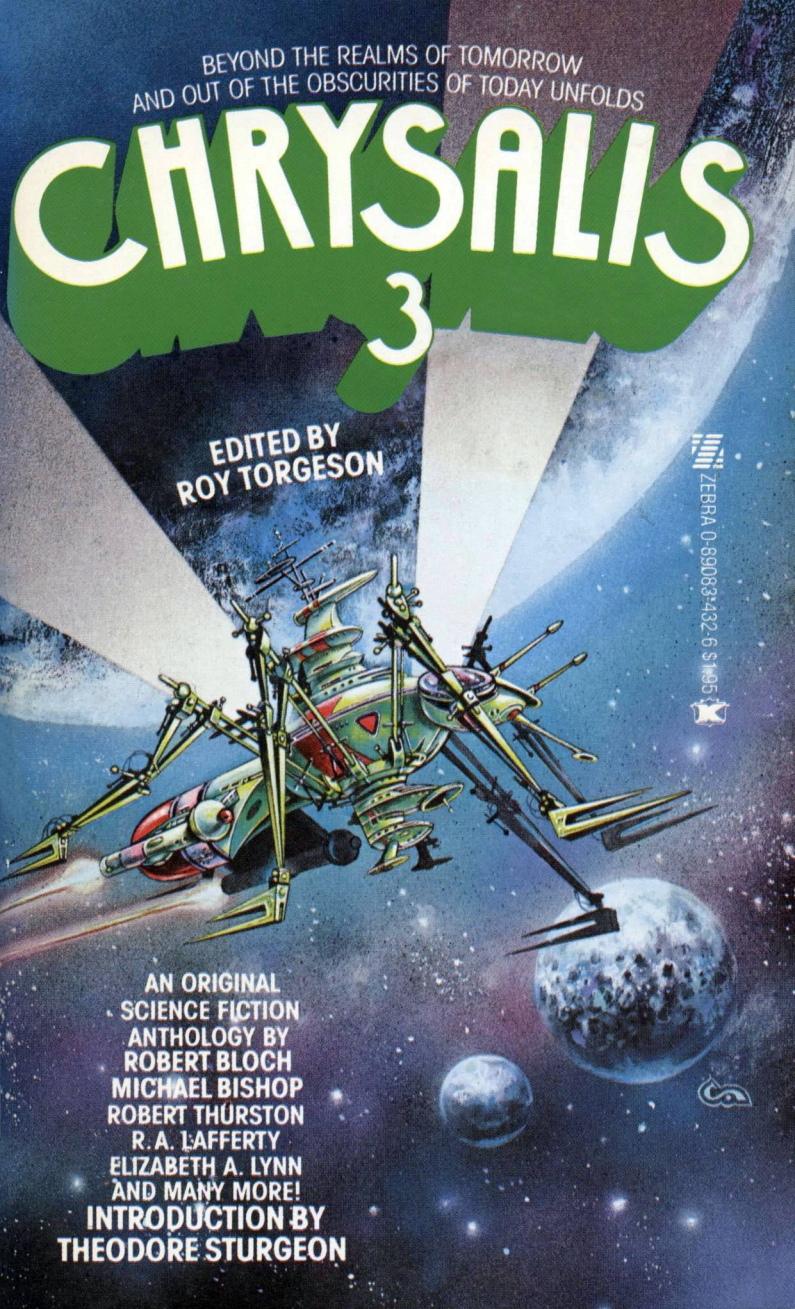
BEYOND THE REALMS OF TOMORROW
AND OUT OF THE OBSCURITIES OF TODAY UNFOLDS
CHRYSALIS
3
EDITED BY
ROY TORGESON
ZEBRA 0-89083-432-6 $1.95
AN ORIGINAL
SCIENCE FICTION
ANTHOLOGY BY
ROBERT BLOCH
MICHAEL BISHOP
ROBERT THURSTON
R. A. LAFFERTY
ELIZABETH A. LYNN
AND MANY MORE!
INTRODUCTION BY
THEODORE STURGEON

THE DAWNING OF A NEW AGE AND THE BEGINNING OF A NEW WORLD UNFOLDS IN THIS NEVER-BEFORE-PUBLISHED ANTHOLOGY

PLUS A DOZEN MORE ORIGINAL AND UNFORGETTABLE STORIES BY THE MOST SOUGHT-AFTER, MOST TALENTED SCIENCE FICTION WRITERS OF TODAY AND TOMORROW!

R. A. LAFFERTY
Bright Flightways

THOMAS F. MONTELEONE
The Imperfect Lover

SUSAN JANICE ANDERSON
The Fossil

ROBERT BLOCH
The Spoiled Wife

MILDRED DOWNEY BROXON
In Time, Everything

CHRYSALIS 3

EDITED BY ROY TORGESON

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For Howard & Jane Frank
my friends
and for
David, Laura & Erica
the rest of the guys

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INTRODUCTION

This is *Chrysalis 3,* in case you hadn't noticed; and if you are unaware of its predecessors, I envy you. I envy anyone the surprises in store for those who encounter this remarkable series for the first time. Go ye then to your bookseller and see to it that you are supplied; ply him with sweet words and wine and your foot hanging heavily over his metatarsal.

One of the many reasons I so counsel you is that in *Chrysalis II* (or 2, if you like Arabs better than Romans) is a story—unbelievably, a first sale—by Karen Jollie, called *The Works of His Hand, Made Manifest.* Anyone interested in writing must marvel at the suppleness and craft of this story, and anyone interested in sheer *story* must be captivated by the exploration-in-depth of the closeness between two men which is not what you think—if what you think is anything superficial.

Why I mention this at the outset is that on reading this first Jollie story you would have every reason to believe that she had done—done beautifully—all that could possibly be done with the theme; that she had written the bottom line. Yet you hold in your hands her second sale, and it is about these same people and this same relationship; it is a much longer story (the longest in this book), structured as strong and efficiently as an airframe, so ingeniously that even its title is, after you have read it, a zinger. And the title is *Chrysalis Three.* How about that?

I'd like you to know that this is not my first crack at writing the introduction. After reading all the manu-

scripts, I chuntered and paced for a long time—too long a time—and finally sat down and wrote an intro in the form of a debate: Resolved: that Roy Torgeson is a better editor than Theodore Sturgeon is a writer. It derived from my feeling that I felt quarrelsome about some of these stories; that here and there they say things I would not say, or say very well certain things I just don't believe, or believe in. The moderator and judge of the debate was an unnamed person designated only as "Y." The whole thing developed into something intolerably cutesy, and I junked it, and called Roy to beg for more time, which gave him and the publisher purple fits; but as you see, he gave it to me.

