship. It's in orbit. What're you getting at?"

"The other," said B'jorg. "Is he . . . a friend? Are you close to him?"

"Not really. He's young. Ambitious. I don't really know, I guess."

"He must be dealt with," said B'jorg. "He must be led to believe that you have destroyed me."

"Are you asking me or telling me?" Musante stared into the tank at the twisted corpselike body, wondering what motivations still willed it to life.

"I suppose you could say I'm striking a bargain, of sorts. My life for yours, to put it bluntly."

"I see. But it won't be easy. Our orders were to bring you back."

"Dead or alive?"

"Preferably alive."

"But acceptably dead, I suppose?" The speaker emitted a brief laughing sound.

"That's right."

"Could you convince your partner that you had to vaporize me sufficiently that there was nothing left to bring back?"

"I can try," said Musante, pausing to reflect on the blasphemous qualities of his conversation with B'jorg. If someone had told him that he would ever be in such a position, he would have never believed them. But facing death had an odd way of changing one's perspective. It was a thing that no one thought about on his homeworld; it was that lurking inevitable thing that must be calmly accepted, never challenged. And that was a relatively easy thing to do, since there was no means, in Musante's culture, to offer such a challenge. But here was B'jorg, the most despised criminal of his era, offering Musante a chance to cheat death, and he was leaping at the opportunity. Life was indeed an unpredictable game.

"That brings up the question of *trust*," said B'jorg, interrupting Musante's thoughts. "Since I must heal you before you can attempt to save me from your friend."

"That's true. You must trust me."

The speaker seemed to sigh. "All right, Musante. I must assume that you are an ethical creature. You must be! Who else would strike off across hundreds of

light-years on a fanatical quest of evangelical revenge? I'll heal you. You'll try to save me."

Musante nodded without hesitation. "I'll do what I can."

"All right. We'll discuss the specifics later. Relax now. My servos are standing by. I'm going to put you under."

Musante was suddenly impaled by his words. It was not just possibilities they were blithely tossing about. It was real. It was happening. Some part of him wanted to stop it, to reconsider it, but it was too late. The darkness was already rolling over him like fog in the night. He almost cried out to the thing in the tank. Perhaps there was another way, he thought, as consciousness shattered and fell away from him.

Opening his eyes to the amber light once more, Musante could feel a *difference* about himself. It was most likely the afterglow of some kind of psychological shock, the glaring onus of his cultural denial, he thought. He moved his arms, attempted to sit up on the cushioned slab. He felt totally refreshed, rested. Looking down, he saw a thin pink scar across his lower abdomen; an ugly badge of his guilt, of his sin.

"It's good that you're awake," said B'jorg's haunting voice, startling him for a moment. "There've been some complications while you were out."

"Out? How long?" Musante stiffened, confused by B'jorg's words.

"About eight hours. You were exhausted. You needed the rest. The operation was routine. You'll be fine."

"*What* complications? What're you talking about?"

"My sentries have detected someone in the forest above the gorge. About two kays from here."

"Who is it?"

"That's what I was going to ask you. I have no idea," said B'jorg.

"Can't you get any readings, any thoughts?"

"Not right now. He's asleep, whoever he is."

"Suppose he finds the ship!" Musante sat up on the slab.

"Not good, of course." B'jorg's voice was flat, matter-of-fact.

"Why not have one of your sentries knock him off?"

"Musante, I'm ashamed of you."

"Why not? You almost did it to me!"

"That first shot was just a warning. My mechs are programmed to capture or stun, never kill."

Musante wondered if B'jorg was telling the truth, although it probably didn't matter anymore. "Well what're we going to do?"

The speaker hummed for a moment before B'jorg spoke: "I was thinking of having you go out and check things out."

"What?"

"You're in fine shape, if that's what you're worried about."

"That was one of several things, I think." Musante swung his legs over the side and stood up testily. "But all right, I'll go."

"My servos will get you your things. I will trust your natural abilities to handle the problem, whoever it is out there."

Musante nodded and turned to one of the machines which was already gathering up his jumpsuit and

weaponry. He slipped into the clothing and prepared to open the airlock chamber when the speaker crackled once more.

"Musante," it said, and he turned around to stare once again into the colloidal suspension where the skull-face and the purple eyes floated silently.

"Yes?"

"How does it feel?"

"What?" Musante felt a shiver run through him.

"To walk. To breathe. To unconsciously direct a real body."

"Oh, I see," he said, looking away from the horror in the tank. "It feels good. Very good. Thank you." He turned and entered the lock.

It took several minutes to map out a route up from the gorge, but when he reached the ledge, he moved quickly into the forest, following the coordinates from B'jorg's sensors. Within fifteen minutes he came upon one of B'jorg's sentry-mechs, which now simply turned and regarded him silently, coldly. The thing was attached to the mainstem of a young tree, peering out and over the lower foliage at something. Musante slowed his pace and passed through the thick shrubbery. He recognized the area; he had passed this way himself the day before. It was quite possible that someone had been following his trail.

The someone was Bergmann.

Musante saw him in the brush ahead meticulously folding up a small, nylon tent and stuffing it into a spotless carrying-sack. The fat journalist was wearing a pair of khaki shorts, matching shirt, a small backpack, and an odd-looking hat. Everything about the man was antiseptically clean and neat; his short pants

still carried a sharp crease in each leg and his boots appeared to have been very recently shined. He was an incongruous splash on the green matte of the forest floor.

Instead of anger, Musante felt an unfamiliar sense of pity for the man. Bergmann was obviously a dedicated sort who could not deny his conscience; he had braved the Brazilian wilderness to discover the truth about Musante. And despite Bergmann's ungainly appearance, he obviously was knowledgeable enough to track Musante across many kilometers of rough territory.

There was still the problem of how to deal with the German's presence. Musante rejected a series of possibilities that came immediately to mind, most of which were grisly solutions that stemmed from his prior training. He would have to divert the man from B'jorg's position, but it would be difficult if not impossible.

Bergmann had stood up and was consulting a compass and an unfolded map of the region as Musante slowly backed away from him and scurried off into the forest. The sentry-mech followed closely behind him. Musante imagined that B'jorg was monitoring this particular unit so as to keep abreast of the situation.

He wondered if the battered physician saw H'lagian's surfaceship as it descended to the forest floor in a burst of heat and light and sound.

Damn the fool, thought Musante. Obviously, when H'lagian had failed to receive a confirming message the previous evening, he had taken matters into his own hands. He had probably tapped Musante's hotel console for the coordinates, imagined trouble, and

came roaring down here like an avenging angel.

There was a crashing in the brush behind him, and Musante turned to see the vague khaki form of Bergmann rushing towards the source of the surface-ship's commotion. Huddling down in the cover of a thicket, Musante waited until he had a clear shot at the unsuspecting journalist. It was better to stun Bergmann than risk an unfortunate discovery and perhaps the man's death.

His obese body fell forward and he expelled a wheezing breath like a bellows being stamped shut. Musante checked his pulse and noted that he would probably survive the neuroparalytic effects of his weapon, although the man would be unconscious for more than four hours.

Then, turning, he cautiously approached the ship, which now was nestled into a blackened depression near the lip of the gorge. From a safe, concealed spot, Musante watched as H'lagian leapt from the ship wearing full-assault gear: a black helmet, body armor, and a disruptor slung over his shoulder. The other agent quickly slid over the edge and began the long descent towards B'jorg's ship.

Realizing that he must act quickly, Musante jumped up and ran to the edge. H'lagian had only covered about ten meters when Musante peered over the side and called out to him. The helmeted figure froze for a moment, then jerked its head upward to stare at him through the smoked-glass visor.

"Musante! What happened to you? Did you get him?" H'lagian pointed down towards the ship.

He wanted to nod his head, to say yes, but something would not allow it. "No," said Musante. "I didn't."

"I don't understand, then. What's going on?" H'lagian's expression was concealed, but Musante noticed that the man's training was taking hold. Slowly, H'lagian's shoulder slumped as he prepared to unsling his weapon.

"B'jorg's alive, but just barely," said Musante, and he briefly told him about the tank and the injuries and what the healer had done to him.

When he finished, H'lagian did not speak for several minutes but continued to stare upwards at him through the dark visor. "I suppose," he said at last, forcing a laugh, "that this puts me in a very uncompromising situation."

Musante nodded slowly. It was good that he couldn't see the agent's face; with the helmet, H'lagian seemed more machinelike, less like a man. "In your eyes I have failed. I have sinned."

"Quite so. But you have to sin again."

"I know. But only if you force me to it. I can't go home. I don't really want to," said Musante, searching for the right words. "But *you* can. You can tell them that you finished B'jorg and that I was killed in the effort. You can—"

"No, I can't. I'm sorry, Musante. I don't know what's happened to you down here, but it didn't happen to me. I still believe we were right – are right, that B'jorg must die for his sins, and that you too must die."

"But I won't. *You* will."

The dark helmet nodded. "I know that, too. It's the only way, Musante . . . for me." And suddenly he was huddling down on the ledge, reaching for his weapon, trying to get off a burst.

Musante reacted automatically, depressing the

trigger and burning the man off the ledge as easily as one would flick an insect from a window screen. Long after H'lagian's smoking remains had tumbled into the river mud far below, Musante remained standing at the lip of the gorge, replaying the strange dramas of the past days that had somehow restructured his conceptions of life and death.

Afterwards, he entered the surfaceship and sent off a final program to the orbiting starship, which sent it out of orbit and into a long sweeping arc that would eventually take it into the heart of the solar furnace. Shutting down the ship's systems, Musante left and descended back into the gorge.

When he had finished relating the events to B'jorg, the physician/anthropologist/fugitive said only one word: "Why?"

"I don't know," said Musante. "This is a strange world. It's worked subtle changes in me in the months I searched for you. Changes that I guess I refused to acknowledge. But when I sat through those sessions at Dario's clinic and saw how he – or rather, *you* – were giving them another chance, I guess it 'moved' me. I resented these people having the chance to cheat death, but I admired Dario for giving the gift so unselfishly. That sounds crazy, doesn't it?"

"Not really," said B'jorg. "It wasn't unnatural for our own people to be empathic to the pain of others."

Musante nodded as he studied the mangled body of B'jorg imprisoned in the jellied cage.

"I learned long ago that some must always die so that others may live," said B'jorg. "That is basically what our people were trying to do, I suppose. But it was difficult to remain a spectator, especially after I

discovered the Archives. I made mistakes, I realize. Such is the process of learning."

"Please," said Musante. "I don't think I can handle any more lectures. Besides, I've got to take care of Bergmann."

"What're you going to do with him?"

"Take him back to the village. Tell him I found him in the forest near my campsite, that he was struck by lightning. Dario can take a look at him, can't he?" Musante smiled.

The speaker laughed. "Yes, I suppose he can."

Musante approached the hatch, stopped and turned to face the tank. "I guess I'll be coming back. . . "

"Really?"

"Where else can I go?"

"Dario could use another assistant," said B'jorg. "Earth could probably use a few more like Dario. There's lots to be done. Much to be learned."

Musante smiled, nodding his head. "All right," he said, unhooking his weapons belt and dropping it to the deck. "Teach me."

Theodore Sturgeon is simply one of the finest short story writers America has ever produced. And, as Samuel R. Delany points out, it is a glorious accident that he happens to write science fiction and fantasy. For the past five years Ted has worked on TV scripts, given lectures, taught classes on writing, written book reviews, done introductions to other people's books, cut two recordings, fed his rabbits, fixed his son's toys, tinkered with old VW's and, of late, traveled extensively. But he has not written fiction. A number of his classics were reprinted, but his new masterpieces were not being written. People in the field were beginning to say that Ted was washed up as a writer, that Ted could not write anymore. "Harry's Note" proves them dead wrong.

Then what was the problem? A fair question which Paul Williams answers in an article on Ted to be published in *Rolling Stone*. "The real reason Ted doesn't write is that he doesn't want to." By involving himself in a host of distractions he successfully dammed up his flow of writing for almost five years. Thankfully, as in the past, the dam is going to burst and once again we will be treated to the genius of Sturgeon's stories. "Harry's Note," the first in this new flow of creative artistry, is Ted at his emotional and aesthetic best. Once again we can say: "Sturgeon is Alive and Well."

HARRY'S NOTE

by Theodore Sturgeon

The most exciting thing that had ever happened to Harry (aside from rheumatic fever and Susan) was the evening he spent with Timothy Leary. After that – well, you'll judge for yourself, but before, things had been pretty quiet for Harry.

Dr. Leary came swinging into Woodstock, New York, bringing with him two younger men, Metzner and Alpert, with shiny shoes, pants with creases, and sharing a professorial, rather humorless air. They reminded Harry of divinity students, senior grade:

earnest, intense, illuminated. But Leary, the leonine head just grizzling, straight-spined, quick-minded, with his charisma and his resonant voice – Leary was something else again.

He used words like 'psychotomimetic' and a brand-new one, 'psychedelic,' and fielded questions like "If I knocked on a door and it was opened by a man who had taken LSD, what would he look like?" and "Is it addictive?" openly and immediately, all of which interested Harry quite a lot, but it wasn't until afterward, at the Cafe Espresso across the street, that Harry achieved that highest-yet peak of excitement.

Over cappuccino, Dr. Leary held forth about mutations. "There are three kinds of mutations," said Leary. "Lethal ones, and you can mostly forget about them. They cause stillbirths, and when they don't the young seldom survive, and when they do they seldom reproduce – they're mules, or they just don't live long enough to mate. Then there's the beneficial mutation – say in a herd animal, when one is born with longer and stronger hind legs. This one gets away from the predators better than any of the others, and passes the strain on. The descendants thrive, and in a few, or a few dozen generations, you'll find the whole herd with the new legs.

"But there's a third kind of mutation. It's the one that just means nothing – nothing at all. Suppose, in our herd animal, one is born with mottled skin – black and pink, when all-pink has been the rule. This coloration is under the hair, invisible unless you bring a razor and shaving cream on your safari, and it just doesn't make any difference. It doesn't affect speed or strength or diet or anything else; there's no selective breeding for it because there just isn't anything

to select. Well, in thirty generations, or three hundred, or three thousand – a very short time, as such things go – this mottled characteristic will dilute and die out, and, in all probability, never appear again. Why should it?

"All right," he went on, "all the evidence is that the new brain, the gray brain with its temporal lobes, was an explosive mutation, and in terms of species, it was a beneficial one. Humanity isn't the first animal to perform concerted actions, or to build elaborate structures, or to use tools; it's a matter of degree. Mankind was able to do these things better, that's all – a great deal better, and more of 'em. It wasn't the first to achieve communication with its own kind, either, but again, it did it better than any competitor, and it did it with a very large plus: the ability to transmit knowledge not only to contemporaries, but down through the generations. I mean, each tribe didn't have to discover fire over and over again, or the arch, or the wheel, or Einstein's general field theory. The height of knowledge we have now reached (whatever *that* is) we reached by standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, and who were able to communicate it to us."

Harry pointed to Leary's empty cup, Leary nodded that big fine head, Harry beckoned the waiter and pointed again, all very swift and efficient, without Dr. Leary's having to break his conversational stride. It pleased Harry. Communication. Oh indeed, humanity has come a long way.

"Beneficial mutation, right?" Leary demanded, and immediately, "Wrong! Wrong, because every single one of those survival, progressive miracles can be performed with only a fraction of the brain! Will

you take my word for that, or do you want the documentation? Because believe me, friend, I have it; case histories of ninety percent recovery of function in people with half their brains removed, papers on stereotaxis – electrical stimulation of discrete parts of both the forebrain and the old, old white brain under it – and documentation coming in daily in dozen lots on psychedelic experience . . . but I covered that in my lecture, and you don't want to hear that all over again. No – I'm here to tell you that the explosive mutation produced more than the capabilities we are so proud of – much more. I don't know how many times it has been said, by how many people, that we only use a fraction of the forebrain; some say a tenth, some say a third, some say two-thirds, but I'm not going to get mired in an argument over percentages. I'm simply stating a well-known and proven fact in biology: that if a living thing, plant or animal, has a limb or organ tied off or immobilized, that limb or organ, be it leaf or thyroid or good right arm, is going to atrophy, drop off, die and rot, or what have you. And the same thing happens on a larger scale, in the case of that Class Three mutation, which is initially neither lethal nor beneficial."

With tremendous slow emphasis, drawing all of that charisma into a tight beam and aiming it into Harry's eyes, he said, "Unless we discover the function of that unused portion of the brain, then, just like the mottling of the skin under the hair of the animal I mentioned, that part of the brain will atrophy, wither away, dilute, disappear in thirty, three hundred, three thousand generations – a tick of time in the history of a species – never to be seen again in all the universe. Never!" and he struck the

table so hard that the sugar bowl jumped, and so did Harry, and the waiter was afraid for a moment to put down the cappuccino. "Find it, use it," said Leary. "Use it or lose it. Use it or lose it." Harry thought he saw tears in his eyes. He couldn't know, for the tears in his own.