It's an easy thing to sit down and slosh sweet sugar to coat everything that comes out of the box the editor sends you; do that once, however, and the reader, having found one single cascara in his candy, isn't going to bite another piece of it nor buy another box. One may always praise the stories one likes and say nothing at all about the others, or one may say of these latter: "For those who like the cowboy story that occurs on Mars instead of in Arizona, there's a great little number here called *Walkdown on the Canal Bank*, by J. Tyro," and feel that though one hasn't told the truth (that one hated it), at least one hasn't told a lie, either.

Okay: no candy. Let me first say honestly and freely which stories pushed my joy-button, and a little of why, the way I just did with the Jollie.

The two Lafferty stories, like virtually all Lafferty stories, sting and tickle at the same time. There is nobody, there has never been anybody, who writes like Lafferty. Under the puckishness, the color-bursts, the wild, weird and wonderful characterizations, the tumble and sparkle of language, is an undercoat of sharp and serious observation—observation of human motivations, of human institutions (universities, for example, or rituals which have lost their reason-for-being) so that, like *Gulliver's Travels*, almost all of Lafferty can be read as enchanting entertainments, or as sharply-etched political cartoonery, or as analogs of a superbly thought-out

philosophy concerning human nature and human conduct. In other words, you get out of Lafferty, as out of Swift, whatever you're equipped to bring in.

Anderson's *The Fossil* is a poignant reminder that those who have outlived their world, their friends, lovers, relatives, acquaintances: Those people *feel*. Think of that next time you pass one on a park bench, taking up space a Real Person might use. If you don't know about this now, you will—or die first.

Elizabeth Lynn's *Circus* is a fine demonstration of her growing powers. Everything she writes is better than the one before, and she had two fine ones in *Chrysalis 1*. She feels for *people*—this above all, and this is what I ask of any writer.

Hansen's *Dragon's Teeth* is an unsettling piece about a strange kind of warfare in a strange kind of place. Strong. Again, its strength (to me) lies not so much in its action and its scene as in the familiarity it gives you with the protagonist, the soldier. You come to know him, and therefore to care very much what happens to him.

Seedplanter, by Robert Thurston, is a romp, a gas, a bawdy tumble. Just incidentally, it's also by a guy who does his homework. Various historical periods and the folk who lived in them were not exactly as depicted before cameras on sound-stages, with unlittered ground and fragrant armpits.

Dennis Caro has done something interesting, indeed. He has laid out his story like a set of differently colored tiles, and hands them to you quickly and deftly so that each row matches up and then the thing is finished, a whole mosaic. And in *Couples*, he does it without confusing you—no small trick.

Then here's Quinn Yarbro in a grisly, downer mode. A most accomplished writer indeed, she unloads her downs and her grislys not with blood-sucking vampires (matter of fact, it is well documented that she loves vampires a lot: see her novel *Hotel Transylvania*), but with a much more frightening monster: a computerized apartment which has its occupant's best interests as a prime directive. Ecch.

One of the most astonishing literary jewels to be carved recently was by Alan Ryan in *Chrysalis 2*—a first sale, too. It was called *Dragon Story,* and it is unique. There is an important difference between "unique" and "original" in my personal lexicon. An original is something someone does for the first time (like Murray Leinster's *Sideways in Time,* which invented the idea of moving back and forth between parallel universes, or, for that matter, Mickey Spillane's ugly first book). After that, anyone can write one like it. But a (an?) unique stands alone, and always will; it cannot be duplicated, it cannot be copied, not even by its author. Such a work was *Dragon Story,* and one had to wonder what on earth Ryan might do for an encore. Well, *It Must Be By His Death* is the encore—a strong and searching study of commitment surpassing survival.

David Bischoff is a wordoholic like me. Sometimes he staggers a bit and sometimes his potions are a little strong, and nobody would claim that his basic idea is totally original; but oh, it's good to lie back and let words like that flow over you! I don't know Bischoff, but I'll bet he has soaked in Carlyle and Swinburne, Dante Gabriel Rosetti and William Morris, Yeats, Byron, and suchlike dancers on syllables. He isn't in their league, not yet, and from time to time perhaps some dilution might be in order, but the flavor is there, and it's good. *Alone and Palely Loitering,* he calls it, and you know who wrote that. You don't? Well, Bischoff will tell you.

Michael Bishop has an unusual tale about some regimented children being used—most willingly—as a sort of farm team for a guerrilla army. Bishop has that "people" touch that I look for; you get to know these unlovable but engaging kids, and feel a good deal of what they feel.

There has been a great surge of thought and print about life, death, and continuation of one sort or another recently, and it has touched Mildred Broxon, as evidenced by her *In Time, Everything.* You get to know a dying lady just enough to care about her next awareness (a startling one, frightening) and then—well, there's more. If you

want to assign what she goes through to the swirl of hallucination experienced as the inner light goes out forever, write it in yourself. I prefer to think that Broxon is saying something else.

Charles L. Grant has become one of the big ones, and he is in his stride with *The Peace That Passes Never.* There is a fine reality about this story, a sort of induced familiarity with the town, its streets and houses, and the people you'll meet, even if you've never been in such a place. It's a skillful trick he pulls, because when a special quiet horror moves in, Grant comes close to that greatest of all desiderata of the fiction writer: to make the reader feel that rather than just reading about it, he feels it happening to him. In addition, Grant doesn't hand the answers to you for free; you'll have to satisfy yourself that you understand just what has happened, and that will take a little thought—another deft way the author has of involving you.

Here is where I get quarrelsome. First I'll use the cop-out phrasing: For those who like cold-blooded and heartless violence coupled with sex and insane vengeance, there's a real delectation here called *The Imperfect Lover.* If a simple turn-the-coin-over, or negative-print plot amuses you, try *Kicks Are For Kids.* And if your taste runs to light whimsy, dreadful puns, an improbably plot and an anything-for-a-laugh punchline, written by one of the greatest of us all, then *The Spoiled Wife* is your thing.

Tom Monteleone has done some lovely stuff—hardcore SF ingeniously woven into deeply human events, such as the miracle healers in the Philippines, and light-hearted time-travel/time-track stories, again with that warm human touch. Now, I personally abhor violence, and have almost completely abandoned TV and films because of it, and wham-bam sex without even friendliness, let alone love, seems to me pitiable. Yet it is neither of these which makes me quarrelsome on reading *The Imperfect Lover,* which, as a narrative whole, could not exist without them (always the final test for including or excluding *any*

element); but something quite different.