It was the saddest story he had ever heard. The towering, monumental, mountainous sadness of the concept – humanity having had and having lost this unknown potential, while keeping, while building on, the part of itself it had already used – it was more than Harry could bear. It was infinitely more tragic than the idea of the total death of humanity. And – what would a future humanity be like, without that mysterious potentiality? Would it go on building bigger skyscrapers, bombs, frustrations and alienations? Would it become cookie-cutter repetitive, with nothing left of its deepest humanness but flickering urges and unidentifiable images? Who could know, without knowing the nature of the thing that was lost?

He never could remember the rest of that evening; he never really tried, though because of it he understood far better than the general public what it was that drove Timothy Leary to do what he did, to become famous and then infamous and then well on the road to fame again; and he understood that it was the same thing that drove Metzner to seek his measure of the problem in his own way, and Alpert, who became Baba Ram Dass, in yet another. But this is not their story.

The reason that this encounter had such an impact on Harry is that he was, by some quirk of nature, a

sadness freak – a collector of sadnesses. Like the intergenerational growth of information, Harry's sadnesses stood on the shoulders of sadnesses gone by. When the guys got together in college to slurp beer and tell dirty stories all night, Harry never told dirty stories, he told sad stories, like the one about the man making love to his wife who went on and on for an hour and a quarter before he was finished, and his wife said, "Gosh, honey, what took you so long?" and he answered, "Well, I couldn't think of anybody."

And the one he picked up in England, about the cheery warm pub, and the thin little girl who came in out of the freezing fog, all big eyes and little frayed coat. She sidles round to the bar and the cheery warm bartender says, "Wot'll you 'ave?" and she says, "'Ow much is a 'arf-pint o' bitter?" and he says, "Tuppence," and she says "Orl roight," and he fills this little bitty glass while she dumps her purse on the bar. She starts to pick up the glass and he grabs a wrist like a chicken-foot and presses it back down. "Wite a minute, 'old on there," he says, "yon's a penny and a button." She puts her knuckles to her mouth and her eyes get bigger than ever. "Ow," she says, "Oi've been 'ad fer a button!"

A few like that and the guys would throw empty beer cans at Harry and tell him to go home.

Harry cherished the true story of Humboldt and the parrot. Humboldt was the nineteenth century German explorer for whom the Humboldt Currents are named, and Humboldt County in California. Deep in the rain forest in Brazil he encountered an Indian tribe that in their village had a talking parrot. But this parrot did not speak the language of this tribe; it came from another tribe, even deeper in the Matto

Grosso, and this second tribe was extinct. This parrot was the only living thing on the earth that spoke the language of that dead tribe – and it was only a parrot.

This was the shining central jewel in Harry's sadness collection until that night at the Espresso. Though he never remembered the rest of the evening there, he did remember going to Susan afterward. She held him for a long time – not because she understood what was tearing him apart, because she didn't, but probably because she had never seen him cry before.

Harry might have been able to live with it if it hadn't been for the Man from Mars. No, that doesn't sound right; it sounds like blame. There wasn't anyone to blame, really, except maybe Harry himself, being what he was.

It isn't easy to describe what happened that evening when the Man from Mars first talked to Harry. Correction again. Someone once said about Einstein's Theory of Relativity: it isn't difficult to understand; it's just impossible to believe. All right? This is what happened:

First of all, the Man from Mars wasn't a man and he wasn't from Mars. "The Man from Mars" is what Harry first called him, half kidding, half abjectly terrified, and since he never had another name for him, he stuck with "Man from Mars" though they both knew it was inaccurate. Second, the Man from Mars did something – Harry never knew what – that eliminated the terror completely. Finally, although he wasn't invisible, Harry never saw him, and even when the Man pointed at something on a printed page or on one of the sketches or drawings or

charts he asked Harry to make from time to time, Harry could never if his life depended on it describe what the hand (if it was a hand) or the finger (if it was a finger) looked like. It was as if something diverted his attention every time he started to look at the Man. Yet the presence was very strong, very solid, very real. Well, it's not all that strange, when you come to think of it. A normal person can be hypnotized and ordered not to see someone or something in a room, and he just plain cannot see it, even if you put it right in front of him under bright lights. Whether it was hypnosis or suggestion or something like them – or something infinitely better – Harry did not know, didn't want to know. One thing was certain: nobody else saw (could see?) the Man, and no one but Harry ever heard his questions.

His questions . . . only once did the Man from Mars ever make a statement. He only asked questions. It seemed that he wanted to know about human beings, and he had chosen Harry to give the answers. Why Harry? Harry never knew, though he often thought that the Man might have made a better choice. *Only* Harry? Very probably not. Some of the questions he asked carried a freight of previous knowledge; in such cases, it wasn't *the* answer he was after, but Harry's answer. Again: why Harry? Harry never knew.

So the Man from Mars appeared (funny word to use, under the circumstances) one evening when Harry was alone, and asked him, "Mind answering some questions?" and Harry, terrified, jumped up, looked this way, that way, round and back, and blurted: "Who said that? Where are you? *What* are you – a man from Mars or something?" It was eerie, because there was this sense of a real presence, right

there in the room; not a voice from the street or from some other place in the house, and most certainly not a hallucination – it was just too real, too, well, *here.* It was exactly then that the Man did whatever it was he did to erase Harry's terror, and never again did Harry feel frightened of the Man. Not even awed. And he never wondered why.

"Mind answering some questions?"

"I guess not. Mind if I ask some?"

"Why should I object? What do you want to know?"

Harry pondered. He felt quite comfortable. "How did you get in here? Where did you come from?"

"Do you want a precise answer?"

"Well, sure," said Harry.

"Are you acquainted with the theory of nonfluent time and the present identity of all things, past and future?"

"Well, no," said Harry.

"Then how can I possibly give you a precise answer?"

"Well, you must've come from somewhere!"

"Why?"

"Because you got here!"

"Isn't 'here' somewhere?"

"Well, certainly."

"Then does it satisfy you that I come from here?"

"No it doesn't! You weren't here before and you are now!"

"How can you tell?"

"Well, I never saw you. Heard you. I mean, I – I – oh hell, what do you want, anyway?"

"Mind answering some questions?"

Back to square one and this is what was to happen

every time Harry tried to get an idea of who or what the Man was, or why he wanted his questions answered. He was always led around in a circle by his own statements and responses. Sometimes it was a big circle and sometimes a little circle, but it went round and round until Harry learned that the only way out was to give straight answers to the Man's questions, and put a sharp curb on his own. Besides, you have to understand that he felt quite comfortable with the Man. Really.

Well, he asked questions. He asked questions about morals, about politics, about entertainment, about technology. He asked about pollution, war, religion, history, education, and finance. Sometimes Harry knew the answers and sometimes not; he began a notebook so he could go to the library for information. Sometimes the questions called for opinions; sometimes Harry had very strong ones, sometimes none, sometimes opinions he hadn't known he had until he was asked.

Susan came in, that first night. She wanted to know who he was talking to. Clearly, she couldn't see the Man from Mars. He said he was talking to himself. She didn't believe him. He then said he was talking to the Man from Mars. She said nothing, just went to bed. This happened a number of times. About the third time he broke down and told her the whole story. Shortly after that she moved out. These are very few words to write about Susan, but this isn't her story; and anyway, nothing that happened was her fault in any way. But surely she knows that.

Another sadness for Harry.

He told the Man from Mars about his sadnesses, about what had happened at the Espresso and about

Humboldt and the parrot, and about the feral children. The feral children was for a long time the saddest thing he knew, until it was replaced by Humboldt and then by Leary's Class Three mutation.

The feral children was, as a sadness, very difficult to explain. It was, as Harry once expressed it, something you could just reach with your fingertips, but never get a grip on. You could touch it but not grasp it.

Feral children are those who have been brought up by or with animals. They round one up every few years in India, Africa, South America; there's a very famous case of one picked up in France in the eighteenth century. If they are captured when they are eleven or twelve years old, they have one thing in common: they can never be taught to speak. "Yes" and "No" and "Pass the salt," sure; but the kind of verbal communication we take so much for granted is impossible to them. A brain surgeon might tell you that there is nothing detectibly wrong with them, but they just can't learn speech. Now, learning speech is as close to miraculous as anything on this earth. Not for the accomplishment itself, but because of who does it – little kids. There was a family Harry had read about who lived in India on one of those "stations" the English had during the Empire days. They had three little kids, ages five, six, seven, and a French tutor who would speak nothing to them but French, and an *amah,* a nursemaid, who knew no English and spoke only Hindi. Those kids could speak English and French and Hindi fluently, with no hesitation, depending on whom they were talking to. A gifted adult might do the same, but never in so short a time or without giving it total concentration and effort. A normal adult, well, just couldn't. Any

normal child can, and many do, what those English kids did.

Astronauts call that period of time in which it is possible to launch a rocket at a certain target, taking into account all the variables, a "window." Before the window is open you can't launch and get where you're going. After it's closed you can't launch. Well, it occurred to Harry that there may be a "learning window," like that which makes it possible for normals to learn speech at a genius level, a window that opens on *something else.* It was here that his fingers touched the thing he couldn't grasp – what that *something else* might be. Maybe ESP or telekinesis or that kind of thing, but maybe not. Maybe something different, something entirely new, something as incomprehensible to a normal adult as a transistor or a sonnet would be to a Neanderthal, as incomprehensible as normal speech is to a feral child. The feral child had his speech window open for – how long is the speech window open? Months? Two years, three? – but there was nobody around to put anything into it. So in its own natural time, it closed, as it does for us all (except maybe having a thin crack) and the finest teachers with the best teaching methods and devices can't put anything through it ever again, except maybe for little thin bits pushed in through the crack.

And this, in his collection of sadnesses, was unique, because it was the only one he had never heard or read about; he had worked it out for himself. His conviction was absolute that there was such a window, that it opened, stayed open, stayed open . . . and closed, never to be open again, never to accept anything but slivers and flashes even if someone should appear who had that *something else* in full

flower, and the desire and ability to teach it. Down through the generations, child after child had gone about in this jungle, with this window wide and waiting, and while he scratched for food here and knowledge there, nobody, nobody ever came along who was able to put that *something else* through that special window, until, one day, the window was forever closed. My Dad and Mom, thought Harry, never put anything into mine, because their folks never put it into theirs, and when theirs were open . . . back and back; Oh God, he would think, why didn't the right person come along back there somewhere and start it; where would we be now? . . . It was a full-fledged, collectable sadness, but terribly difficult to explain to anybody.

Whether or not the Man from Mars understood it, he was not sure. His assumption was that the Man understood everything.

Harry, mysterious as it was to his friends and acquaintances, loved his work. He was a statistical typist. You know those entire half-pages you'll see in the financial pages sometimes, lists of bonds by number, all in tiny print, and all absolutely correct? That's what he did, stuff like that, and he could proofread it too. Maybe it was a natural talent, plus years of practice, but he could move the figures from copy to eye to keyboard with great speed and accuracy, and never let them touch his mind at all. And that's why he loved it, because nowhere else, not even drowsing on the riverbank on a sunny Sunday, was his mind so free to rove and ponder. The nature of the work meant no phones to answer, hardly even a word to anyone all day: he had an IN box and an OUT box; people slid paper in and took paper away,

and, unlike the riverbank, no one whanged him awake with a misplaced frisbee or started fighting or baby-bawling, and he was free of bird-droppings and ants. During the many weeks of his communication with the Man from Mars, he strove and drove to squeeze some pattern out of the questions, and the kinds of questions, he was being asked (but there were so many of them, and so many kinds!) yet no one at work was aware of it – same old Harry, doing the same old thing in the same way every day. And in the evenings he simply stopped seeing anybody or going anywhere where he might; and after Susan left, that was easy. So when things came to a head, there was no one to know, no one to stop it.

"Could the earth produce enough food to take care of everybody on it?"

"I guess so. Yes, it could – I read that someplace."

"*Does* the earth produce enough for everyone?"

"Oh no. Well, now – wait. We throw a lot away, here in this country and others, too. And we eat more than we need to, that's for sure. Seems like seven, eight people out of ten are all the time trying to lose weight. I dunno. Maybe if it was shared around, and all that money didn't go into junk and convenience food, yes, maybe we do produce enough. It wouldn't be much fun, though – eating, I mean."

"What about energy?"

"Oh, you mean oil. We're not in very good shape about oil. There's not enough of it in the right places, and the guys who have it are getting more and more hard-nosed, and it's costing more all the time to find it and get it out. We could have a war over that, if it gets tight enough."

"Does energy mean oil?"

"Mostly it does. Then there's natural gas, but the problem there is the same as with the oil, and we're using it up awful fast. Then, coal. There's plenty of coal, but the cheapest way to get it tears up whole countries, and if the mining people have to straighten up the mess, the cost goes up. And mostly it burns dirty, and to get clean-burning fuel out of it, or to make substitute gasoline, that costs more again."

"Is there no other kind of energy except through fossil fuels?"

"Oh sure. Geothermal, but that can be tapped in only a few places here and there. Atomic – atomic fission, that is – but there's a lot of worry about where to bury the waste, because it's radioactive and will stay radioactive for a lot of years. We have a handhold on fusion, so I hear, but it won't be ready in any amount for a long time. There's some new work in wind power and even tidal energy from the sea, and solar power, but none of that amounts to much, yet. And yeah, methane and methanol. I read someplace where Los Angeles, California produces enough solid waste every single day that if it could be turned into methane and methanol it could power the entire tier of Pacific states from Canada to Mexico!"

"And there's no effort to use this instead of fossil fuels?"

"Here and there – Seattle, St. Louis, a few farmers, maybe some more I haven't heard about."

"Why isn't a really major effort being made to get rid of fossil fuels altogether?"

"Search me. Turning all our solid pollution into clean fuels like methanol would get rid of most air pollution as well, right? I guess it's because fossil

fuels offer the biggest profit the fastest, and that just has to go on until they're gone, no matter what the side effects – even war."

"Do you really need all the energy you use?"

"Well, we're trying to cut down."

Patiently, "Do you really need all the energy you use?"

"Well, no. I guess not. Not here, anyway. It's like the food."

At work, while eyes and fingers did their mindless thing, Harry mulled over the true nature of the Man from Mars, who wasn't from Mars. Right at the beginning he had said – asked – something about synchronicity, something about past and future and "now" existing all at once. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., in *Slaughterhouse Five,* came up with an idea like that, on the planet Tralfamadore where the natives could see time, all of time, as if it were a long valley and they were looking down on it from a mountaintop – beginning, middle, end, all of it. And we who think of time as a moving stream, sequential, linear, we were sealed inside a tank car on a railroad running up through lengths of four-inch pipe sticking out of the tank car like naval rifles out of a battleship, and we could see the scenery passing as the train moved up the valley, only we didn't know it was a train, we didn't know it was moving, we thought we were seeing events begin, and progress, and end. Well, maybe that's where the Man came from, or somewhere like it. There are a lot of mystics and the like who come up with ideas like that: that there's really only one electron in the whole universe, and it travels backward and forward in time so it seems to

reproduce itself exponentially. Some say consciousness affects the universe, even creates it; some say the universe *is* a consciousness. It's not only mystics: some far-out, high-altitude physicists are going that route. Harry wasn't about to pull a theory out of such a cosmic quagmire, not one he could believe. What he could and did believe was that the Man was real, as real as an IBM typesetter or a ham on rye. Given that, he had to accept the idea that the Man came from a place where all of time was visible and reachable. Maybe in a place like that time and space and matter and energy were interchangeable, like Einstein suspected; if so, the notion of transforming one into the other (like transforming electricity into heat or mechanical motion and back again) wasn't so hard to swallow. If you can look calmly at the idea that all times exist simultaneously, then you can look at the idea that all places are likewise "here." To travel from one place to another is done by not traveling at all, but by being totally aware of the "hereness" of the place you want to be. This takes no time, and in this sense there is no distance, and the limitations of the speed of light have nothing to do with it.

"Wow," said Harry, loud enough to cause a financial editor to swivel around in his chair; but Harry went on working and the editor swiveled back.

What he dredged up out of all this was that no matter where or when the Man came from, he probably knew the future; and (although up to now Harry had not been particularly successful at it) had allowed that he was willing to answer questions. Maybe Harry just hadn't asked the right questions.

Well, now he would.

He felt good.
He felt – armed.

"Would it make a difference in this world," asked the Man from Mars, "if every person treated every other person exactly the way he or she would like to be treated?"

"A difference? It wouldn't be this world. It would be heaven. Anyway, it can't happen here." He felt very sure of this one. He'd been through this one in college. "What you are talking about is the Golden Rule. A very old idea. I once read a collection of quotations from seventeen major religions, and every single one of them said the same thing, although the phrasing was slightly different. 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' 'Do as you would be done by.' A find old notion, but it can't work."

"Why not?"

"Well, take a big simple example. Balance of trade. When a country exports more than it imports – sells more than it buys – that's called a 'favorable balance of trade.' If you're the seller and I'm the buyer, you win on the deal; to the extent you win, I lose."

"So it isn't a balance?"

"Of course it isn't. If men and nations started treating one another by a Golden Rule sort of balance, maybe nobody would lose – but nobody would win either, and that's where it breaks down."

"Wouldn't the whole world win?"

Harry hit himself on the chest. "Number One here wouldn't – couldn't win, and that's intolerable to a man or a nation."

"Is there no feeling that all men are one, that all of them get tired in the same way, or hungry, or happy?"

"There's a word for that. Em-something. Empathy. Feeling with someone else's fingertips, seeing through someone else's eyes. 'Walk a mile in another man's moccasins,' some Indian said. Sympathy, now, there's a lot of that from time to time, like when someone has an earthquake or a typhoon or something. But empathy, there's not too much of that around."

"Is there no teaching that not only are all men one, but that all things are one thing?"

"Oh sure. Millions of people practice a religion that says just that. They go around chanting a word: *Aum* or *Om* that means (if I understand it right) both 'one' and 'all.' And they keep saying to each other (and anyone else who happens along) 'Thou art God.' But I can't see how it's changed the way the world is run in any important way. But speaking of 'Thou arts,' I have a couple of questions to ask, and I think you'll agree it's time I had my innings."

"You wish to question me?"

"Yes I wish."

"Are you aware that any correctly structured question embodies its own answer, and therefore need not be asked?"

"No you don't!" rapped Harry. "I'm not getting led around the corral and right back to the gate again, not this time."

"What is your question?"

"Questions, plural. First: do you know the future?"

"What future is that? Yours? This nation's? Your species'? This planet's? What you call the universe, perhaps, or what I call it?"

Harry had to admit that that was a good response. He certainly wasn't calling for a detailed chronology of the cosmos from now on out to the next Big Bang.

He did feel, too, that buried in that response somewhere was a 'Yes.' It certainly wasn't a 'No.'

"Okay, okay, I see I'll have to take it by little steps or you'll lose me. Let's start with you, and your 'correctly structured questions.' If they need not be asked, how come you've been asking? Wouldn't the *World Almanac* have done a better job for you?"

"Is there anything in the *World Almanac* which deals, not with facts, but with your perception of the facts? Is there any way to study that without questioning *you*?"

"All right, I can buy that. It isn't my world and my time you're studying, but how a man of my world and my time thinks about it. Hmp. I really think we're getting somewhere." Also, he was more than a little flattered, but he wouldn't say that. "Now, about the mutation I told you about, that would turn out to be meaningless unless it was identified, understood, exercised: Was the man right?"

"Can there be any doubt?"

That was as close to a flat 'Yes' as he had gotten so far. He was increasingly pleased.

"And has it been identified and understood?"

"Haven't you heard the chants of 'Om'? Aren't you aware of the the consciousness-raising groups, the Marco Philosophy, TA, TM, the Self Realization Fellowship, and all those people you yourself describe (and there are nearly a billion of them now, by the way) as going around saying 'Thou art God'?"

"Then we've found it, we've got it, we've saved it! right?"

"AUTHOR'S" NOTE:
This manuscript arrived in my mailbox, forwarded from one of my publishers. The covering letter was signed "Susan" and neither it nor the envelope bore a return address. In with the manuscript was a sealed envelope. I give you excerpts from Susan's letter, with my annotations.

"Harry's notebook was found on his desk with a letter to me clipped to it. The letter is personal, so I am not sending it, but the part about you is, he wanted me to type up what he wrote double spaced, inch-and-a-half margins, one side of the paper, pages numbered. (She did – impeccably. TS) He said to send it to you, maybe you could get it published. He said maybe you better use your name, it might have a better chance that way. He said if they pay you any money, keep it, you earned it because of something you wrote a long time ago. He said you would know what that was. (I don't. TS)

"He said after I typed the last page to put it in a separate envelope and seal it. He wanted you to look at what he wrote and think about it awhile before reading the last page and decide whether it is too dangerous to print, some people might get upset.

"I have to tell you I am upset. I feel real bad about the whole thing. To me what he wrote is a suicide note. My shrink says it is usual for a survivor to feel responsible for a death, especially if it is or might be a suicide, so don't worry, I'll get over it, thousands have. Anyway he had a bad heart. I think the story is very sad. Harry liked sad things. I once told him sad things made him happy. If that is so and this is the saddest thing he ever dreamed up, then he died happy. I guess that is a bitter thing to say but I will leave it lay. Like I said, I am upset. Harry and I had a good thing going for quite a while until he got the crazies with talking to himself and all and I took off.

"One thing I can tell you, why it is he wrote this thing in third person "He" instead of first person "I." My shrink believes in journals, the patient should write about himself in third person, it makes him stand off from himself. I told Harry that

and I think that's why he did it. They found him dead at his desk at home a week ago Monday, he must of died right after he finished the letter to me. Don't try to find me, I just did what he wanted, now I don't want any part of this anymore, and thank you."

I read the story without the last page, and then I read the last page. In Susan's words, because "I just did what he wanted," (and I'm intuitively sure that it is what he wanted) I give you his last page. Rest in peace, Harry.

TS

And the Man from Mars hesitated, for the very first time; and in that exceedingly brief moment, Harry had a flash of insight that cut deep into his marrow. It was this: that he had been insulated against fear by this Man; and when you have no fear, you may not be reached by anyone else's emotion. Anger cannot reach the fearless, nor danger, hopelessness, despair; fear is the trigger to the healthy survival mechanisms of fight and of flight; fear also is the measure of that which is dear and cherished: fear of its loss. Never until now had Harry perceived the slightest hint of emotion from the Man; but now, in that slight hesitation, a hot wave of emotion burst from him and sliced through the barrier of fearlessness – and was gone. Harry identified it. It was compassion.

"Do you really want to know?"

Fearless again, Harry responded: "I asked you, didn't I?"

Then it was (for the very first time) that the Man from Mars uttered something that was not a question, something that described a species rocketing up away from and above all others, using only a part of its gift, and the world that must ensue from that terrible and tragic imbalance.

"Identifying it and understanding it are not enough. The appearance of great and gifted gurus is not enough. Can the professor of speech teach a feral child?

"No, Harry; it cannot be taught. It is too late. The gift is lost. The window is closed. It closed nearly three thousand years ago."

Then he left, and Harry went and got his notebook and began to write.

Elizabeth A. Lynn is a relative newcomer to writing science fiction and fantasy. But she is rapidly gaining a reputation as someone to watch. To date she has sold fourteen short stories, many of which will be appearing in leading science fiction magazines this fall. In addition to writing, she teaches a course in science fiction and fantasy at San Francisco State University and reviews science fiction and fantasy for *The San Francisco Review of Books*. Lizzy also teaches Aikido, a Japanese martial art, in which she holds the rank of brown belt. When relaxing, she has the impeccable good taste to drink Dos Equis beer and Tanqueray gin.

The stories really have nothing to do with each other, so don't look for some kind of continuity of theme. "Mindseye" was written originally as a first contact story, but it turned out to be a story about insanity and reality in which "things are seldom what they seem. . . . " "The Man Who Was Pregnant" is a story about sex roles and sensuality. Pregnancy is both an individual and a social experience, and Lizzy conveys the interface of these experiences without getting all that "heavy."

MINDSEYE

by Elizabeth A. Lynn

They hovered over the planet at the edge of light. Sunlight and heat poured across one face of the world; the other was left to starlight and cold. Bands of red light flickered around the room, glowing a red warning. Phillipa reached out a hand to brush them away. She barked her knuckles on the wall. She stared out, down, transfixed above a world cut in two, one side light, one dark, one hot, one frozen. The light shields closed. She fumbled to strap in.

The ship, a silver graceful sliver, sliced out of space,

through an obscuring sky, and down into dark.

Phillipa walked to the control room. Xavier sat at his desk console, staring at numbers on his comp-screen. "This place is a freak," he said.

Phillipa sat down in a chair. She touched the light switches for a moment, and tripped the light shields. They went up. Darkness crawled outside the window. A crowd of stars lit the planet with the force of a moon. The rocks reflected starlight. She touched the switch again. The shields went down; the lights came on in the cabin. "Has this place got a name?"

"No. Just a number. M427-something. Want to name it?"

"I'd like to go outside."

Xavier scowled. It was the scowl of a punchinello puppet, ferocious and red on the dark narrow face. Phillipa said, "The reports say it has a breathable atmosphere and a gravity just under 1G. There's no good reason why I can't take a walk, Zave. If my anti-bac shots don't hold up, I'll sue."

"If your antibac shots don't hold up you'll be dead," Xavier said gloomily.

"What's the matter with you?"

Xavier looked away from the hidden windows. "I don't like freaks. This planet ought to be a Janus world, one light side, one dark side, and no rotation. It's not. It has an atmosphere – an oxygen atmosphere, yet. It has plants. It's weird."

"Can we walk around without machinery?"

"I don't want to walk around at all," Xavier said. "I like things and places that are one thing or another, and I like knowing which they are."

"We're an X-Team, Zave," Phillipa said. "That's the thing we are."

"Go out if you want to," the captain said. "We'll sit for a few days. Lui's found a bug in the Drive that he wants to fix. Seth would like us to move to the day side. It has more vegetation."

"What's the day side look like?"

"Hot, marshy, slightly volcanic. Seth says it looks like a Cretaceous mangrove swamp. Hot. About 170 degrees Fahrenheit."

"I wish you wouldn't do that," Phillipa said. "What's that in Centigrade?"

Xavier scowled at the ceiling. "About 76 degrees."

Phillipa had a sudden vision of the other side. Clouds, steam, black sooty smoke, coiling in the grip of hot winds, plumed across the dim red sky. In space a sky. On the other side of the thick clouds, in space, a huge red sun pulsed like a flapping flag. Tough twisted vines clung strongly to the stones. Lizards hid in the vines, purple and orange. As the world rotated slowly, inch by tired inch passing from day to night, shadows fell across the rocks. The vines contracted tensely. Storms lashed the twilit plains. The lizards crawled for shelter into the cracks and holes in the cooling earth. They blinked their eyelids as the light faded and the night brought out the stars their eyes would never see.

"I asked him if he wanted to wear an HT suit while he gathered his specimens. At least on the dark side he can walk out without back-packing a heating system."

"How cold is it?"

"One degree below Centigrade zero, mean temperature."

"Break out the parkas."

"Think this planet has any people on it?" Xavier said.

Phillipa nodded once. *That* was what was worrying him. Not a place, but people who might be different or strange or even dangerous. Aliens. *If they are here, I'll find them,* she thought. *But no Exploration Team has yet found aliens. Why should we?* Just alien places. "Who'd colonize the place? We won't. The Verdians wouldn't. They couldn't live here either."

"I wasn't thinking of them." Verdians were aliens but they were familiar, known. It was they who had found Terra, anyway, falling out of the sky a hundred years ago. "But there could be something here, living in caves –"

"To coexist with the polar bears? Who've you been reading, Walt Disney?"

"Who?" said Xavier blankly.

Phillipa grinned. "A twentieth century artist. Never mind. Look, anything smarter than we are would have gotten off this planet long ago." Xavier was still scowling. She imitated him.

"You don't *feel* anything?"

"When I'm locked up in the ship with the rest of you bums," Phillipa said, "the only thing I can feel is you. To do my work I have to go outside."

"So go! I said you could go. Maybe I'll take a trek – stretch my legs a bit. Even if this place *is* creepy."

Phillipa said, "Creepy? That's not a very scientific term. You going to put that into your report, Zave? *This place is creepy, folks.*"

But creepy was a good word. *This place makes me feel like there's something creeping up on me.*

She was sitting in a cul-de-sac of rock. Beyond the jagged brim above her head, the lights of the ship glimmered a false dawn. True dawn was long ago and

far away. She had looked closely at the reports before leaving the ship. It took this planet nine standard years to go around the sun, and almost a thousand standard years to turn from dawn to dawn. A year was nine years long and a day was a millenium. Five hundred years of night.

It felt good to be away from the ship for a while. Phillipa relaxed and extended her mind. Nothing. Some animals, too dull to catch. This was their final stop; from here they were going home to Main Base on Nexus. One more long Jump through the Hype. She counted. They had stopped on four planets. Too many. Already the team was beginning to show signs of entropic disturbances. Xavier's xenophobia was not normal. And the Drive crew, Lui especially, had lapsed into near-autism. Too many jumps between spacetime normal and hyperspace would do that, would joggle the brain. She could feel their limits stretching, the shape of their sanities changing. And she, Phillipa, the telepath of the team – who would feel it when she broke? Who would heal the tear?

She shook herself mentally. There it was again, that creeping depression. *Have to stop that.*

The cold was getting at her hands and she tucked them under her armpits, into the warmth of the parka. The cold slapped her cheeks with hands of windblown ice. She reached up and pulled the drawstrings tighter, pulling the fur hood round her face. She tried to imagine herself home on Terra, standing in a field, with the bright yellow lights of houses shining across snow. The picture came strangely into her mind. *Memory distortion,* said a remembered voice, *is an early clinical sign of entropic disorientation.* Andresson, at the Institute. She had said that.

Phillipa stamped around on the rock. Time to be getting back. The ship's lights glared across the tundra as if it were facing an enemy. The ice-coated rocks glared back. Did animals truly live in this cold? This cold that never let up, that lasted a thousand years? She pictured little furry things, rats, owls with immense eyes, and scaly lizards that hid in the thickly matted vines. She tugged on a tendril of vine. It gave reluctantly. Water slicked her glove. The drops, tinged with orange, made her think of eyes.

She turned to leave the cul-de-sac.

Stopped.

There was a youth standing in the mouth of the cul-de-sac. White skin, white hair, white eyebrows – an albino, Phillipa thought. But, no, his eyes are black. Then she realized that those were the youth's pupils, round, huge, like cats' eyes, like an owl's eyes. He was about 1.7 meters tall. He was naked. He was human.

Phillipa felt her heartbeat race. Eyes, ears, nose, fingers and toes, bare toes on the ground, it made no sense! Amazed, she looked into the other's face.

A claw dug into her brain. She was a battered branch whipped by a tossing wind.

At Psi Center, where she had trained to work on an X-Team, the final examination had been a no-holds-barred attempt at telepathic takeover. It had not been gentle, it had left her shaking and sick, but whole. She had passed. This was like death.

She felt her body break, and fall.

She came out of the mind's darkness into more darkness. Above her there were stars. She was lying on something soft. She turned to look; it was the vines. They smelt metallic. She shifted, braced her hands against them, trying to sit up. She only achieved a deep trembling. She lay still.

Black eyes in a white face bent over her. She flinched.

"I am sorry," said a soft voice in her own language. "I did not mean to hurt you."

"I'm just weak," she said. She tried to sit up again. An arm came round her shoulders to help. Through the fabric and fur of her parka she felt it, like a cold bar against her flesh.

"You have been unconscious," said the alien.

"How long?"

"Three standard hours." All that is taken from my mind, Phillipa thought. She felt emptied. Check for the pattern. You are an X-Team telepath, that is your skill and your training and your job. All beings have patterns. Find out what kind of a being this is – touch its mind.

She could not. She was too weak.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"My name is Cold."

A tutelary spirit? This isn't real. I'm hallucinating. I must tell Zave. She closed her eyes, trying to will herself into the ship's infirmary, with its deep-sided bunks and shaded lights. But when she opened her eyes it was all still there, vines, ice, Cold. She forced her numb hand towards her face, and touched the stud of her communicator.

"Phil!" Xavier's voice fell thudding into the small space. "Where the hell are you?"

"In a small dead-end canyon. I can see the lights of the ship."

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm not sure. I fell and blacked out." She looked at the alien. "Zave, listen. There are people on this

planet. One, anyway. Humanoid, advanced, and not hostile. I'm serious."

"Sure, but are you sane? Don't switch off, you hear? We'll find you."

When Xavier and the others came, the alien had gone, and Phillipa had managed to stand up.

They put her in the Infirmary, and Mickey put her to sleep. When she woke, the ship's time was morning. Xavier was sitting by the bed. "Hi," she said.

"Hi. How you feeling?"

She stretched. She was weakened. Her mind felt bruised. "Tired."

"Mickey says there's nothing the matter with you that some rest won't fix. Out in the cold too long. What the hell happened to you?"

"Maybe I fell over a rock."

"Could be. And you had a dream about friendly humanoids?"

Phillipa said, "It wasn't a dream, Zave. He was there."

"Did you speak with him?"

"Yes."

"In what language?"