You see, Monteleone's story is cast in a far future where an extremely advanced technology passes miracles in transportation, weaponry, and communications, and yet the story turns on something I detest more than most things in life: jealousy. Mindless, vicious, possessive sexual jealousy. "Jealousy," Bill Ballance once said, "is the only vice which is never fun for anybody." And I quarrel with the idea that mankind can advance so far in all these other areas and still be afflicted by so useless and destructive an emotion.

I quarrel with Bryant's story for a much more trivial reason: the title. Those who read this book newly minted will readily recognize *Kicks are for Kids* as a play on the off-repeated slogan of a television commercial, but this isn't a periodical: it's a *book*. Books stay around. Even magazine stories get into books and then stay around. I bite my tongue and my ears get red whenever I encounter one of my own early stories and find in it the tag-line of a radio comedian of my early youth. The context of a line like that is quickly forgotten; secondary meanings disappear, and real wit with it, and often the line becomes meaningless and imperils whatever meaning the story might have had. The practice dates. If Stanley Weinbaum were alive today, I'll bet he would give anything to be able to rewrite the dialog in one of the greatest SF stories ever written, *A Martian Odyssey*.

Robert Bloch's *The Spoiled Wife* is the kind of playfulness which my friends occasionally lay on me, by telling an almost interminable and complex anecdote, requiring real attention and concentration, and building up to a single pun. My reaction to this is that my (now erstwhile) friend has presumed on my friendship to rob me of forty-two minutes of my life *which I am never going to get back*. I'm supposed to *laugh?*

(But Oh Lord, I confess . . . I have done it too . . . I try not to do it any more. But did you hear the one about the man who was arrested the other day on Montauk, hurling rocks at seagulls? . . . arrested . . . jailed . . . refused to

speak . . . wife and priest called . . . psychiatrist . . . ((forty-first minute)) . . . hated seagulls and was determined to leave no tern unstoned.) That kind of thing is almost forgivable from me, but from a giant like Bloch? The mighty story-machine, capable of shattering suspense and monumental terror, turning out the likes of this?

And yet—and yet . . .

Capital "I" is scattered through this introduction like flyspecks on the office calendar of an abandoned fertilizer factory, and that's no mistake; they're there to make a point. Everything I have expressed here is true and freely and openly stated. True—*for me.*

Why, because of my detestation of jealousy, should I put down Monteleone's story? My feeling about jealousy is so intense that I let it blind me to other available and valuable insights. For example, why could I not have interpreted his story as cautionary, like *1984?* Why not take it as a view of what it might be like if humanity progresses technologically without evolving away from its pathologies? A warning? 1984 will not be what Orwell predicted very largely because he wrote his remarkable book and alerted us. In Monteleone's far future there may be no jealousy at all because by writing this story he planted the seed here and there that this must not happen.

Why jump on Ed Bryant because he has done something which, in the past, has embarrassed me? My being embarrassed did not bring about the end of the world. He may not be, may never be, and very probably should not be embarrassed by it. He did not intend this story to be inscribed on stone and brought down from the mountain to guide us; why should I look on it as such? And if I want Deeper Meanings, why not regard with Bryant, with a certain affection, the shifts and cycles of human attitudes?

And why jump on Robert Bloch for anything he does, ever? If there is anyone on earth who has earned the right to write what he pleases, it's Robert Bloch.

And anyway, I've made my confession.

The point I'm making is that Roy Torgeson did not compile this anthology to make me like it, item by item, page by page; and for me to pick out targets from it to shoot at would be a way of saying that I thought he had done the whole thing just for little old me.

There are lots of you who enjoy things I can't share with you: zucchini, disco dancing, uppers, downers, 1950s parties, sitcoms, bathing suits . . . and it would be a pretty arrogance for me—or for you—to demand of Roy Torgeson that he distribute stories tailored to any one particular taste.

This was the thrust of the debate I began to write: Resolved: that Roy Torgeson is a better editor than Theodore Sturgeon is a writer.

After all, he can edit for more kidns of readers than I can write for.

But whichever side you take in the debate, remember that the moderator and judge is the mysterious "Y."

The mysterious You.

Enjoy.

Theodore Sturgeon
Los Angeles, 1978

CHRYSALIS THREE

Karen G. Jollie

I

"Charlie's at it again," I said morosely.

Edmund barely looked up from the polliwiggler tanks. The blood-red larvae were wriggling all about his hand, like arching cats rubbing for attention. He waved his fingers slowly in the brine, the sinuous motions only drawing them tighter in a frenzy of attraction. A vague smile of satisfaction drew at the corners of his mouth. "At what?" he finally acknowledged.

"Oh, you know, cracks. Sideways implications. One of these days I'm going to put some knuckles through his incisors."

Edmund wasn't impressed. "You'd only ruin your chances for a lieutenancy," he muttered absently. He drew his fingers out of the water, watching the drops make spreading chains of circles across the surface. The polliwigglers milled a moment where his hand had been, confused perhaps by an object that could escape their hydrous universe so suddenly and irrevocably. They spread at last out into the shallow tank cruising just below the surface, finding a discreet distance from one another and keeping it, random bundles of scarlet in ever-shifting patterns. He squatted down so his eyes were below the water level and continued watching them through the tank walls as

their mirrored images danced above them in inverted mimicry.

I grumbled, "You think he's kidding. He's not. He really believes it. He's ruining my chances for a lieutenancy already, if you ask me. So busting him won't matter. He's not helping your reputation either, you know."

Edmund sighed and stood up. "Jeremy, you shouldn't worry so much what Charlie thinks," he said seriously, his gray eyes probing at my agitation. I felt prickles at the look and turned away. When Edmund went at you with those eyes you could feel him suddenly present inside your skull. It was embarrassing—especially when you didn't want him to know what was really there. Turning away helped sometimes, but this time I knew he'd caught it dead center before I could avoid his shot. I coughed and felt my ears getting red.

"Maybe you should take this more seriously," I said defensively. "Even if nobody paid any attention, it's still damned insulting. Damned insulting," I added in an undertone, but the red didn't go away.

He smiled in that vague way he has when he's aware of somebody else's intense feelings about something he personally considers beneath his notice. It always annoys me when he does that, because he's usually right.