"In my own." She saw Zave's face twist skeptically. "He took it from my mind, Zave. He was a telepath."

"It sounds nuts," Xavier said. "Lab is testing the vines now for hallucinogens. You fell on a bed of them. But I think the Hype is getting to you, Phil. Lui says he's almost finished playing with the Drive. It's time we all got home."

Phillipa turned her face to the wall. Home. What was home? There was a crack in her mind, and the ice was coming through it. The cells in her brain had

been pushed askew; she could almost feel them, like a break in a plate. "You don't understand," she said wearily. "He *was* there."

She woke again. Ship's time said late afternoon. Some measure of balance had returned to her. *Maybe Xavier's right,* she thought. Of course he's right! *You noticed the early signs yourself, the depression, the memory distortion.* Time for us all to be home. Back to Psi Center. But that thought brought back, with jolting force, the spongy sensation of vines beneath her back, a cold arm holding her, and a canopy of sky like a black blanket with stars poking through it like knives.

"Hey, Mickey."

The medic turned around. "You awake again? How do you feel?"

"Better." Phillipa sat up. "Can I get out of here, or do I have to stay in bed?"

"You're not confined," Mickey said. She pushed the buttons that released the sides of the bed. "Just take it easy. Your clothes are in that panel. If you begin to feel disoriented, come back here and go to sleep some more."

"All right."

She went to the Drive Core to watch the engineers. At Psi Center they had trained for a while on a simulated ship. Phillipa knew enough to keep out of the way. The Verdians had discovered the principles of hyperdrive but had been unable to do more. Ilse Perse on Old Terra had created the Drive and seen the first starship Jump out into the Hype.

Warp space, hyperspace, the Hype – there were no stars in it, just clouds of congealing dust. Entropy

was different within hyperspace. It was partially congruent to spacetime normal. The routes it provided through the galaxy could be mapped – were being mapped. Unmanned ships with sensors did the mappings, and peopled ships followed them, Jumping through the Hype to one and then another place within spacetime normal.

The first men and women to go into warp space had come back insane, when they came back at all.

That discovery had resulted in the word hyperspace being shortened to the bitter exclamation: *The Hype.* Phillipa had seen – not met, you could not call it a meeting – some of these returnees; people of immense courage and hope, shut in a box bounded by the bone of their skulls, locked into an internal reality so cohesive and demanding that the most skilled therapists, the most powerful telepaths, and all the drugs in the world could not touch them. The Hype had done that to them. *The Hype could do that to me.* It would be like climbing endlessly within a mountain range of ice; clear, smooth, reflecting ice, ice like a mirror, so that wherever you went you saw only, in a hundred thousand different distortions, your own face.

Stop that!

"Hey." Xavier bobbed up in front of her, his clown's face a mask of concern. "What're you doing, just sitting here? Come and eat dinner."

Phillipa looked around. The Core was empty; the engineers had gone. "Now why the hell didn't they tell me?" she grumbled. But she knew why; they most likely hadn't seen her. Creeping autism, she thought. I'm not real to them anymore, none of us are. Only machines are real. *They forgot that I might want to eat. The Drive doesn't.*

"You're looking better."

"Maybe hallucinating is good for me."

"Doubt it," grunted Xavier.

"I gather nobody else has seen a thing."

"Nothing but rocks and ice and snow and those damn vines. But if anybody has a similar vision I'll let you know."

"If they start seeing naked albinos creeping around –"

"I'll apologize."

Xavier was afraid. She could feel his fear. He was afraid of what was happening to her, to him, to them all. "We're all right, Zave," she said gently. "We're all right and we're going to get home safe. What's there to stop us?"

"Imaginary albino telepaths," Zave said. "I don't mind you hallucinating aliens, Phil, but naked humans, in a place where no human would ever survive naked – why human?"

"I guess it means I want to go home, Zave."

After dinner she went to her cubicle and lay down. She thought about home, Terra, Earth they called it once. Now there were colonies on many planets. She made a litany of their names and sang it: New Terra, New Terrain, Nexus Compcenter, Ley, Pellin, Azure, Ambience, Altair, Enchanter, Skell – all with bright suns and flowers and years made of days, not days made of years. It was hard to concentrate: her thoughts kept sliding into the ice and darkness outside the walls. *Go to the Infirmary. Get Mickey to take a look at you.* What for? It's my mind. Nobody can heal my mind, except another telepath. She started to walk to the Infirmary anyway, tripping all the light shields as

she passed them, because it was important that as little of the darkness as possible get into the ship. She could see it, in her mind's eye, pressing on the windows, trying to creep in.

Takeo and Zave and Seth were standing in the hall. "I'm going to take a walk," Takeo said. "How much time have I got?"

"About an hour," said the captain.

"I won't stay out that long, it's cold out there, man!"

"I'll come with you," Seth said. "I want to hack off a few more plant samples." Cold out there. Was Cold trying to get into the ship, with the dark? She didn't want him. She would tell him that, she would go to him and tell him to stay out of the ship, stay away, stay out of my mind. She was a telepath, he was a telepath, she could talk to him.

She crept down the corridor after Takeo.

The wind on the tundra numbed cheeks and fingers and toes. Takeo and Seth had put on their LT suits, and they trundled along like obscene mummified snowmen, Phillipa, walking unseen in the shadows, felt winged in comparison. She let them get ahead of her, and then turned. What would the animals in the crevices of the rocks think of the strange beings stomping at them? She laughed. They would barely notice her. She had been there before – she was not a stranger anymore.

The darkness seemed pleasant now, natural, not threatening at all. The ice rustled and chattered around her as she walked into a maze of tall crags. Soon she could not see the ship's lights. She walked through darkness until a white hand came out of the night and

led her into a cave. There was a fire leaping within a rocky niche. It lit the interior with a sullen glow. "Am I dreaming you?" Phillipa said to the alien. "Are you only something in my mind?"

"I am real," said the soft voice.

Phillipa said, "Why do you look human? Why are you naked?"

"I am *Myrkt*."

A name? Yes, but not a personal name, a racial name. "I don't understand," Phillipa said. Even here, by the fire, the cold numbed her mind.

"We are – chameleon? Yes. That word. To you I am human. To a Verdian I will be a Verdian. To a fish, a fish. To the rock-lizards I am a scaly god."

"Are there more of you?"

"I am alone here."

"Are there any more like you? Where is your home-world, your home?"

"Home? What is home? I live here. One lives there." The white arm flung out, pointing at the stars. "One lives there. One lives there. That is all. There are no more."

Not human. "How long have you been here?"

"A day and a night, of this world."

A day and a night of this world was a thousand years.

"Phillipa!" a voice boomed at her. "Phil, turn on your communicator. Phil!" Silence, and then it began again. "Phil!"

What could you do for a thousand years? The alien touched her, drew her deeper into the cave. Eyes sparkled at her, scores of them, unblinking, unmoving. Animals, birds, fish, people, great sculptures made of ice. There was a bird with outflung wings, and a

woman bending her body in a hoop to the ground, and a giant beetle with outjutting claws. A voice still called her name. The fire in the niche leaped higher, and the ice sculptures shone. The Myrkt's skin glittered like the things he had made.

"What is human?" said the Myrkt.

Human is. . . . "There are patterns," Phillipa said. For a moment she thought of tall blond Andresson. Andresson, that is human. How did you get in here, Kirsten? "There are twenty-two, no, twenty-five patterns. Twelve Verdian patterns. That is human, those mental patterns."

"What is alien? Am I? I look like you."

"You can look like anything, you told me."

"Did I?" A woman's voice. A woman in white stood by her, with frosty hair. Phillipa knew her. Named her.

"The Ice Princess."

"What is that?" The black eyes were rapacious. "Tell me."

"The Ice Princess lives on top of a mountain of ice. She is very beautiful, but she has no heart. Men climb the ice mountain for love of her beauty, and perish in the cold and the dark. The mountain is covered with bodies, frozen bodies of men, dogs, birds, fishes, beetles. . . ." *That's not how it goes!* She couldn't remember. The ice in the cave glittered terribly.

"Was she human?"

"I don't know," Phillipa said. "She could have been, but she had no heart."

"What is that – heart? Heart is like a pattern? How may I get it?" A white face stooped to hers. It was a burning cinder, a cold star. Palms touched her face.

Cold – cold as death, cold as cold metal burning

against bare skin. Illusion swirled and changed and died. Inside her mind something spoke to her, telling of loss, of loneliness, of desperate greed. Then the pictures shattered.

They found her at last after a four-hour search, crouching in a corner of rock and ice, in a cave, unseeing and silent as the ice. She was alive, that was all. Mickey felt her all over. "Nothing broken. Phillipa? Phil?" They could not rouse her. At last they made a cradle and carried her between them, limp, out of the grotesquely embellished cave. And Xavier, using his heavy metal searchlight as a club, hammered at as many of the statues as he could reach, until a rubble of broken ice littered the frozen lightless ground.

THE MAN WHO WAS PREGNANT

by Elizabeth A. Lynn

He was an unlikely looking man to be a mother: tall, with a bushy brown beard and long hair, stolidly and solidly male. He was hairy and not very strong. As a child he had been fat. He liked loose clothes; tunics, dashikis. The first thing he did when he realized he was pregnant was buy a bright orange caftan and hang it away in his closet. Sometimes he would touch it, the coarse sturdy cotton like the kind bedspreads are made from, and picture himself inside it, swelling it out like a tent. Both his sisters had worn maternity

clothes during their respective pregnancies and would have been glad to lend him shirts and tunics, but he preferred the somewhat asexual look of the caftan. It lent dignity to an otherwise puzzling and slightly ridiculous event.

He was unsure how he could be pregnant. He had had all the usual childhood diseases and examinations. In 1969 during his Army physical (he had been rejected for active duty for a heart murmur about which he had never known and which never gave him any trouble) doctors had probed and palpated and x-rayed (it seemed) every inch of him and had found no anomalies, nothing out of place, no extra organs. He went to the main library and looked for other cases like his own. The librarian directed him to the references on sympathetic pregnancies. He read them dutifully but they told him nothing. There was no such thing, after all, as a sympathetic rabbit test. He *was* pregnant.

It was even more of a puzzle to him how he could have gotten pregnant. His sex life was healthy. He was between attachments but had two steady liaisons going, one with Louise who worked in a bookstore, the other with Sandy who waited tables in a men's bar. Louise could clearly have had nothing to do with the event, and therefore Sandy must have – but the logistics seemed shaky. His sisters made rude and ribald comments about virgin births.

The doctors at first simply refused to believe that he was pregnant, despite all their test results. They decided that he was crazy, or hoaxing them, or that he had a "mass" or a lesion or a hernia or anything but a baby growing inside him. The woman doctor who examined him was just as intransigent as the men.

They wanted to keep him in the hospital, they told him. He realized that they wanted to keep him the full nine months. He decided that this was an unnatural situation in which to have a baby and signed out AMA, which meant against medical advice.

His sisters, Ruth and Nancy, swung between sisterly concern and incredulity. It did not help that they were both older than he. When he started getting morning sickness in his third month they told him to cut out all coffee before lunch. It worked. They could both sew, he had never learned; he brought his pants to them to open the waistbands and seams.

He started "showing" at the fourth month. By the fifth he was able to take the caftan from its hanger and slip it on. He wore T-shirts under the caftan. One morning he left off the T-shirt. The coarse fabric rubbed his nipples pleasantly. He stopped wearing T-shirts altogether. He liked sunlight. The window of his studio faced south; he moved his bed into the area of sun. During the day he lay naked on the bed, drenched in sun, touching himself – his nipples, his cock, and the swelling flesh between. He masturbated. It was dizzying to feel his cock stiffen in one palm, and pass his other palm over the soft stretched skin of his belly.

One afternoon as he caressed himself the baby moved, kicked. He cried out. The baby was there, alive, there.

He was a printer, but he had been unemployed for nearly a year and had gotten used to daytime solitude. Every once in a while he missed the companionship of the shop. But he had always preferred having lovers to having friends. He visited Louise at the bookstore. She liked to chat with him, she even set

aside baby books for him to look at, but she would not visit his apartment. He was too shy to go into the men's bars; his relationship with Sandy came to an abrupt but natural end.

He spent a lot of time with his sisters and their friends. At night he read or watched television. His downstairs neighbors, a couple with a two-year-old son, invited him to dinner. He went. They were vegetarians. After dinner they passed a joint. Sara remarked that she had smoked dope all through her pregnancy and that Jorma (named after Jorma Kaukonen of the Jefferson Airplane) didn't seem the worse for it. Tony said that he had read that it was okay after the fifth month. Jorma fell asleep on the floor.

In the seventh month he got tremendously depressed. The abnormality of his state began to terrify him. There was no one like him in the world, no one to reassure him or tell him what to do. How could he have a baby? Where would it come out? He read in his books about ectopic pregnancies. He contemplated going back to the hospital but could not see how that would help. The doctors knew less than he. He stopped going out, except to buy food at a corner store. He watched a lot of television, even daytime television, although the game shows repelled him. He sat in his window and watched the traffic pass on the street below. His back hurt.

In the eighth month his breasts began to grow and ache and his cock to shrink. He understood: his body was making a pathway for the baby. His depression vanished. He went back to the bookstore and bought books on natural childbirth. Sara and Tony helped him do the exercises and learn the breathing tech-

niques. His sisters had a fight over whether or not he should go to the hospital. Nancy stopped speaking to him or to Ruth. But one day she called him, crying, to tell him she loved him and that he should do whatever he wanted to do, that he would always be her baby brother.

He went into labor one night at home. Sara called a woman she knew from a midwife collective to help. Tony counted and rubbed his back and yelled at him to breathe. The labor went on for a long time; he fell asleep in the middle of it (not a real sleep, just a drowse) until the contractions woke him up. The baby was born in the afternoon, in the sun, and named Kris. It was his mother's name. Sara pointed out it was short for Krishna. He could not remember when Ruth and Nancy had arrived, but they were there. The midwife praised them all for their spirit, and gave them the name of a pediatrician. It did not seem to him that it could be over. He rubbed his nipple against the baby's tiny lips.

When the doctors finally came around to check on him, he pretended to be his own (nonexistent) brother. He told them that he had moved away. They seemed relieved to hear that. They shook his hand. The woman doctor smiled at Kris.

After that nobody came to ask questions. He lost all the weight that he had gained during the pregnancy. His cock regained its normal size. Except for the stretch marks and the darkened wide aureoles of his breasts there was nothing to show that he had been pregnant. Under Jorma's tutelage, Kris began to call him Da and not Ma.

The orange caftan hung shapeless and unused in the closet. He took it out one day, meaning to give

it to Ruth to make into a shirt. The smell of it was familiar and interesting. He put it on, and wore it like regalia around the studio, till one of his sisters commented unmaliciously that it made him look swish. The word offended. He took it off again, and when he went to look for it some months later it had disappeared.

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Charles L. Grant is a full-time writer of fantasy, horror and science fiction tales, with over three dozen stories and nine novels sold. In addition, he is the editor of *Writing and Selling Science Fiction* and an original horror story anthology to be published later this year. He has been nominated three times for the Nebula Award and once for the Hugo, winning the Nebula for best short story (1976). He is primarily known as a fantasy author, and that's fine with him. Charlie is totally addicted to horror/fantasy films and is notorious to his neighbors as the strange guy who sits up late at night watching weird movies on the boob tube.

"The Dark of Legends, The Light of Lies" is the fourth in a tetralogy dealing with science fiction and/or horror as it concerns the arts. Capturing the mood and style of Ray Bradbury's short stories of the late 1940s and early 1950s, this story could not have been written by Charlie through any other medium except the horror/fantasy genre. The fact that it happens to take place in an indefinable future is purely coincidence. Here you should be warned that Charlie's kind of horror story creeps up on you gradually, with great malice aforethought. Then . . . watch out!

THE DARK OF LEGENDS, THE LIGHT OF LIES

by Charles L. Grant

The hills of October are laden with ghosts, and that lone stand of birch is a white cage for a whisper.

To mark that now as a beginning is simple enough when hindsight lends its not-so-calming torch to the confusion of fear; but to mark it as an ending is something to which I will not let myself repair, not yet. Not even now, not even beneath the fading to brown

golds and reds where the wind has stopped and shadows still drift, where the wind has died and sighs still hover. Perhaps it's because I refuse to admit it, or perhaps it's because I admit it finally and will not fight it. To fight implies a possibility, a chance, an unexpected twist of Fate in my favor that will bring me the win, the victory, or at the very least . . . the pause. Yet, not to fight likewise implies that I have been beaten, I have lost, I have no hope at all that there is a waiting Fate. Confusing it is, and I am confused to be sure, but the one thing I still know, the one thing my senses will not rob me of in this twilight of too many things, is the assurance that what has been done has been done because the future came to pass and I was not ready.

Assurance.
Or judgment.
No matter.
It ends.

There are very few things convincing and real that will force a man to a mirror and show him the absolute truth of his talent. I had resisted, both stubbornly and childishly, not only the blandishments of my employer, but also the sweet sympathy of my friends; resisted the damnation of my dreams until, as always, the incongruous and the unlikely came to their aid. And again, as always, I didn't know it until it was over.

I was still in my office well after hours, working on a manuscript flashing slowly across the desk screen of my comp. With litepen in hand, I was trying to make a masterpiece of something that should not have even been dreamt of, much less written. That part wasn't unusual. I did it for a living, such as it was, along with

two other editors in a Philayork firm, one of less than a similar dozen still in existence, still plodding, still dreaming of the days when people held books instead of each other. The words flowed across the screen and I corrected almost automatically, paying no attention to the plot because I'd read it eight times already, and it wasn't much different from the dozens of others I'd read that year. Admittedly, it was realistic – as it had to be to get anywhere – and it even had a romance that boded well to last beyond the final page. That was all right, too. That would help it sell. The trouble with this novel (not to mention those dozens of others) was, it was both too short and too bare, and I was attempting to correct that, too, when Neil Benson slammed into the small room and did not stop running until he came up hard against the front of my desk.

I looked up and smiled. Neil was beefy and jowled, and when he laughed his ghost-pale eyes vanished into purple-shadow folds. This time, however, he was glaring, and my greeting smile drifted to one side hesitantly before it disappeared.

"You're still working," he said.

I shrugged, but restrained from pointing out the obvious.

"Damnit, why haven't you finished, Simon? Don't you know we have a deadline on this one for tomorrow? This thing has got to be at comprint before noon. My God, man, don't you have any sympathy for me at all?"

Sympathy for him I would never have. He was the editor-in-chief of BenEl Publications and the publisher of five novels a month, five novels that vanished into the cityplex and were never heard of again. It wasn't his fault, though, I'll give him that much. All the

firms were the same, struggling manfully if not gainfully against the floodtide of extinction. But sympathy? For the others, perhaps, but not a whit for Benson.

"Simon," he said when I didn't answer immediately, "I'm beginning to think you've delayed me for the last time. I've already looked over what you've done on this one to date, and instead of doing what you're paid for – and you surely remember what you're paid for, don't you, Simon? – instead of doing what Joanna and Alex do without giving me any trouble, you've made this thing at least twice as long! Twice, Simon! Twice!"

"Well, it should be, Neil," I said, miraculously sounding more calm than I felt. "It can't be told in fewer words than that."

Neil shook his head, almost in sorrow, and might have said something more to carry out his threat of dismissal had we not been interrupted by a forced cough at the door. Two heads – one framed in soft black hair that curled at the ends and was Joanna; the other desperately struggling against baldness, and losing, and was Alex. Neil straightened and glared at them, turned back to me and jabbed a stunted thumb at my compterm's segmented hood.

"You will finish this before you leave, Simon. Finish it and be ready for the next one in the morning."

"I thought I was fired."

He rolled his eyes, closed them, and I thought I had finally pushed him a shade too far. "How," he said, "can I fire you? If I did, you would only go somewhere else and do the same to the next man." His eyes closed again, his features softened, and for a moment I thought he would slump to the floor. "Simon," and now his voice was quiet, "when you're not lugging that banner for your crusade, you're one

of the best men around here, and you know it. Your trouble is, among other things, you worry too much about the novels and not enough about the firm. You care too much for the authors."

"Maybe that's because I'm one myself."

"No, you're not, Simon. I wish you were, believe me, but you're not."

I traced my forefinger over the screen while I thought about what he'd said. But before I could compose a reasonably strong retort he had sniffed, grunted, jabbed the hood again for emphasis and turned on his heels. At the door he muttered something to Joanna and Alex and pushed between them to vanish into the dim light beyond.

Alex, as lank as I but looking ten years older, rubbed a palm over his mouth and chin. Then he tapped a finger lightly against the jamb. "You going to be long?" he asked.

"Long enough it looks like," I said.

"Simon," Joanna said, "why don't you quit now and come in early tomorrow? We've been waiting to have dinner with you, if you want to come."

"I want," I said, swearing at Neil through my regret, "but I can't. You heard the man. I have to cut out everything I put in and have it all ready for comprint by morning."

Alex clucked, Joanna blew me a kiss, and they pulled back into the corridor, leaving me alone.

It has been said by those who emulate birds and foolish butterflies that the nightlights of Philayork are enough to rival any other cityplex in the known world, the universe, even that bold infinity beyond. I accept the hyperbole for what it is: a prideful celebration of one of the largest Noram population

centers on the continent. But as for the universe and the immeasurable infinity beyond . . . that judgment I'll leave up to those who live in the Colony Domes scattered throughout the solar system. Myself, I was just as glad that BenEl had interior offices so I didn't have to look out and see those famed lights. Neil's anger had produced a reaction of my own, and I was in no mood for poetics, rather needed only a slight shove more to send me home for good.

Damnit, I thought as I turned back to my desk, now I'll probably have those damned dreams again!

But I did the work required, and did it well. Though the taste in my mouth was something else again.

Then, instead of rushing directly back to my Key, I decided to walk.

Alone.

Not nearly as bad as one would think. There's a hell of a difference (the old cliché goes, and rightly) between alone and lonely; the former is mine by choice and preference, in lifestyle and thoughts; the latter seldom touched me save when I tried to be more than I was (if Neil is any judge, and the others an objective jury). But I couldn't help it. At thirty-seven, habits resist dying. Besides, I had been raised in the Fringe, the outer limits of the cityplex that ended in blank walls facing blindly the hills and the trees of the country's Outland. The Fringe isn't a gutter by any means, but neither is it the elegance of City Prime. The Fringe is . . . the Fringe; and when my mother died giving birth to a stillborn sister, my father took the easy way out (though not so easy for him, I admit), and I was left to beg and scrounge and thus skipped entirely the compulsory University most Noram children were shuttled through.

Without a trade, then, and without a legal means of accumulating creds and coin, I wandered for years from doorway to doorway, from Keyloft to Keyloft whenever a woman took pity and coveted my love-making. I learned, though, damn but I learned. From the women, from the newses in the streets and the newshawks on the communit, from the ed channels when I could watch them, and from dozens of battered bound books I found in alleys, in homes, wherever I could. Some were texts long outdated and not even University used, many of them were novels, and many of those were old enough to intrigue and puzzle. They were long, they were wordy, evocative and moody, and in numbers of cases the print was incredibly small. A puzzlement, as I said, but an incredible fascination.

Eventually, however, I grew tired of living vampiric and I tried writing, liked it, but sold not a word.

There is one book, however, that I . . .

Later.

Later.

Not having sold, then, I decided to work from the inside out, and hoped to bide my time with BenEl until my time finally came.

And each time I thought that it had, there was always Neil and Alex and the dark-eyed Joanna to smile and pat and wash me behind my ears.

The sidewalk was crowded with gaily dressed peds heading for the joyhalls and cinema bowls; the air was barely tinged with a warning approach of October; and I felt for a delightful moment as if Philayork were indeed the greatest plex on earth. I ambled, and passed children crouched over a sparkling spinning toy, a couple listening to a joyhall advoc enticing them into the game and the gambling and the holo-

film adventures. The Blues were out, too, walking their patrols and pointing directions, always polite, always imposing. A lousy job being a cop, I thought as I passed one, and gave him a bright smile that nearly rocked him off his feet.

When I strolled away I was laughing, and when a hand touched my arm, I turned and the laugh faded in nearly a choke.

A stranger, a man, in a black lapelled suit edged in muted gold, a dark face with dark hair fashionably tipped blond and curling over a deep-lined forehead. He was tall, taller than any man I'd ever seen, and before I could question his intent he handed me a card. Relaxing and thinking him a shill for a Lover, I made to slip the card into my pocket and be on my way. He stopped me with a look. I read the card.

"All right, Jonathan Dare," I said, and he nodded. "I'm sorry, but as they say, you seem to have the advantage. Do I know you from somewhere?"

"In a manner of speaking," he said, his voice not quite matching the heft of his bulk. "You're Simon Wallace."

"True. That's true. And now that we know each other . . . so what?"

I didn't like being curt, but then I didn't much care for his expression. I'd seen it once before, just before Neil had fired the late fourth member of our so-called editorial team. A look of complete satisfaction at a deed well done; no matter how bloody or awful, it was a deed well done.

"If you're Simon Wallace –"

"Come on, I just told you I was."

"– then you're the man who works on my books."

Had I the chance then I would have turned and run, or flown, or searched for a hole I could crawl

quickly into. But under the circumstances, I could do nothing but gape at him stupidly. Jonathan Dare. He was the giant who wrote small books, small books that sold and kept BenEl afloat. Not that he was any different from any of the other authors in Noram; he simply followed the lucrative formula of simplicity and large print better than most.

"All right," I said, "that's me. But I'm off duty now, if you'll excuse the expression, and unless it's really important I'd like to go on home. Where I was heading, by the way, before you stopped me. Home. I have my own Key, you see –"

The man had frightened me into babbling, and I feel no shame for it. His height was imposing, his heft unbelievable, but his face and the glaring white teeth in his feral smile gave him an aspect of the Reaper I didn't need knowing. I edged away, hopefully unnoticed, and he took a pace to close the gap, took my arm and pulled me closer.

"I just want you to know, Wallace," he said, "that we've been told what you're trying to do to us."

"We?" I must have announced my fear, because his smile broadened and he leaned closer, his breath warm, his grip now tight enough to make me gasp.

"Let me put it to you this way, Mr. Wallace. In simple terms. You are long out of date, way too long out of date, and we do not appreciate you trying to drag us down with you. It's difficult enough trying to make a living without your meddling and your so-called editorial discretion. Benson told me you've delayed my new novel for the second time. I can't afford that, Wallace, none of us can. If the books stop coming out, no one will pick them up again. So why don't you just do us all a big favor and get the hell out, go find a grave and write yourself an epitaph."

"I'll call a Blue," I said.

"Do that, Mr. Wallace, and he'll never know what you wanted."

He released me abruptly and strode into the crowds that jostled me as I tried to follow his departure. My hands were wet, my neck stiff with tension, and I could feel blades of perspiration stabbing down my chest and back. A Blue marched by and I almost grabbed his arm, stopped myself when I realized I had no legal cause. The threat was between Dare and myself, and no one else had heard it; and if someone had, they couldn't have understood it. Instead, I hurried down the boulevard toward my loft building and saw nothing on the way but shadows that trailed me and that foul dark face grinning at me from every shop window.

And when I had finally, centuries later, reached my own neighborhood, the fear had drained and anger had taken its place. An anger I had grown used to over the past several months, an anger that surged whenever I read those books I'd saved and compared them to the books whose accomplice I was in letting them out. I kept telling myself, of course, that a country's population moves with the times, and the times had been moving too rapidly for the leisure that novels needed. Why sit and read when you could catch the comunit and learn, play the joyhalls and win, be safely immersed in bloody spectaculars by paying the price at a cinema bowl? That was nothing new, nor was it original with my generation; it was as ancient as the idea that Columbus had been the first to cross the ocean and sight Noram's ancestor.

No, that's not what angered me, not entirely. That part was the inevitable result of advancement and

regression. What angered me was that I still did not know why men like Jonathan Dare, understanding all that they did, continued to write.

I took the liftube to my floor, went inside the three-room Key and leaned against the door. Tans and browns worked to calm me. A sprinkling of red at chair and couch, the blank gray face of the comunit's wall screen a meter square, the lamp that glowed golden as soon as I entered. But I wasn't calmed. I would have to, once again, do my own purging.

I made a fist of both hands and clasped it to my forehead, pressed hard, pressed harder, gathered the acid anger into my throat and tightened my lips. Grunted. Once. Loudly. And it was gone, all of it gone, and I sagged onto the couch, thankful that one more time I had stopped myself from screaming.

. I dreamed that night.

I dreamed of shadows and things, of dark corners and things, of shadows and dark corners . . . and something that waited to spring.

It was a familiar dream, too familiar and too frequent.

And when I awoke, I thought I saw a shadow in the corner.

2

Several days later, Joanna and I left a poorly renovated theatre well beyond the regular entertainment strips. We'd just seen a revival of a fifty-year-old play, and we were more than slightly depressed. She had feathered her hair over both shoulders, was wearing a soft cotton tunic suit of light gray and greens, and in

the silence that cloaked us I realized for the first time (after dreaming of it often enough, wistfully enough) that I loved her. Her left hand grasped my elbow, and I hugged her fingers to my side, breathing deeply to stall time and perhaps the moment and us with it.

"It's sad," she said finally, her dark lips in a pout, a glance over her shoulder.

"No kidding? I thought it was supposed to be a comedy."

She slapped playfully at my arm without laughing, and for the briefest of moments rested her cheek on my shoulder. The briefest of moments.

"No, Simon, I mean the whole thing about all these plays. They try to bring them back, and they don't work. Did you see that audience back there? They didn't know what to do, Simon. They were waiting for volcanoes and hurricanes, things like they get on the regular stage. They didn't even know when to laugh!"

"So? A play fifty years old is fifty years old. They weren't putting floods on stage back then, remember."

"I know, and that's what makes it so sad somehow. Those poor people, and us included I guess, weren't used to just actors saying lines. I heard some guy keep asking when the earthquake would start."

"All right," I said, frowning, "so they're used to having things done for them, and to them. So that's the way things are, Jo. What can I say?"

"Nothing," she said after a disturbing pause. "It's just like your books."

I nodded without thinking, knowing she was referring not only to those BenEl novels we worked on every day, but also my own abortive attempts to copy the old ones I'd read when I was fighting to get

out of the Fringe. I had written three . . . but they were far too old.

"Like my books," I repeated. "Well . . . I'm not all that sure, actually. Partly, that's true, I guess. But there's something else, Jo, and I don't have a name for what it is, something more than just big letters and simplistic plots. I'm going to figure out why things have turned out this way, I've been trying on my own, but. . ."

She stopped suddenly and put a hand to my chest. "And so what if you're right, Simon?" she said, nearly angry. "What if you do come up with whatever that 'something else' is? What good's it going to do? It won't change things. Books won't change, plays won't change . . . what damned good is it, Simon, that you're ruining yourself trying to find something no one cares about?"

"The good is that we *might* be able to change things, make things like . . . well—"

"No." There was no equivocation, no leeway for argument. Just a statement of fact. "No, Simon, and that's why you're sad, too. There's no room for that kind of change anymore."

My hands reached for her shoulders, but she turned and walked away from me. A few moments later, swallowing to keep the anger down, I hurried to catch up, this time not touching. "Look, Jo," I said earnestly, "if you helped me read those old books, and read my new novel, maybe the two of us could find out why this has all happened and what we can do to fix it."

"Alex was right," she said, more to herself than to me. "He told me yesterday you were driving yourself toward a firing and a breakdown. He was right. Blessed priest, Simon, he was right. Your trouble is,

you won't accept things the way they turned out to be, things that can't change no matter what you do."

"Jo, that's unfair. There're all kinds of ways we –" But I never finished. I looked across the street and saw a shadow standing in a doorway on the other side. At first I thought it was Dare or one of his friends after me again, but it wasn't. It was only a shadow, standing, waiting, but I'll be damned if I knew for what.

But I said nothing to Jo. She was still angry with me, and I knew she wouldn't believe me if I tried to point the shadow out to her. And to show her there were no lights over there, nothing from which a shadow could be born.

Later I tried to talk to her about finding out what happened to the books, and why my attempts at writing were not working, but she refused to listen. "Simon, just take me home, all right? I'm tired, and I don't want to have to fight with you."

I did, reluctantly, and when I got home and grunted away my anger, I fell into bed without disrobing, kicked my clothes off sometime after midnight and almost, but not quite, slept.

I dreamt again. And could not fight it.

of shadows that spun in some forgotten corner, scattering, coalescing, growing into mockeries of faces that reached across a starkly bare room, grasping and holding nothing, sighing and noiseless;

of shadows that dropped like nets from rotted rafters, spreading wings but not flying, soaring but not moving, each with a dark face that I thought I should know;

of shadows lurking somewhere in the shadow of shadows – growing, reaching soaring, flying, grasp-

ing, holding, patiently waiting, patiently . . . waiting.

of shadows . . . of shadows . . . of a million dark suns that exploded in my face and awakened me to see the morning pour through my window in golden alarm. I sat up gasping and rubbed an arm over my face to rid the room of the nightmare. My skin was chilled and drenched in perspiration, the sheets crumpled at the foot of the bed, my only pillow somehow tossed violently into the room's far corner. I blinked rapidly, wiped my face again and slid off the mattress, padded across the living room to the lav alcove and took a long, extra-long shower.

The water was thunder, and the noise kept me from thinking.