"It's not," I continued hotly, trying to goad him, "as if this doesn't affect you, you know. Sometimes I think he's trying to get at you since that Karyos thing. He won't admit it, but he's had it in for you since Karyos . . . "

"I am aware," Edmund said drily, cutting me off in mid-gripe. He shrugged the whole thing away from him and went into the tank case for his clipboard and data sheets. "Have you been keeping track of the feeding weights?" he inquired over his shoulder, writing as if the preceding conversation hadn't occurred.

"Yes," I said between my teeth. I considered pursuing it, finally concluded I would only be having an argument with myself. I went to the stockroom for the base feeding regimen without another word. I started making it up, but spilled half the carton across the counter. From across the lab, Edmund laughed aloud.

"Right," I cursed to myself. "Right. Right!" I almost forgot to record the weights, but I was determined not to have Edmund at my shoulder with that damned lofty smile again, so I stopped, ticked off the procedure in my head, and caught it. "Right."

I was really steamed, but at that point I wasn't sure whether I was more steamed over Charlie's snide remarks or over Edmund's refusal to acknowledge them. Sometimes I think Edmund is completely oblivious to people's reactions to him; other times I'm sure he knows full well what they think, but he just ignores them. I can't tell whether that's his way of denying them, or whether it's just that he doesn't especially care. He's forever accusing me of worrying too much about what people think. What's worse, he says, is that I trouble myself more about what people think of him than about what they think of me. He finds it mildly amusing, but I guess it's true enough. I still have this tendency to defend him.

It's not always easy. Edmund gives people pause on first introduction. Without fail. Some get over it right away; some never do.

I believe all humans have a sixth sense. We can't measure it, but it's there all right, and it operates very acutely when we first meet somebody new, superceding the other five.

The five measure Edmund up as a little too tall, a little too slender for his height. A little too boyish for his age (thirty six or eight?), maybe not taking things with the seriousness everyone else thinks the things warrant. Definitely too light in his coloring—those grey eyes change hue too readily, are a little too airy and

disconcerting, the gaze a bit too direct; the gold hair is cut too full. Nice straight mouth though, and clean lines to his profile. A face that says nothing or everything. A voice that is level, low, distinct. It would take a lot to upset him. Too quiet, though, not aggressive enough. Word is, he's a real brain, but bet he's not ambitious. He'll be cooperative, he'll go along. The reports of the five are comforting.

But that sixth sense unerringly knows Edmund, even though the other five don't. It's a tactile sense that reaches out with tendrils of sensitivity, and when it reaches the edges of Edmund, it encounters "strange" and rapidly retracts.

That's the pause.

The sixth sense knows he's different, different in a way even the sixth sense itself is incapable of grasping. The people who get over that pause are the ones who won't withdraw from the touch of incomprehensibility, the ones who somehow give their sixth sense the courage to touch him again and again, long enough to know him under that outer edge of strangeness. He himself is not frightening. Only the strangeness is. It is borne, once you bother to know him.

I bothered. He's the best friend I've got. No, that isn't quite the way it is—I'm the best friend he's got. He has a few others, the ones that managed to get over the pause right away. But they're not too close to him, not the way I am. We understand one another, Edmund and I. Since we're fellow Science Officers on the starship *Liberty*, we relieve each other daily. We room together. We work together on our own researches (like the polliwiggler project) when our combined schedules allow us. The *Liberty*'s on cruise, right now, so lately that's been often. He still gives my sixth sense the prickles on occasion, but I don't let it bother me anymore.

Now Charlie senses the strange in him, just like everyone else, but Charlie resents it, and is, I think, a little afraid of it. His five senses won't tell him

why he's afraid or why Edmund should seem strange. Most who never recover from the pause end up avoiding Edmund, or ignoring him. Charlie sort of sniffs around after him like a suspicious puppy trying to figure out a scent it hasn't encountered before. He muters to others that Edmund is weird, and his slitted eyes follow his movements minutely, waiting for a slip, perhaps, or a look, or a word that will enable him to put a label on the strangeness and identify it.

Charlie wants to nail Edmund. Good.

The strange in Edmund is not easily labeled. It is not any one thing he is, or any isolated thing he's done. It's the sum total of him, making him a being somehow beyond other beings. (I won't say "man," because I'm not yet certain he is a man, even though my own sixth sense has never suspected him of being otherwise.) He does things, senses things a normal man doesn't. He tries to keep most of it to himself.

You need a for-instance? O.K. He can regenerate.

Hohum, you say, the Academy Medicom has already perfected techniques that can regenerate nerve tissue, bone, most gland, and soon they should get around the scar tissue contamination problem, and crack the coding for deep muscle. I'm not talking about "techniques" with Edmund.

He just does it. An entire hand. I saw it happen.

Not only that, but he can induce it in others too, and at incredible speeds—in "normal" men like me. He saved my life doing that. But Edmund doesn't want Medicom or Command or the Academy to know about it. He doesn't want anyone to know about it. With me, it was unavoidable—either I died or I found out. That's how I found out.

Even now, he gets kind of uneasy if I refer to it, no matter how obliquely. He won't discuss it at all with me. I have the feeling that he'd just as soon pretend it hadn't happened, like it was some embarrassing *faux pas* he'd let slip in one unguarded moment,

and he was afraid I'd throw it up to him one of these days in an argument or something. I think he's worried I may eventually betray him, intentionally or otherwise.

I wouldn't do that. Not intentionally, anyway. Not even if I were mad at him. So I avoid the subject as much as I can. Still, there are times I have to clamp my jaws down hard, just to keep the questions unspoken.

He ought to understand that a man can't help but wonder. All I can do is let my sixth sense have free rein, and try to let what it touches suffice.

None have touched more deeply than I.

"Damn!" said Edmund.

I jerked upright, attentive. Edmund rarely uses expletives of any sort, so when he does, it reflects an upset of unusual proportions. "What?" I inquired as sweetly as one can from across a lab.

"Another one's dead!" he fairly fumed. "The biggest one."

I put aside the feeding formula and covered it. "Leave it alone a minute, will you? I want to see." I ran my hands and arms through the sterilizer and went over to the tanks.

The large polliwiggler floated, its bulbous belly up, on the far side of tank three. The ruddy color of its youth had faded to a sick, pinkish mauve; but what was more indelicate, it appeared as if it had sprouted a coat of fine, white peach fuzz which shifted back and forth with each ripple that rocked the corpse. The stiff miniscule limbs barely cleared the parasitic growth. "Any evidence of fungus infection before the death?" I asked.