And as I was eating, finally dressed and calmed, the vione chimed and the comunit screen wavered. I slapped at a toggle; the wavering sparked, brightened, became Joanna. She seemed to have had as bad a night as I, worse if the lines in her face were as deep as they looked.

"Good morning," I said, nevertheless, determined to remain cheerful in the hopes it could help her.

"No," she said. "It's raining." Before I could respond, she rubbed a knuckle under one eye and suddenly said, "There's trouble, Simon. I wanted you to know before they came."

"They came? Who came? I mean, who's coming?" I shook my head at my own confusion, thinking Neil had probably decided to use his pink-slip axe. "Jo, what's going on?"

"It's Jonathan Dare, the man you told me about, the one who stopped you on the street."

"How could I forget him," I said sourly. "He threatened to kill me if I so much as changed one more of his commas."

"He's dead."

I choked while gaping, wiped absently at my chin. "Good God, what did he die of?"

"Murder."

"That can't be right, Jo," I protested. "The guy's too damned big! Blesséd priest, the man was a giant."

"He's dead."

I blinked stupidly and shook my head. "Okay, tell me everything, and what's all this about someone coming to get me. Who? His friends, Neil . . . who?"

"The Blues," she said, abruptly looking to something beyond the view of my screen. At first I thought there was someone with her, but when I asked she denied it. "Just a shadow," she said. "I didn't get much sleep and I'm still not seeing straight. Alex called about the news, see—"

"So tell me, for crying out loud, woman!"

She did, and I made no further interruptions. Dare, the one and only Jonathan Dare of the incredible height and the frightening face, had been found in his Key just after dawn this morning. A neighbor, who had supposedly agreed to wake him, called him twice, and when the vione hadn't summoned the author, he contacted the Blues, just in case. The door was broken in, and once inside the Blues found the Key completely wrecked – furniture thrown and shattered and splintered, dark stains on the wall as though there'd been a fire, the window cracked like a manic spider's web. Dare was in the bedroom, lying half under his bed. When they dragged him out, they found little left of him – he'd been flailed until his flesh parted in strips from waist to neck, neck to crown; his jaw had been broken, teeth gone, nose shattered, eyes . . . gone. What blood hadn't spilled

onto the floor was smeared on the walls, splattered on the ceiling. There was no one else in the Key, and no signs of forced entry.

"He was a bastard, Jo," I said when she'd done, "but he sure didn't deserve to go that way."

"Neil told the Blues that too, apparently," she said, "and he also told them the trouble you and Dare had been having."

"Oh great!"

"They just left here, Simon. They want to talk to—"

A knock on the door made me leap on my feet. Joanna's face suddenly drained pale and her eyes were wide when I nervously broke the connection, and turned around.

It was a Blue named Fein, and without many preliminaries, I was brought to his office.

"Well, primarily I'm an editor, change the books around, see, so hopefully they'll sell. They don't sell all that much anymore, of course, but it keeps the business floating for another month. But I'm also a writer, you see, of something Dare called too old-fashioned. I never went to University, so I had to educate myself with what tapes I could watch and what books I could get hold of. I suppose, yes, it's fair to say I let my enthusiasm for the printed word get in the way of production, but I'm also doing this personal research, something totally on my own, about the public's reading habits – what they are, *why* they are, and so forth. That, too, got in the way when I wasn't careful, and I guess I got Dare and my boss angry at me because I made too many errors and delayed things a bit. Dare and I only had a few words,

that's right, and to be frank we didn't much get along. He had his ideas and I had mine, but I sure as hell wasn't going to kill him over them. I mean, what would be the sense? There'll be another along to take his place. There always is, though Neil would be the first to admit they're getting harder to find these days. He, Dare, was popular for a few years, which was far above average, and sooner or later he would have faded away. I certainly don't think I'm jealous of his talent, no, though perhaps a bit envious of the coin that came his way. But there's no chance of my getting any of that, no chance at all, so why would I kill him? And even if I wanted to, have you seen the size of the man? Do you really think someone like me could get him to stay still long enough to do something like *that* to him? Hey, don't apologize about the yawn. I understand. I had a bad night, too. No, I didn't see anything. It must be these lights of yours, they make odd shadows. Is that all, Mr. Fein? Can I go now? My friends are waiting outside and I think they're anxious."

3

By the end of the month I'd been cleared and was free to move around without the ghost of a cop hovering over me in his WatchDog. I hated those things, have since I lived in the Fringe. They were tear-shaped and painted a nonreflective black, and I couldn't help thinking of them as bloated dragonflies waiting for a corpse to feed on during the hottest day of summer.

Morbid, but I couldn't help it; that was my mood. I couldn't get Dare out of my mind, nor did those

dreams soothe me. Every other night, now, it seemed, and each time I woke more weary than when I'd gone to sleep. It must have been catching; even Neil seemed more haggard, as well as Alex and Joanna.

Then . . . another death.

Two days later, yet another.

The day after that a third and a fourth.

One more day, and a fifth found slaughtered.

Authors and publishers, and one maiden editor.

We all grew nervous, saw shadows following us even in sunlight, and finally I decided to get away from the plex, if only to reassure myself that I wasn't a target. Alex and Joanna agreed to go with me, and when the office shut down on the last day of October, we rented a landcar and headed for the outland.

My place, I liked to think . . . the hills and trees more of me than any part of the city, including the Fringe.

There was a house a woman left me when I was younger and she thought she loved me; it was set on a sharp hillside overlooking a valley that had never been developed. Huge boulders lay above and around it, the closest trees a stand of birch not ten meters from the rear door. It was a weathered gray, with one window to a wall and a small skylight in the slightly peaked roof. Inside, it was a single room twenty meters by twenty, three of the corners screened off for privacy, the center occupied by a large table on which sat my latest manuscript. As Alex and Joanna each went to their beds to unload their bags, I stood by the table and looked down at what I had done, touched it once and shook my head. Then I drifted out onto the back stoop and said hello to the birch.

The air was, finally, permanently chilled, the leaves

turning gradually, the sky taking on a sharp, brittle look. A squirrel danced around the birch, a trio of late-leaving birds swooped and vanished into a canopy of gold. I took a deep breath, exhaled slowly and watched the white plume slide coldly from my lips. Ten minutes later I was joined by the others, and we sat and watched and said nothing at all about the sudden feeling of oppression that seemed to float into the clearing.

"Simon," Alex said at last, "I saw that manuscript."

I stiffened, plucked a dead leaf from my shoe and shattered it noisily.

"Ah yes," I said when his silence unnerved me. "'The hills of October are laden with ghosts.' A pretty good first line, if I do say so myself. Don't you think, Alex?"

"No," he said. "Not really. I only read a couple of dozen pages, but it's obvious you haven't learned a thing working with Benson."

"Now wait—"

"That first page is superfluous, and the rest of what I saw could easily be cut by ninety percent."

"Philistine," I said in what I hoped was a joking tone, but when I saw Jo's expression I knew she had read it, too. "All right, so you don't like it. You can't kick a man for trying, can you?"

"No, but I can warn a friend against wasting his time."

I was getting angry, and though the sun was still bright there was a haze over my eyes as though I were looking through a veil made of black lace.

"Simon," Joanna said, "Simon, what did I say to you the other day? Didn't I tell you that if you persisted—"

"But I'm so close!" I insisted. "I think I know – but I only have a feeling, you understand – I think I know what's going on."

"What are you talking about?" Alex said.

I stood to lean against the door, my arms folded tightly across my chest. "I'm still trying to figure it out, see, still trying to make sense of it. What I mean is, you take a man like Dare, or any of the others . . . what the hell are they trying to prove by writing?"

"Immortality and creds," Joanna said instantly as Alex nodded. "That's the only reason people write, Simon. A little coin, and a book that'll be around after you die."

"No!" I said angrily. "Come on, think a little farther than your beautiful nose, Jo. The coin – well, maybe, but there's not all that much. And the immortality? Can you name me one book, one novel anyone has published that's lasted more than a year? For a year, period? Blessed priest, even library tapes are shredded after eighteen months. That's immortality?"

They were silent. A wind rose, then, and dead leaves were spilled in uneven heaps over the ground. I shivered and looked up to the sky for stormclouds. There were none. Only the wind. And it was getting stronger.

"But what about you?" Alex said suddenly. "That's what *you* want, isn't it? That's why *you* come out here every chance you get, to do that . . . that writing in there, so that someone will know who *you* are after you're dead?"

"All right, yes," I said. "That's exactly what I want."

"With that book in there?"

"Why not?"

"I told you already, it's too long and it's not right."

"Why?" I wasn't badgering now, I really wanted to know, needed to know, and would feel horrid when I was told . . . but much better than if I had been told by Neil again. Or Joanna, whose eyes were so deeply sad that I could not look at them.

Alex lifted a hand, then stopped and glanced quickly at the corner of the house, shrugged after a moment and seemed to shake himself into beginning. "It seems to be some kind of ghost story, or a psychological study that makes it seem as if things are happening that we all know couldn't possibly happen. If I read the whole thing, maybe I could get something more, but on that alone, Simon, you're a failure. You're asking too much of a reader to suspend all that University training for the sake of a shock he won't get anyway."

"I read more than he did," Joanna said softly, "and he's right as far as he goes, Simon."

"No," I said. I shoved my hands into my pockets and leaned forward against the wind keening around the house. Then I straightened, pushed open the door and motioned them inside. Following, I glanced behind me, frowning and wondering where the hell the clouds were. Then I slammed the door and took my place at the table, the manuscript scooped protectively into the circle of my arms. "Listen," I said, "do you ever dream?"

"God," said Alex, leaning back in his chair, "if you only knew the dreams I've been having. Would you believe even the doctor I went to is having them?"

"No," I said, "that's not what I meant. I mean, don't you ever daydream? Don't you ever imagine

what things would be like if things were different? It's like taking a close look at what we laughingly call reality, say, and giving it just a bit of a shove this way or that, just to see what it would be like."

The vione chimed off in the corner. I ignored it, but Alex shook his head and walked across the bare floor to answer it.

"No," Joanna said, "it can't be done."

"What? Of course it can be done, Jo," I snapped. "You mean to tell me you can't imagine things anymore?"

"Not the way you mean it," she said. "You're asking too much of us . . . too much of *anyone*, for that matter. Life has changed, people have—"

There was a sharp thud against one wall and we both jumped, spun around and saw claws of a branch scraping against a window. Leaves were pelting the house like hailstones, and the air above the skylight was fragmented darkly. I didn't like it, and Joanna was obviously getting frightened. I didn't blame her. I'd come out here in all kinds of weather and I'd never seen a display like that.

But I shook the feeling off and turned back to our argument. "Jo," I said, resting my hands atop the manuscript, "I'd be a fool and a candidate for a lockup if I tried to say there actually were such things as ghosts and night creatures and things like that. I used to read about them when I was a kid in the Fringe, but the city's too real, Joanna, and I never believed in them. And *that*, I think, is where the key lies. Don't ask me why, or what, not just yet, but I'll get hold of it, damned if I will."

"So what else is new?"

"Look, damnit—"

Alex returned, his footsteps weary, heavy, and he leaned against the table and stared over my head.

"Neil and two others," he said simply. "Editors in that firm on the fifteenth floor."

This time, when I looked through the skylight, there were clouds. Huge, black to gray and ponderously massing over the hills. Bits of twigs had joined the dervish leaves.

Suddenly I wanted the comfortable bulk of the city, and it didn't take much to convince them we should leave. As I locked the door behind me, I took one last look inside and saw the table, and the manuscript, and blinked away hurriedly an uncomfortable image that waterfalls of shadows were drifting to the floor.

The sky darkened.

The wind rose to maniacal proportions and buffeted the landcar from one side of the road to the other. I parked in front of the office, still fighting that damned wind, and we raced up to our floor where we found Fein waiting, and pale; and I didn't have to ask what Neil's body looked like, or the others.

"Didn't anyone see anything?" I asked, nearly frantic. "Didn't anyone see anything at all?"

Fein shook his head. "It's not right," he said finally. "Something doesn't feel right." Then he looked squarely at us as though we were to be pitied. "Another thing . . . I don't know what you're all going to do come Monday. As soon as the word got out, five of your competitors announced they were closing their doors. For good."

Joanna slumped weakly against me and I slipped a none-too-steady arm around her waist. We were dazed,

too shocked for mourning, and though Alex volunteered to return the rented car, he begged off supper with us with a slow and sad shake of his head, a weary wave, and a sigh that could have been a sob.

Jo and I walked. In the wind. Against the dust that blew out of the alleys, the scrabbling litter that fought for our ankles. And the sudden, bitter, cold.

"Simon," she said as we approached her Key, "what are we going to do? What are those poor writers going to do? There's nobody now who can afford to take them on. By Monday . . . Simon, by Monday the whole industry may be dead. It's all falling apart. Damn, it's all falling apart."

I said nothing, only scanned the haggard faces of the peds who fought the wind with us, glanced up once at the sky to the clouds hovering over us. And once inside, I sprawled on her couch while she stood in front of the ovenwall and stared at the menus.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"I don't know. I shouldn't be hungry after all that's happened, but I am, and I don't know what to eat."

"Oh come on, Jo," I said. "Think of something. Just be creative."

You have, as someone supposedly wise once said, a nose on your face that you never even see. Not even in a mirror. You're blinded by your conditioning, by photographs or whatever, by what other people tell you. You never see the true nose, and you never see what's perched on it laughing until, most of the time, it's far too damned late.

I motioned wildly to Joanna to forget about the

meal and sit beside me. She looked at me quizzically, obeyed slowly, and I took her hands in mine, grinning.

"I know," I said softly. "Joanna, I know what it's all about now. I have the answer. To everything."

She almost pulled away from me then, but there must have been something in the way I spoke, because she relaxed suddenly, gripped my wrists and linked us. Nodded.

"Tell me, Simon," she said. "For God's sake, tell me."

I hesitated and squinted, a habit of mine when I didn't know how to say what was rolling in my mind. But I tried. I tried.

"Books are read and thrown away these days," I said finally. "It's an economic necessity and a fact of life."

"Agreed," she said, glancing once at the window and shuddering.

I went on – stumbling and stuttering because it was a birth I was midwifing and wanted no part of seeing – to explain that it wasn't simply our population's conditioning that led to this present where plays were not watched but experienced, films became holographic life substitutes, where cinema bowl spectacles have jaded even a youngster's passion for novae and blood. It was more than just conditioning, much more than that. Since the population has been conditioned by its cultural matrix, it had to follow that those who tried to create a people's diversions were also conditioned, all of them having gone through the same educational state, the same pre- and post-school training. They can think for themselves, of course, but what they cannot do is break through

the cage that inhibits their imaginations! The imagination that lets them talk to themselves, see things that aren't there, *create* books and plays and . . . God, whatever else has been lost . . . create these things out of whole cloth, or even slightly used dreams.

Dare and the others had hated me, not because I was destroying the commercial viability of their material, their work – they hated me because when Neil showed them my first three books, they knew that I could do what they could not: create from a source to which they had no access.

It was this, then, that distressed me, frustrated me, gave me those bouts of horrid, terrifying anger, that made me want to scream when I was alone in my room. Alone. With my imagination.

And the more I talked, the more furious I became, looking for and not finding a single tangible object at which I could direct that rage. Neil was dead. Dare was dead. The others were dying, and I loved Jo too much. My breath came more rapidly, perspiration broke and scattered on my forehead. I made a fist and pressed it to my brow, closed my eyes, and grunted. Nothing happened. Grunted again, and still nothing happened. The rage grew. I tried again. The rage broke into crimson spirals behind my eyes. Once more I tried, waiting for the screaming, until finally it passed and I slumped back on the couch.

"Simon," she said, sliding away from me, "you're . . . you're not well."

"Insane?" I felt as if I'd run round the country without stopping. I was gasping for air and my lips were trembling.

"No, I didn't mean that. But I've seen you go through this before, in the office."

Something moved in the corner. I didn't look; I knew I would see nothing.

A WatchDog screamed by, and another, and a third.

Someone shouted in the corridor, shouted and was cut off.

"Simon," she said, rising suddenly and backing toward the door. "It was you, wasn't it? Dare, Neil, the others. This thing you have about them—"

"No!" I said, leaning over the back of the couch, one hand outstretched. "Joanna, no, I didn't kill anyone."

"Those fits of yours . . . you must black out sometimes they're so strong."

"Joanna, please!"

"You can't know what you're doing when you black out."

I shouted her name; she wouldn't stop talking.

"You . . . you hated them, didn't you, for not publishing that monster of yours. You hated them. Simon . . ."

I didn't move as she slid open the door and raced into the corridor screaming for help. She pounded on doors until she made her way around to the other side of the building. Then I rose and staggered out to the liftube, stepped in and drifted downward, hearing as I passed each floor people stirring as though uneasy and unable to stay by themselves.

And once outside it was cold, too cold for the sun that was still shining.

4

If Joanna had decided that it was I in some madness who had killed all those people, then I was sure

it wouldn't be long before someone like Fein reached the same conclusion. I needed a place to think, then, and headed for my Key, but when I reached the corner of my block I saw that a WatchDog had settled in the middle of the street and Blues were standing deceptively calmly in front of my Keyloft. They were huddled against the wind and blowing into their hands. A crowd was forming. It was a spectacle not to be missed. I stared, holding onto the edge of a building, stared and shook my head slowly as my world began to shatter.

Someone bumped into my back, turned me halfway around, and I began to run, veered at the next corner and headed directly and without hesitation out toward the Fringe. That was where my life was, and the Blues would say that I was from the Fringe, as though that would be explanation enough for my sins. No one would care that I fought my way out, no one would notice that I had circumvented University and made it all the same.

The buildings grew more dull as I ran, the joyhalls not quite as garish, no cinema bowls, no hundreds of well-dressed peds moving from Key to office in an automated stream. I slowed, grabbing tightly at my side, looked up and realized the sun had some time before already set. The Keyloft walls were now dotted with squares of light, the children were gone, the night's peace had arrived.

I slowed. I stopped. I waited for childhood memories to overwhelm me, possess me, produce a tender gentle smile.

They didn't.

I was alone in the Fringe, and a stranger.

I wandered for something like an hour, trying to force myself to be receptive to the ghosts of my past. It was futile, however, and I knew it and I kept trying. With Joanna gone–

a WatchDog shrieked by

–I didn't think I had anything left. I touched things, I smelled things, I even accidentally wandered onto the street where I had been born and my parents had died. But the Keyloft was gone, replaced by another with a joyhall on the ground and shops to either side and above. It was, as I stared, as though someone had hacked off my left hand, then my right, and left me with stumps to shake hands with my friends.

A Watchdog shrieked by.

Suddenly, a Blue stepped out of a restaurant behind me. He brushed my arm, turned to apologize and stopped, stared, reached into his tunic pocket to pull out a newspic. Of me. And I bolted without thinking. My shoulders hunched, expecting some sort of blow, and I bent over at the waist to make a smaller target. Skidded around a corner, around another, ducked into a doorway and pressed against the wall, gasping, tearing, then spinning out again. Behind me was the city, ahead at the end of the street I could see the buildings break.

I stumbled. Caught myself and stumbled again.

Saw four Blues racing after me, one with his hand pressed close to his face. A sudden feeling of exhilaration washed over me, tempted me to wave at my pursuers and urge them on as though they were the bad guys and I wore the white shirt. That fantasy ended abruptly, however, when a piece of a building shattered away only a handsbreadth from

my head, and shards of hot stone pelted my back.

The game was over.

I was mad and I was running.

Less than a minute later breaking past the last of the city and into the outland, through the trees and avoiding the roads, staying beneath the leaves to keep the 'Dogs from spotting me. With any luck at all they would never find me. The advantage here was, I knew where I was going.

Without a timepiece, I had no idea when it was that I finally arrived at the edge of the clearing. But the moon was up, the clouds having fled, and the stars were indifferently cold, like splatters of old ice. I crouched behind a hedge of brush and stared at the gray house, waiting patiently, finally, to see what traps had been laid. I counted slowly and silently to myself until I judged an hour had gone by, rose with one hand bracing myself against a lightning-dead oak, and stopped when the back door opened and Joanna stepped out.

The wind had died, and there was silence..

When I moved out of hiding and walked slowly across the clearing, she started, reached behind her and pulled Alex out to stand by her. They watched me carefully, not moving, only once glancing at each other as though they had known I'd been there all along. The leaves beneath my feet already had a sheath of frost and they snapped when I walked, a cannonade of dying, until I came up to the stoop and waited. I thought nothing. I only stared at them until Alex, his arms too loose at his sides, cleared his throat. I moved back a pace, another, then reached up and brushed a hand through my hair, stroked my cheek once and nodded.

"Joanna called me," Alex explained unnecessarily.

"And the Blues?" I said, bitterly and without remorse.

"Simon, please," Joanna said, one hand reaching out, dropping back. "Please, Simon."

"It seems to me I said that to you, Jo, a little while ago and you ran away from me."

"You frightened me, Simon. You . . . you weren't the same."

"Yes, I was," I said. "You just haven't recognized me."

"I finished that book," Alex said, diverting my attention. He half-turned toward the door, changed his mind and faced me again. "You were very angry when you wrote it, weren't you?"

It was my turn to move away, and I did, stalking halfway across the clearing before putting my hands on my hips and letting my gaze climb the black shadowall of the trees to the icestars in the sky. I heard Alex step down to the ground, his footsteps crackling like walking fire. I wouldn't look at him, though, and he had to come around in front of me to meet my eyes.

"It's angry," he said again. "So full of frustration and hate, Simon! Lord, I didn't know you had all that in you, I just didn't know. Why did you write it? A form of exorcism?"

"The hate's still there, Alex. Ask Joanna. She saw how I handle it now."

"She told me. It isn't safe, Simon, that kind of repression isn't safe. You'll explode one of these days, unless you get yourself some expert help. It isn't right for someone to behave that way, to carry all that inside them."

"The Fringe," I began, but his hand waved me silent.

"Simon, you've used that as an excuse since the first day I met you. You're not the only one who's made it into Prime or close to it from the Fringe. And you won't be the last. Joanna told me everything you said to her tonight, and reluctantly I have to agree with her that you've actually stumbled onto something that just may be important. But you're going about it all the wrong way."

"I did not kill any of those men, Alex," I said, each word flung like a stone into his face. "I did not kill them, I have never killed anyone, and . . ." I took a deep breath to calm myself, blew it out slowly, and felt my legs beginning to tremble, my arms stiffen. Then a sudden, brief gust of wind knocked a shadow away from his face and I nearly fell onto my back when I saw his expression. "You hate me, too," I said quietly.

"No," he said, his palms out as though I were about to strike him.

"You do," I insisted. "Damnit, Alex, I can see it!"

I lifted a fist over my head and he winced, half crouched, but did not move away. The fist stayed, rigid, then returned slowly to my side as I berated myself for the idiocy I had committed. All those things I had told Joanna, that beautiful sociological theory that explained away in the simplest of terms a malignancy that had struck to the hearts of our people . . . *wrong*. Wrong because I thought it was the end, and it was not. They hated me now, and I knew why because neither Joanna nor Alex had ever had dreams of putting words between covers. It wasn't the fact that I had the tap to imagination. No, damnit, and I spun around on my heels, nearly groaning aloud in

my stupidity and self-pity. No, it wasn't that at all.

And it was not paranoia.

It was a foul form of sophistication, an evil they had created themselves to replace the evils their ancestors believed. They had constructed pedestals to lift themselves above the level of savages, pedestals that brought them Philayork and hovercats, the Colony Domes and a now-building starship; joyhalls, viones, WatchDogs, comunits; they had laid planking from pedestal to pedestal to cover the past and keep their eyes focused upward, but they had forgotten that there were still spaces beneath that flooring, spaces that grew shadows, that grew nightmares, that hid suns.

And I had torn up that covering, and the shadows had surged.

"Simon, are you all right?"

I had shown them nightmares.

"Simon?"

I had shown them dreams.

"Simon!"

I had somehow become atavistic and had shown them themselves.

Glittering savages on a cityplex street.

Anger. Fury. Rage. I squeezed my eyes shut and my head twisted from side to side, my lips opening and closing, my hands into fists. I might have made them more human, more caring, more aware of what they were so they could transcend and grow, but they hated me for it instead of being grateful and wanting to learn, they hated me and were afraid of me and I hated them in turn. My arms became rigid, my feet drifted apart until I reached up for the sky and balanced myself by grasping for the black.

And I screamed.

And I screamed.

And I screamed.

And . . . I wept.

They had hidden themselves and their legends in a dark and small closet *(I don't believe it, science has proved it can't happen, and even if it could I wouldn't believe)*, bolted the door and pronounced themselves cured by turning on a sunbright lamp to show the truth of their lies.

I slumped to the ground and rocked, crooning, on my buttocks. Alex dropped beside me and put his hands on my shoulders, gently shaking me and calling my name softly. I know he thought I was having a fit, retreating loudly and madly behind a screen of my dreams. He was worried, and I heard him call out to Joanna, the call suddenly choked off as his hands stopped their touching. I opened my eyes, then, blinking, then scrambling to my feet and running back toward the house. Alex was standing upright, his arms pinned to his sides, a roping of shadow twisting around his chest and his legs. Within the shadow were sparks, of green, of red, of colors I knew had no names. And from out of the forest on the back of the wind came others, hundreds, thousands that I cut off from view when I slammed the door behind me.

The room was empty.

I heard an engine sputter into a roar and raced to the front window in time to see a darkness drift out of the trees and settle, in time to hear Joanna scream.

And when it was done the shadowbeasts left and I raced from the house to beat them to the city.

Stopped when I neared it and saw the glow in the sky that glowed with a scream.

Joanna was right. Alex was right.

I had killed them, killed them all, my frustrations and anger somehow becoming lungs to give the dead legends a chance to take life.

And no one will believe it. They'll stay on their pedestals until the absolute end, their eyes always skyward, denying the savage and the nightmares he has.

Meanwhile I run.

And it has come to me in my running that those shadows I've spawned will return to their maker. All of them. Every one. And I can see now the need for a pedestal fortress, for the legends and lies are shields that we hear, legends and lies the armor that we wear.

Gone. All gone.

Like the house in the clearing when I stumble out of the woods, hands and arms and face and neck bleeding, stopping to see a monstrous black pillar where my manuscript had been. The white cage of the birch is the only color left. Joanna is . . . somewhere; Alex is . . . somewhen; and the only chance I think I have is to tell all that darkness that I was wrong, I don't believe, no matter how many facades have been shattered in the city I am still of the future . . . and I do not believe.

It's the one chance I have as I run for the birch the one chance I have

but the white has gone gray

and the shadows are moving

The world of fantasy writing has produced myth-figures only rarely. Far less than the theater or the world of serious art. Poe, Bierce, Kafka, Lovecraft come to mind of course; and in more contemporary times, Asimov, Clarke, Herbert and Heinlein and Bradbury. Vonnegut fills the bill. And Ellison. For every story he has written – and there are over 900 of them, as well as 31 books and uncounted articles, reviews, critical essays and self-revelatory introductions – there are five "Ellison anecdotes." Put two fans together and within minutes they'll be recounting the latest seventh-hand Ellison excess. His frequent appearances on such television talk-shows as Tom Snyder's "Tomorrow" on NBC have left in their wake not merely *bleeps*, but kilometers of censored videotape. His spoken-word records have chilled and delighted thousands of listeners. His personal lecture appearances often end up as riots. His obsessive drive for personal freedom, not only for himself but for everyone in the world, it seems, has made him a figure of polarized controversy.

Even so, he gets away with it because of his talent. If he were *only* an outrageous figure, he could be easily dismissed. But the talent is there, demonstrated again and again in a body of work that stretches across twenty years. Despite the hordes of detractors who would happily disembowel him, he wins the highest awards in writing with such seeming ease it only enrages the mob more. This, his latest story, an extravagance from first line to last (literally!) will certainly add fuel to the fire.

HOW'S THE NIGHT LIFE ON CISSALDA?

by Harlan Ellison

When they unscrewed the time capsule, preparatory to helping temponaut Enoch Mirren disembark, they found him doing a disgusting thing with a disgusting thing.

Every head turned away. The word that sprang to mind first was, *"Feh!"*

They wouldn't tell Enoch Mirren's wife he was back. They evaded the question when Enoch Mirren's

mother demanded to know the state of her son's health after his having taken the very first journey into another time/universe. The new President was given dissembling answers. No one bothered to call San Clemente. The Chiefs of Staff were kept in the dark. Inquiries from the CIA and the FBI were met with responses in pig Latin and the bureaus were subtly diverted into investigating each other. Walter Cronkite found out, but after all, there are even limits to how tight security can get.

Their gorges buoyant, every one of them, the rescue crew and the medical team and the chrono-experts at TimeSep Central did their best, but found it impossible to pry temponaut Enoch Mirren's penis from the (presumably) warm confines of the disgusting thing's (presumed) sexual orifice.

A cadre of alien morphologists was assigned to make an evaluation: to decide if the disgusting thing were male or female. After a sleepless week they gave up. The head of the group made a good case for his team's failure. "It'd be a damned sight easier to decide if we could get that clown out of her . . . him . . . it . . . that thing!"

They tried cajoling, they tried threatening, they tried rational argument, they tried inductive logic, they tried deductive logic, they tried salary incentives, they tried profit sharing, they tried tickling his risibilities, they tried tickling his feet, they tried punching him, they tried shocking him, they tried arresting him, they tried crowbars, they tried hosing him down with cold water, then hot water, then seltzer water, they tried suction devices, they tried sensory deprivation, they tried doping him into unconsciousness. They tried shackling him to a team of Percherons

pulling north and the disgusting thing to a team of Clydesdales pulling south. They gave up after three and a half weeks.

The word somehow leaked out that the capsule had come back from time/universe $Earth_2$ and the Russians rattled swords – suggesting that the decadent American filth had brought back a decimating plague that was even now oozing toward Minsk. (TimeSep Central quarantined anyone even remotely privy to the truth.) The OPEC nations announced that the Americans, in league with Zionist Technocrats, had found a way to siphon off crude oil from the time/universe next to our own, and promptly raised the price of gasoline another two dollars a barrel. (TimeSep Central moved Enoch Mirren and the disgusting thing to its supersecret bunker headquarters sunk beneath the Painted Desert.) The Pentagon demanded the results of the debriefing and threatened to cut throats; Congress demanded the results and threatened to cut appropriations. (TimeSep Central bit the bullet – they had no other choice, there had been no debriefing – and they stonewalled: *we cannot relay the requested data at this time.*)

Temponaut Enoch Mirren continued coitusing.

The expert from Johns Hopkins, a tall, gray gentleman who wore three-piece suits, and whose security clearance was so stratospherically high the President called *him* on the red phone, sequestered himself with the temponaut and the disgusting thing for three days. When he emerged, he called in the TimeSep Central officials and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, quite simply put, Enoch Mirren has brought back from $Earth_2$ the most perfect fuck in the universe."

After they had revived one of the women and four of the men, the expert from Johns Hopkins, a serious, pale gentleman who wore wing-tip shoes, continued. "As best I can estimate, this creature – clearly an alien life-form from some other planet in that alternate time/universe – has an erotic capacity that, once engaged, cannot be neutralized. Once having begun to enjoy its, uh, favors . . . a man either cannot or *will not* stop having relations."

"But that's impossible!" said one of the women. "Men simply cannot hold an erection that long." She looked around at several of her male compatriots with disdain.

"Apparently the thing secretes some sort of stimulant, a jelly perhaps, that re-engorges the male member," said the expert from Johns Hopkins.

"But is it male or female?" asked one of the men, an administrative assistant who had let it slip in one of their regular encounter sessions that he was concerned about his own sexual preferences.

"It's both, and neither," said the expert from Johns Hopkins. "It seems equipped to handle anything up to and including chickens or kangaroos with double vaginas." He smiled a thin, controlled smile, saying, "You folks have a problem," and then he presented them with a staggering bill for his services. Then he departed, still smiling.

They were little better off than they had been before.

But the women seemed interested.

Two months later, having fed temponaut Enoch Mirren intravenously when they noticed that his weight had been dropping alarmingly, they found an

answer to the problem of separating the man and the sex object. By setting up a random sequence sound wave system, pole to pole, with Mirren and his paramour between, they were able to disrupt the flow of energy in the disgusting thing's metabolism. Mirren opened his eyes, blinked several times, murmured, "Oh, that was *good*!" and they pried him loose.

The disgusting thing instantly rolled into a ball and went to sleep.

They immediately hustled Enoch Mirren into an elevator and dropped with him to the deepest, most tightly secured level of the supersecret underground TimeSep Central complex, where a debriefing interrogation cell waited to claim him. It was 10'x10'x20', heavily padded in black Naugahyde, and was honeycombed with sensors and microphones. No lights.

They put him in the cell, let him stew for twelve hours, then fed him, and began the debriefing.

"Mirren, what the hell *is* that disgusting thing?"

The voice came from the ceiling. In the darkness Enoch Mirren belched lightly from the quenelles of red snapper they had served him, and scooted around on the floor where he was sitting, trying to locate the source of the annoyed voice.

"It's a terrific little person from Cissalda," he said.

"Cissalda?" Another voice; a woman's voice.

"A planet in another star-system of that other time/universe," he replied politely. "They call it Cissalda."

"It can talk?" A third voice, more studious.

"Telepathically. Mind-to-mind. When we're making love."

"All right, knock it off, Mirren!" the first voice said.

Enoch Mirren sat in darkness, smiling.