Edmund didn't answer at first. He was leaning against tank four with crossed arms pressing tightly into his solar plexus, as if he were trying to fold himself up, except that he was too stiff from frustration to bend. He examined the

floating blob with stony intensity, as his lower incisors pressed a neat tow of thin red stripes into his upper lip. That narrow icy stare projected like a beam on which the information he sought would somehow transport itself into his head from the fuzzy, bloated corpse bobbing there three meters away. Finally his arms unlocked and he filled his chest with a sigh. "No," he said at last, very quietly. "No external evidence, anyway. Maybe the granulation of the skin is the sign of it. Maybe we ought to do biopsies on the ones that have started to granulate." Whatever information his stare sought, it had not been found. "Fish him out before he contaminates the others, will you?"

This was a first for me. I was, of course, intrigued with this culturing problem and I was curious as hell to what form the polliwigglers would metamorphose—presuming we ever found the key to trigger metamorphosis—but the biggest fascination for me was watching Edmund being frustrated. It's not that he doesn't handle blocks well—he does. It's just that I don't think he's *used* to being held up by some unfathomable bug in the proper order of things. I've watched him fathom bugs so fast, he should've been an anteater by trade. The stoppages, the quirks, the sudden vicissitudes of chance usually failed to give him pause for very long. He has an uncanny talent for burrowing right to the trouble, uncorking the bottleneck, and backing out looking properly humble while the problem in question evaporates before everyone's admiring eyes.

But not this time. These unassuming little one-kilogram polliwigglers not only refused to attain sexual maturity, but they stubbornly insisted on randomly dying and getting infected (or getting infected and dying), with a white filamentous fungus that left no aerial or aquatic spores and resisted being wiped out by any known chemical treatment that didn't wipe out the polliwigglers themselves.

My hands were sterile, and we had at least determined that the fungus was noninfective to any earth-based life, so I gently lifted the jellying remains and carried them to the pan of fixing agent. Edmund didn't look like he was going

to get the hypodermic, so I got it myself and began injecting. He just stood, staring at the place where the victim had been, massaging his jaw, obviously immersed in his own raging world of frantic analysis. Edmund: frustrated.

Very interesting.

"Do you want to do this autopsy?" I asked after a decent interval.

He started out of his pensiveness. "What? Oh." He considered. "No, I think you had better do it this time. Maybe you will see something I have missed. I think I'll set up for some biopsies on the granulating ones." He appeared to shake his musings away from him and went slowly out. To sick bay, I thought, to arrange for flash-freeze. Well, what the hell, we had to change direction soon. We still had plenty of polliwigglers left, but if we kept losing them at this rate, we'd run out just about the time *Liberty* was due to dock. I was pretty certain Captain Harvester would take a dim view of any request for a return run to Valpecula Centaurii just to pick up some more specimens. The only trouble was, even if biopsy showed us they were previously infected, it still wouldn't tell us how to clear up the infection.

Ah, well, onward and upward. I got my dissecting instruments and set to work, trying very hard to suppress a gleeful desire to discover something very simple right out from under Edmund's nose.

It's funny how some ideas take hold on pieces of your life. They grab your gray cells and hang on. You think on them constantly. Anytime your mind wanders, it always returns to the same thoughts, hacking at them, twisting them, turning them inside out, drawing and quartering them as if you had to get to their very core to save your life or your sanity.

Right now it was metamorphosis.

The polliwigglers had started it. They were puzzlers from the word go. Most of the fauna of Valpecula

Centaurii were pretty well known by this time. Valpecula is largely an aquatic planet; there are only a few patches of sterile sand with enough *chutzpah* to rear themselves above the restless brine. The sand migrates a lot in the summer regions to escape the anger of the storm-driven seas, so the fauna is exclusively marine. Polliwigglers prefer the warm shallow waters around the equatorial sand bars. They're numerous there, and they've been collected for years—but no one has ever found a polliwiggler capable of reproducing. The logical conclusion has been that they must metamorphose into something else. So we're trying to get them to metamorphose under controlled conditions.

But they won't.

We've tried everything. Especially waiting. No dice. They just die.

So I think about metamorphosis a lot. I even dream about it. I find myself applying the concept to everything around me. The things, the happenings. The people.

Especially the people.

There's the old saw about the only inevitable things being death and taxes. But there is metamorphosis too—it's another name for change, particularly irreversible change. That's just as inevitable. Edmund says it's a good thing, metamorphosis. The best lives have a lot of it, he says, and as unchanging as he seems to me, I guess he knows what he's talking about.

I don't think he means changing for change's sake. Some people do that. They do that and think it's their vitality showing its stuff. Like Guardo. He's into mushroom-growing right now, and that's only a month, because he was into pewter, old pewter, just a solar month ago—he's still got stains on his fingertips from that new polish that didn't work. It's mushrooms now, and he talks mushrooms and reads mushrooms and stinks of manure a lot. But give mushrooms three months, tops. I give them two. Then it'll be ethnic literature or pottery. Anything. Guardo, he doesn't stay with anything too long. "Gotta keep learning," he says, "Gotta keep growing." Yeh. He's

just amusing himself is all. Nobody else. He lets it get so important to him, his whole life for a while. Then he drops one whole life, because it isn't important to him anymore, and picks up a brand new whole life. He's pieces, man, and no glue. Interesting to talk to sometimes, but you never get the feeling he's *with* you, you know? In a conversation, I mean. He's with his pewter or his mushrooms, or whatever. And he changes for the sake of change and he's always the same. Different. You know what I mean? No handle.

Boy, could *he* use a change.

And then there's Charlie. A good example of metamorphosis at its worst.

I really liked Charlie when I first met him. He's sharp, really quick on the uptake. He's one of those guys who's always willing to help; he loves to show off his mechanical prowess, which is considerable. He can be a little on the loud side sometimes, but he rarely loses his temper on the job.

The first time he met Edmund was in Personnel Check-in, and you could almost see the hackles rise. For no reason, he took instant dislike to him.

We went through the usual physical training program right after departure, and that only made things worse. Charlie is a real nut on fitness; he's really proud of winning the hand-to-hand Mock Combat Award three years running.

Well, he and Edmund were paired in the third round of the finals this time, and the face-off appeared unfair on the surface. Charlie's a little shorter than Edmund, but not by much; and he outweighed him by almost ten kilos. Edmund is not massively built, but he has surprising strength and he's agile, with unerring coordination. He kept throwing Charlie around like luggage, and Charlie got mad and tried a chop that would have killed, had it landed. Edmund just let it slide past and dumped him again. The round was called right there, and was awarded to Edmund on account of Charlie's unsportsmanlike conduct.

As if that weren't bad enough, there was the Karyos affair. Charlie was assigned . . . Oh, hell, I don't even want to talk about the Karyos thing. Suffice it to say Charlie ended up on report.

Charlie does not forgive.

At first Charlie's ire took the expected form of offensive remarks about Edmund's strangeness, his haughtiness, his secrecy. Then came the introduction of suspicions: Edmund was actually an android the Academy was testing. He was a surgically altered alien. He was a spy.

When these were pondered and finally dismissed, the floating intimations became a little more personal: Edmund avoided women because he was afraid they'd discover some physical aberrancy. Then the wandering word held the not-so-subtle hint of impotency. Finally, it had bloomed into the general understanding that Edmund didn't like women—he had other tastes.

Edmund goes around in his usual oblivious way, and I don't understand it, I just don't understand it. If it were me, I'd bust Charlie one. I'd really bust him.

Hell, maybe I would anyway.

I made notes on the dissection as I went along. The fungus had completely infiltrated to the deepest tissues of the dead polliwiggler. This was evident both macro- and microscopically. Even the internal skeleton was beginning to break down, lose its calcification. You rapid little parasite, I thought; you damned rapid infective little parasite.

There was one strange thing, though—a bony nodule, not yet disintegrating, lodged at the base of the skull. I hadn't remembered that as a normal part of the skeletal apparatus. There was another one in the thorax and a third in the abdomen, both attached to the ventral surface of what had been the backbone. Very hard, unaffected by the fungal invader.

A sign of early infection? Of maturation? Of a normal growth pattern? I rechecked our anatomy diagrams. Well,

in one large one there had been small, calcified bumps at the same sites, but not nearly the size of these. That specimen could have been infected, too. Or *this* one could just be showing development normal to the species.

I hate the vague guesses in the early stages of an investigation. I noted these down for Edmund, then carefully dumped the remains in a storage container.

I heard Edmund come in and move around among the tanks, then languid splashes. He must be collecting his biopsy samples. It was fascinating to watch him handle the polliwigglers. They would come trustingly to his hands as he dipped them in the water. His long fingers would curl about their plump, scarlet bellies so gradually, so gently, that the larvae seemed to welcome their own entrapment. They lay relaxed in his grip, even as he drew minute plugs of skin tissue off their backs for examination. Then he'd seal the tiny wound with the lasuturer before returning them to their tanks. He was choosing the largest ones, those that were showing the first signs of the darker granulation developing on their slimy hides. It began at the base of the broad, webbed tail, but would spread over the entire surface with time. He'd mark each one he'd sampled with a numbered metal tag clamped through the tail fin, before lowering them slowly into the water. As he opened his fingers, they'd give a single fiery flip and be milling among their brethren once more, still drawn to the hands invading their watery domain. I came over to help label the samples.

"Gearshaw wants to see you," he said quietly, even before I came into his range of vision. "Saw him in Biomed."

Commander Gearshaw was the First Officer on the *Liberty*.

"What for?" I asked, realizing my voice had gone a bit taut.

"I'm not sure, but I expect special assignment. The buzzing from the bridge is we've changed course, but nobody I've talked to knows the destination."

"Great," I said sourly. "I hope it doesn't bite into the

lab time."

"Bets?" said Edmund.

"Why me?" I asked the Commander.

He smiled. "You're up top the duty roster. See? 'Steward, Jeremy, Ensign.'" He held up the list for my considered examination. "Findell handled the Karyos affair, remember?"

"Yes," I complained weakly, "but Edmund's better at this sort of thing, really. It's just . . . "

"I was under the impression you were classified Science Officer," said Gearshaw drily.

"Yeh, but . . . "

"Which means minimum twenty-four credits sapiology at the six level, correct?"

I said nothing.

"You've really got to work on that self-confidence, boy," advised the Commander, dismissing me and my assignment simultaneously.

Every time I have a fight with Veronica, it ends up being over Edmund. It may not start out that way, but that's the way it always ends up.

This time it was my ego. I made the mistake of telling her about Commander Gearshaw's remark, so right away she has to jump in and agree with him—all serious and solemn, the way she can be when she talks to me about me. She's a nurse, but sometimes I think she's a frustrated Freudian—she can't resist psychoanalyzing people, especially me. So now Edmund was bad for my ego.

A serving yeoman came and renewed our drinks. The subdued sparkle from the chandelier caught in the ruby depths of the wine and splashed over onto her fingertips. Whoever designed this season's evening lounge decor certainly knew what he or she was about. The lights played Veronica's skin like an instrument, and I began to wish she'd get off the subject of my ego and onto my libido.

"Still," she continued, "You're always speaking in comparisons, always measuring yourself against him."

"I am not," I said defensively. "If he's better at something, I don't mind admitting it. What's wrong with that?"

"But, according to you, he's better at everything!"

I sighed. "Well, in most things, he *is*"

"Still, I think you spend too much time hovering in his shadow—and a non-existent shadow, at that."

I decided not to get mad. I wanted her too much tonight to spoil it by getting mad. I forced a smile. "Well, don't resent the shadow too much. He graciously consented to vacate the room again. Just for you."

She smiled. Genuinely. "Isn't he getting a bit tired of spending the night in the lab?"

I shrugged. "I keep asking him that, but he says no, very cheerfully."

She seemed to muse seriously on that one. The serving yeoman looked our way, but I shook my head in the negative. Her quiet question was out before I could look back at her face.

"How often has he asked you to return the favor?"

It was a bomb, splashing fragments of burning implication. I immediately thought of Charlie. She must have seen it in my expression, but she went on talking as if the question hadn't been asked.

"He's developed quite a reputation for untouchability, you know. It became something of a game among the unattached women crew members. The competition to successfully seduce him got so fierce, I was beginning to think bets were being laid. Hilda got a real complex. She's so used to landing anything in pants that his cool disinterest really took her back a few notches. I've never seen her more sedate since her encounter with him." She was amused, glowing from within at some private joke. I said nothing, seething internally.

"They've all backed off, finally," she went on. "I think they've all come to the conclusion that he is just plain unreachable."

I maintained my silence. About six different emotions vied for attention, none of them reliable.