"Then there's life in that other universe, apart from that disgusting thing, is that right?" The third voice.

"Oh, sure," Enoch Mirren said, playing with his toes. He had discovered he was naked.

"How's the night life on Cissalda?" asked the woman's voice, not really seriously.

"Well, there's not much activity during the week," he answered, "but Saturday nights are dynamite, I'm told."

"I said *knock it off,* Mirren!"

"Yes, sir."

The third voice, as if reading from a list of prepared questions, asked, "Describe time/universe $Earth_2$ as fully as you can, will you do that, please?"

"I didn't see that much, to be perfectly frank with you, but it's really nice over there. It's warm and very bright, even when the frenzel smelches. Every nolnek there's a vit, when the cosmish isn't drendeling. But *I* found . . ."

"*Hold it, Mirren*!" the first voice screamed.

There was a gentle click, as if the speakers were cut off while the interrogation team talked things over. Enoch scooted around till he found the soft wall, and sat up against it, whistling happily. He whistled "You and the Night and the Music," segué-ing smoothly into "Some Day My Prince Will Come." There was another gentle click and one of the voices returned. It was the angry voice that spoke first; the impatient one who was clearly unhappy with the temponaut. His tone was soothing, cajoling, as if he were the Recreation Director of the Outpatient Clinic of the Menninger Foundation.

"Enoch . . . may I call you Enoch. . ." Enoch

murmured it was lovely to be called Enoch, and the first voice went on, "We're, uh, having a bit of difficulty understanding you."

"How so?"

"Well, we're taping this conversation . . . uh, you don't *mind* if we tape this, do you, Enoch?"

"Huh-uh."

"Yes, well. We find, on the tape, the following words: 'frenzel,' 'smelches,' 'nolneg'. . ."

"That's nol*nek*," Enoch Mirren said. "A nol*neg* is quite another matter. In fact, if you were to refer to a nolnek as a nolneg, one of the tilffs would certainly get highly upset and level a renaq. . ."

"*Hold it*!" The hysterical tone was creeping back into the interrogator's voice. "Nolnek, nolneg, what does it matter—"

"Oh, it matters a lot. See, as I was saying—"

"—it doesn't matter at *all*, Mirren, you asshole! We can't understand a word you're saying!"

The woman's voice interrupted. "Lay back, Bert. Let me talk to him." Bert mumbled something vaguely obscene under his breath. If there was anything Enoch hated, it was vagueness.

"Enoch," said the woman's voice, "this is Dr. Arpin. Inez Arpin? Remember me? I was on your training team before you left?"

Enoch thought about it. "Were you the black lady with the glasses and the ink blots?"

"No. I'm the white lady with the rubber gloves and the rectal thermometer."

"Oh, sure, of course. You have very trim ankles."

"Thank you."

Bert's voice exploded through the speaker. "*Jeezus* Kee-*rice*, Inez!"

"Enoch," Dr. Arpin continued, ignoring Bert, "are you speaking in tongues?"

Enoch Mirren was silent for a moment, then said, "Gee, I'm awfully sorry. I guess I've been linked up with the Cissaldan so long, I've absorbed a lot of how it thinks and speaks. I'm really sorry. I'll try to translate."

The studious voice spoke again. "How did you meet the, uh, Cissaldan?"

"Just appeared. I didn't call it or anything. Didn't even see it arrive. One minute it wasn't there, and the next it was."

Dr. Arpin spoke. "But how did it get from its own planet to $Earth_2$? Some kind of spaceship, perhaps?"

"No, it just . . . came. It can move by will. It told me it felt my presence, and just simply hopped across all the way from its home in that other star-system. I think it was true love that brought it. Isn't that nice?"

All three voices tried speaking at once.

"Teleportation!" Dr. Arpin said, wonderingly.

"Mind-to-mind contact, telepathy, across unfathomable light-years of space," the studious voice said, awesomely.

"And what does it want, Mirren?" Bert demanded, forgetting the conciliatory tone. His voice was the loudest.

"Just to make love; it's really a terrific little person."

"So you just hopped in the sack with that disgusting thing, is that right? Didn't even give a thought to decent morals or contamination or your responsibility to us, or the mission, or anything? Just jumped right into the hay with that pukeable pervert?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," Enoch said.

"Well, it was a *lousy* idea, whaddya think about *that*, Mirren? And there'll be repercussions, you can bet on that, too; repercussions! Investigations! Responsibility must be placed!" Bert was shouting again. Dr. Arpin was trying to calm him.

At that moment, Enoch heard an alarm go off somewhere. It came through the speakers in the ceiling quite clearly, and in a moment the speakers were cut off. But in that moment the sound filled the interrogation cell, its ululations signaling dire emergency. Enoch sat in silence, in darkness, naked, humming, waiting for the voices to return. He hoped he'd be allowed to get back to his Cissaldan pretty soon.

But they never came back. Not ever.

The alarm had rung because the disgusting thing had vanished. The alien morphologists who had been monitoring it through the one-way glass of the control booth fronting on the examination stage that formed the escape-proof study chamber, had been turned away only a few seconds, accepting mugs of steaming stimulant-laced coffee from a Tech 3. When they turned back, the examination stage was empty. The disgusting thing was gone.

People began running around in ever-decreasing circles. Some of them disappeared into holes in the walls and made like they weren't there.

Three hours later they found the disgusting thing.

It was making love with Dr. Marilyn Hornback in a broom closet.

TimeSep Central, deep underground, was the primary locus of visitation, because it had taken the Cissaldan a little while to acclimate itself. But even as

Bert, Dr. Inez Arpin, the studious type whose name does not matter, and all the others who came under the classification of chrono-experts were trying to unscramble their brains at the bizarre progression of events in TimeSep Central, matters were already out of their hands.

Cissaldans began appearing everywhere.

As though summoned by some silent song of space and time (which, in fact, was the case), disgusting things began popping into existence all over Earth. Like kernels of corn suddenly erupting into blossoms of popcorn, one moment there would be nothing – or a great deal of what passed for nothing – and the next moment a Cissaldan was there. Invariably, right beside a human being. And in the next moment the invariable human being would get this *good* idea that it might be nice to, uh, er, that is, well, sorta *do it* with this creature. . .

Saffron-robed monks entering the mountain fastness of the Dalai Lama found that venerable fount of cosmic wisdom busily *shtupping* a disgusting thing. A beatific smile creased his wizened countenance.

An international conference of Violently Inclined Filmmakers at the Bel-Air Hotel in Beverly Hills was interrupted when it was noted that Roman Polanski was under a table making violent love to a thing no one wanted to look at. Sam Peckinpah rushed over to abuse it. That went on, till Peckinpah's disgusting thing materialized and the director fell upon it, moaning.

In the middle of their telecasts, Carmelita Pope, Dinah Shore and Merv Griffin looked away from the cyclopean red eye of the live cameras, spotted disgusting things, exposed themselves and went to it,

thereby upping their flagging ratings considerably.

His Glorious Majesty, the Right Honorable President, General Idi Amin Dada, while selecting material for his new cowboy suit (crushed velvet had his temporary nod as being in just the right vein of quiet good taste), witnessed a materialization right beside his adenoid-shaped swimming pool and fell on his back. The disgusting thing hopped on. No one paid any attention.

Truman Capote, popping Quaaludes like M&M's, rolled himself into a puffy little ball as his Cissaldan mounted him. The level of dope in his system, however, was so high that the disgusting thing went mad and strained itself straight up the urethra and hid itself against his prostate. Capote's voice instantly dropped three octaves.

Maidservants to Queen Elizabeth, knocking frantically on the door to her bedchamber, were greeted with silence. Guards instantly forced the door. They turned their heads away from the disgusting sight that greeted them. There was nothing regal, nothing imperial, nothing even remotely majestic about what was taking place there on the floor.

When Salvador Dali entered his Cissaldan, his waxed mustaches drooped alarmingly, like molten pocket watches.

Anita Bryant, locked in her bassinet-pink bathroom with her favorite vibrator, found herself suddenly assaulted by a disgusting thing. She fought it off and a second appeared. Then a third. Then a platoon. In moments the sounds of her outraged shrieks could be heard throughout that time-zone, degenerating quickly into a bubbling, citraholic gurgle. It was the big bang theory actualized.

Cissaldans appeared to fourteen hundred assembly line workers in the automobile plant at Toyota City, just outside Yokohama. While the horny-handed sons and daughters of toil were busily getting it on, hundreds of half-assembled car bodies crashed and thundered into an untidy pile forty feet high.

Masters and Johnson had it off with the same one.

Billy Graham was discovered by his wife and members of his congregation having congress with a disgusting thing in a dust bin. He was "knowing" it, however, in the Biblical sense, murmuring, "*I* found it!"

Three fugitive *Reichsmarschalls,* posing as Bolivian sugar cane workers while they plotted the renascence of the Third Reich, were confronted by suddenly materialized Cissaldans in a field near Cochabamba. Though the disgusting things looked disgustingly kosher, the unrepentant Nazis hurled themselves onto the creatures, visualizing pork-fat sandwiches.

William Shatner, because of his deep and profound experience with Third World Aliens, attempted to communicate with the disgusting thing that popped into existence in his dressing room. He began delivering a captainlike lecture on coexistence and the Cissaldan – bored – vanished, to find a more suitable mate. A few minutes later, a less discerning Cissaldan appeared and Shatner, now overcome with this *good* idea, fell on it, dislodging his hair piece.

Evel Knievel took a running jump at a disgusting thing, overshot, hit the wall, and semiconscious, dragged himself back to the waiting aperture.

There in that other time/universe, the terrific little persons of Cissalda had spent an eternity making love to one another. But their capacity for passion was

enormous, beyond calculation, intense and never-waning. It could be called *fornigalactic*. They had waited millennia for some other race to make itself known to them. But life springs into being only rarely, and their eons were spent in familiar sex with their own kind, and in loneliness. A loneliness monumental to conceive. When Enoch Mirren had come through the fabric of time and space to $Earth_2$, they had sent the most adept of their race to check him out. And the Cissaldan looked upon Enoch Mirren and found him to be *good*.

And so, like a reconnaissance ant sent out from the hill to scout the territory of a sugar cookie, that most talented of disgusting things sent back telepathic word to its kind: *We've got a live one here.*

Now, in mere moments, the flood of teleporting Cissaldans overflowed the Earth: one for every man, woman and child on the planet. Also leftovers for chickens and kangaroos with double vaginas.

The four top members of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Supreme Soviet of the Communist Party (CPSU) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – Brezhnev, Kosygin, Podgorny and Gromyko – deserted the four hefty ladies who had come as Peoples' Representatives to the National Tractor Operator's Conference from the Ukraine, and began having wild – but socialistic – intercourse with the disgusting things that materialized on their conference table. The four hefty ladies did not care: four Cissaldans had popped into existence for *their* pleasure. It was better than being astride a tractor. Or Brezhnev, Kosygin, Podgorny and Gromyko.

All over the world Mort Sahl and Samuel Beckett and Fidel Castro and H. R. Haldeman and Ti-Grace

Atkinson and Lord Snowdon and Jonas Salk and Jorge Luis Borges and Golda Meir and Earl Butts linked up with disgusting things and said no more. A stately and pleasant hush fell across the planet. Barbra Streisand hit the highest note of her career as she was penetrated. Philip Roth had guilt, but did it anyhow. Stevie Wonder fumbled, but got in finally. It was good.

All over the planet Earth it was quiet and it was *good.*

One week later, having established without room for discourse that Naugahyde was neither edible nor appetizing, Enoch Mirren decided he was being brutalized. He had not been fed, been spoken to, been permitted the use of lavatory facilities, or in even the smallest way been noticed since the moment he had heard the alarm go off and the speakers had been silenced. His interrogation cell smelled awful, he had lost considerable weight, he had a dreadful ringing in his ears from the silence and, to make matters terminal, the air was getting thin. "Okay, no more Mister Nice Guy," he said to the silence, and proceeded to effect his escape.

Clearly, easy egress from a 10′x10′x20′ padded cell sunk half a mile down in the most top-secret installation in America was not possible. If there was a door to the cell, it was so cleverly concealed that hours of careful fingertip examination could not reveal it. There were speaker grilles in the ceiling of the cell, but that was a full twenty feet above him. He was tall, and thin – a lot thinner now – but even if he jumped, it was still a good ten feet out of reach.

He thought about his problem and wryly recalled a

short story he had read in an adventure magazine many years before. It had been a cheap pulp magazine, filled with stories hastily written for scandalously penurious rates, and the craftsmanship had been employed accordingly. In the story that now came to Enoch's mind, the first installment of the serial had ended with the mightily-thewed hero trapped at the bottom of a very deep pit floored with poison-tipped stakes as a horde of coral snakes slithered toward him, brackish water was pumped into the pit and rising rapidly, his left arm was broken, he was without weapon, and a man-eating Sumatran black panther peered over the lip of the pit, watching him closely. Enoch remembered wondering – with supreme confidence in the writer's talents and ingenuity – how he would rescue his hero. The month-long wait till the next issue was on the newsstand was the longest month of Enoch's life. On the day of its release, he had pedaled down to the newsstand on his Schwinn and snagged the first copy of the adventure magazine from the bundle almost before the dealer had snipped the binding wire. He had dashed outside, thrown himself down on the curb and riffled through the magazine till he found the second installment of the cliff-hanging serial. How would the writer, this master of suspense and derring-do, save the beleaguered hero?

Part two began:

"With one mighty leap, Vance Lionmane freed himself from the pit, overcoming the panther and rushing forward to save the lovely Ariadne from the aborigines."

Later, comma, after he had escaped from the interrogation cell, Enoch Mirren was to remember

that moment, thinking again as he had when but a child, what a rotten lousy cheat that writer had been.

There were no Cissaldans left over. Everywhere Enoch went he found the terrific little persons shacked up with old men, young women, pre- and post-pubescent children, ducks, porpoises, wildebeests, dogs, arctic terns, llamas, young men, old women and, of course, chickens and kangaroos with double vaginas. But no love-mate for Enoch Mirren.

It became clear after several weeks of wandering, waiting for a materialization in his immediate vicinity, that the officials at TimeSep Central had dealt him more severely than they could have known.

They had broken the rhythm. They had pulled him out of that disgusting thing, and now, because the Cissaldans were telepathically linked and were *all* privy to the knowledge, no Cissaldan would have anything to do with him.

The disgusting things handled rejection very badly.

Enoch Mirren sat on a high cliff a few miles south of Carmel, California. The Peterbilt he had driven across the country in futile search of another human being who was not making love to a Cissaldan, was parked on the shoulder of Route 1, the Pacific Coast Highway, above him. He sat on the cliff with his legs dangling over the Pacific Ocean. The guidebook beside him said the waters should be filled with seals at play, with sea otters wrapped in kelp while they floated on their backs cracking clams against their bellies, with whales migrating, because this was January and time for the great creatures to commence their journey. But it was cold, and the wind tore at

him, and the sea was empty. Somewhere, elsewhere, no doubt, the seals and the cunning sea otters and the majestic whales were locked in passionate embrace with disgusting things from another time/universe.

Loneliness had driven him to thinking of those terrific little persons as disgusting things. Love and hate are merely obverse faces of the same devalued coin. Aristotle said that. Or Pythagoras. One of that crowd.

The first to know true love, he was the last to know total loneliness. He wasn't the last human on Earth, but a lot of good it did him. Everybody was busy, and he was alone. And long after they had all died of starvation, he would still be here . . . unless he decided some time in the ugly future to drive the Peterbilt off a cliff somewhere.

But not just yet. Not just now.

He pulled the notebook and pen from his parka pocket, and finished writing the story of what had happened. It was not a long story, and he had written it as an open letter, addressing it to whatever race or species inherited the Earth long after the Cissaldans had wearied of banging corpses and had returned to their own time/universe to wait for new lovers. He suspected that without a reconnaissance ant to lead them here, to establish a telepathic-teleportational link, they would not be able to get back here once they had left.

He only hoped it would not be the cockroaches who rose up through the evolutionary muck to take over the cute little Earth, but he had a feeling that was to be the case. In all his travels across the land, the only creatures that could not get a Cissaldan to make love to them were the cockroaches. Apparently, even disgusting things had a nausea threshold. Un-

checked, the cockroaches were already swarming across the world.

He finished the story, stuffed it in an empty Perrier Water bottle, capped it securely with a stopper and wax, and flung it by its neck as far out as he could into the ocean.

He watched it float in and out with the tide for a while, until a current caught it and took it away. Then he rose, wiped off his hands, and strode back up the slope to the 18-wheeler. He was smiling sadly. It had just occurred to him that his only consolation in bearing the knowledge that he had destroyed the human race, was that for a little while, in the eyes of the best fuck in the universe, *he* had been the best fuck in the universe.

There wasn't a cockroach in the world who could claim the same.

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