She studied my countenance and seemed to grow pensive. "Jeremy," she began cautiously, "I have a confession to make." She waited for a response, an inquiry, but I wouldn't satisfy her. She sighed and leaned back in her chair, sipping languidly at the wine, examining the granite lines around my mouth.

"You think I hate him, don't you? Or that I'm jealous?" She paused meaningfully. "Well, the truth is, I waited until all the girls had had their fling at him and failed. Then I started dating you. To get at him. I figured it was the only way."

My burning glare leaped at her face, searching for the purpose in this. The corners of her mouth had tipped up in that slightly crooked smile she has, but the dark eyes seemed suddenly huge, hollow with empathy. She looked down at the meager surface of the wine and the smile went away. "I know now that I can't have him," she said in subdued explanation. "No one can have him. By the time I'd discovered that, I had come to realize that I wanted you more than I had ever wanted him."

I tried to clear my throat, to say something. I couldn't think of anything to say. I gulped at my untouched drink.

She took a deep breath, not of relief. A drawing of further strength. "He's your weak point, Jeremy. You care about him too much. He'll drag you down in the end. Are you aware of the rumors being spread about him?"

I wished I wasn't aware. I was weary of the subject, weary of Roni's opinions on it. My desire to spend the rest of the evening with her was rapidly evaporating. "I suppose you believe them," I remarked bitterly into the wine.

Strangely, her calm smile returned. "It does not matter what I believe."

"Well, they're not true," I asserted, not knowing whether they were or not.

"I didn't expect they were. That's not the point."

"Just what is your point?" I growled.

The hollowness in her eyes became cavernous. "My point is that—lies or not—the rumors about him reflect on you. I *care* about you, Jeremy. I care what people think about you. If you could somehow disassociate yourself from him; or at least spend a little less time . . . "

Something unravelled in me. I stood up. "You're worse than Charlie," I snapped at her. I wanted to shout, but I cared too much what the other people in the lounge would think.

Too damned much.

When I slipped into our quarters, I expected to find them empty, but Edmund was sitting at the desk with a journal. The single desk lamp threw a grotesque exaggeration of him on the opposite wall.

"What are you doing here?" I inquired weakly. I had wanted to be alone.

"Reading," he replied calmly. Then: "What happened?"

I started, then stammered, "I don't know what you mean."

He glanced at the clock. "You began getting upset about forty-five minutes ago," he declared. "My only surprise was how long it took you to break out of it and come back here. So what happened?"

Bewildered, I backed up against the door, but it was on automatic and opened with a hiss; I nearly sat down in the corridor.

I had once described our relationship as a kind of symbiosis, but this aspect of it had never occurred to me. He could get inside my head! Without my knowing it! A series of some of the thoughts I had been entertaining lately paraded across my memory. I shuddered and considered running.

He swivelled in the chair, his arm draped across the back, and confronted me with a broad grin that leaped out from the semi-darkness. "What's the matter? You think I'm a mindreader or something?"

"Or something," I murmured, not moving.

"Get in here," he commanded good-naturedly, "and quit making an ass of yourself."

I entered uncertainly. The door hissed shut behind me. I settled in the nearest chair and examined him with quick eyes, like a mouse.

"I do not read minds," he stated flatly.

"Then, how . . . "

"When somebody feels an intense emotion, they send out a pretty strong signal. Automatically."

"And you pick it up."

"And I pick it up," he quietly concurred. He spread his hands in apology. "I can't help it, especially if it's someone close to me. Honest."

"So you knew tonight was off, even before I did."

"*As* you did, not before." He smiled sadly. "I came back up. No point in staying away." He seemed to hesitate. His concern hung heavy, like a shuttle in landing-phase two. "What was it about?"

"Never mind." I threw the memory of the argument away from me, reluctant to relive it. "It doesn't matter anyway." I rose, and began stripping off my tunic as if that would end it.

"Was it me?"

I paused in the middle of the room, my arms still bound by the cloth, and glanced at his face. The sad smile was still in place, a bit weaker perhaps, and a profound regret rimmed the edges of his eyes.

"Shit," I said. I flung the tunic at my bed. It slapped and stuck to the surface like a wrinkled leech. I sat on it and examined the floor. The silence seemed hollow at first, but then it become close, tactile. The touch hurt.

"She wanted you," I said cautiously. I wouldn't watch his face. "Did you know?"

"Yes." Levelly.

"I guess that's why you never liked her much."

"Yes," he agreed quietly. I risked a glance at him. He was looking into space, his eyes ice-hard, speaking to me from some vast distance. "The fact she told you only

confirms my judgement. So she ended it?"

"No," I said wistfully. "She just wanted to explain that she didn't feel that way about you anymore. I don't think she even likes you much now."

He seemed to ponder that with growing relief. The vacancy in him gradually dissolved, as did the icy glitter in his eyes. He came back into himself. "Can you make it up?" he asked, his concern returning.

"I don't know if I want to."

"You ought to."

My eyes narrowed at him. "Oh?"

He attempted a smile. "She's important to you."

"Oh?" I repeated, trying to sound sarcastic. It came out half-heartedly. "You know that for a fact, do you?"

"Yes." Without hesitation.

"You shouldn't defend her, you know," I added. The bitterness had somehow washed away. "You don't know what she said about you."

"That doesn't matter."

"It does to me."

"Well, it shouldn't."

"Well, it *does*!"

I thought I was going to get angry again, but he placated it with a sigh and a smile. "Go to sleep," he advised amiably, shrugging off further argument. He swivelled his back at me and reapplied himself to the open journal on the desk.

I suppose I should have followed his advice and it wouldn't have happened. But I was festering over his usual apparent lack of concern over anybody's opinion of him. I sat on my tunic and went over the evening again, beginning to feel like a martyr. I shouldn't, I realized. I was self-appointed—his defender because he made no attempt to defend himself. But why did he have to make it so damned difficult? He wouldn't even provide me with any ammunition.

"Don't you *like* women?"

The thought was in my mind, but it was preposterous to suppose I would have uttered anything so stupid aloud.

His unnatural stillness in the chair made me realize that the question had not been my imagination. My mouth dehydrated instantly; I wanted very much to swallow my tongue.

His chair moved; it swivelled back around with slow deliberation. Its occupant had his arms interlocked across his chest, as if imprisoning within some aberrant form of supreme satisfaction. He was grinning from ear to ear.

"I love them," he replied mildly. "Why do you ask?" He was trying very hard not to laugh.

I honestly attempted a reply; my mouth gaped, but nothing came out. The pulse at my ears slowly began to subside.

He finally recovered a straight face. He leaned forward onto his knees. "Charlie finally getting to you?" he asked, not unkindly.

"No, I . . . No."

"Not even a little?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"How *did* you mean it?" The note of amusement in his voice was wholly gone. My pulse picked up again.

I tried to explain: "I don't remember you ever . . . It's just that you never . . . " My voice died. I couldn't figure out how to say it tactfully, so I stopped trying.

He leaned back, his eyes on my face, trying to read my thought. He pondered an answer, seemed to shrug it away, and finally let his gaze wander to a far corner of the ceiling. He smiled, but it was a distant smile, somehow weary.

"Were I to take up with a woman," he began, his eyes not leaving the corner, "I would seek joy. The women I have met here have long been taught to aspire to pleasure, and to avoid anything further. I daresay I would be unable to satisfy their desires. I know they would be unwilling to satisfy mine." He stopped, reluctant to say more.

"Surely, you don't think everyone on board . . . "

"It is not a matter of thought," he interrupted gently. "It is a time, an attitude, a more. Most attain it early as a matter of convenience. But I, Jeremy . . . I have never been able to reduce human intimacy to a form of recreation."

I felt it was an indictment—of me, of all the crew members around me. The corners of my mouth went stiff. I stood up.

"You know, it never occurred to me that you were something of a prig."

The terminology seemed to relieve him. He smiled shyly at nothing. I relented, suddenly curious. "Don't you miss it? Even a little?"

He shrugged his unconcern. "A little. Not that much."

He was cool, I got a bit heated—at what, I don't know. "Don't you realize that there are about a half-dozen girls aboard this ship who are more than willing . . . "

"I am aware," he snapped. He was evidently tired of the discussion, for he swung around and pointedly returned his attention to the journal. I should have left it alone, but I would have the last word.

"Well, if you ask me, there's something wrong with you," I muttered.

He stiffened, suddenly became dry and hard, like the rough husk on a coconut. "You and Charlie can think what you like," he declared coldly. "I don't give a damn."

The "damn" meant he was upset.

II

I was down in the control viewroom of Docking Bay Four, ostensibly to check out the computer terminals for complete lock-in on the portable translator units. Francis was there, as usual, moving shuttles around and testing the power levels on the landmags at the same time. I watched him do his stuff and admired.

If you were choosing a candidate for metamorphosis, you'd likely overlook Francis. He is small and stocky, squared off at the corners. The perfect image of boulder constancy. Cheerful as a lapdog, he often hums as he works at the boards. You can tell he likes what he does and doesn't object living with himself at all. Hardly someone in need of a change.

But Francis wanted to change. Badly.

He was in docking and space traffic control. Lord, could he handle those shuttles—three up and all moving, but he could pull two in and get one out of the bay all at once, like they were marionettes and he the puppeteer. I'd go down just to watch him juggle the traffic, and wonder at it.

I was there when he pulled in the crippled freighter, the *Mary B.*, and set her down, all passive and compliant, even though her right lateral stasis thrusters were jammed on full and threatening to careen her into the bulwarks. He just handled his lateral tractors on overdrive until the thrusters ran out of fuel. By the time they slowly leaked down to a dribble, he'd damned near overloaded the generators, but his thick fingers just played over the landmag board, balancing pressures and forces as if he had an electromagnetic sensor in one eye and a thrust sensor in the other. And all the time that freighter hovered there with only a veer or two to show all the pushing and pulling she was subject to. She could have taken out the left wall, gone right into the compression tanks, and blown the whole starship; but Francis, he just danced those twinkling pinkies over that magboard and didn't even breathe hard. Instinct, that's what he's got.

You take a man like that—somebody who's used to treading the thin line between standard operating procedures and disaster—and it doesn't faze him. So what's a man like that need a change for?

I don't know how he got starship duty. Or why he chose to go for it. He could have gotten a starbase station position just as easily, or even a planet-based one. That would have limited his contact with aliens a lot more, something he would have been more comfortable with. Oh, he was able to handle humanoids just fine—most vert forms, actually. It was carapsoids. He had this thing about carapsoids really bad. Had the nightmares about them, the sweats; got crawly thoughts and tachycardia just at the mention. I don't know how he got past the psychoprobe with that phobia intact. But he loved ships, shuttles, freighters, anything built to run in space. The more varieties he encountered, the more blissful he became. For

him, it had to be a starship.

So he fought it. Stoically. And three months after departure from Earthbase, he enlisted me in the battle. At first I demured, and suggested a head doctor. No, he said, he didn't want it on his medrecord. I knew all about carapsoids, didn't I? Doesn't familiarity breed contempt?

We've been working on it since. My weapons were books, diagrams, then holograms. He'd sweat a lot, sometimes look away. But he hung in there.

I tried to work him up to touching some preserved specimens. I started with little ones, familiar ones. Earth beetles and mantids. Crosorian land-crabs. He'd pick up the containers with the tips of his fingers, as if they would contaminate him through the plastic. He shook when he touched a big brown mantis with his fingertip. But then he smiled.

He broke only once. My mistake was over-confidence. I brought out one of those Gaurian carapsoids—a big, fuzzy, armored tank of a beast with a dozen clawed legs, and a carapace black and erupting with spines. A genuine bug-eyed monster about a half-meter long, guaranteed to give the stablest person bad dreams. He backed and ran from the lab. I followed him to apologize; met him just outside the door. He only needed a minute, he'd said. Just a minute. He was pale and breathing hard, but he went back in five minutes later and made himself look at it. A week later, he was able to curl his fingers around one of the spines and grin his victory.

God, he had guts.

So I watched him now with some measure of pride, admiring his skill. I think he was aware of it because he picked up a vacant shuttle from the alpha slot and transposed it into gamma, smooth as butter, just for the hell of it. If Captain Harvester knew about the power waste, Francis would have been demoted on the spot; but he just grinned when two shuttle mechanics, nursing their coffee on the bay floor, looked up into the control windows in surprise. One of the mechanics was Charlie. I turned my back to the windows.

"Hear we're heading for Scarabis," Francis remarked conversationally. He shut down the boards and leaned back in the operator's chair.

"Yes," I said. "Diplomacy."

"Oh, yeh? You into it?"

"I'm supposed to be the welcoming committee."

"Really?" He gazed out the windows. Something was bothering him; his fingers played absently over the dead switches. He cleared his throat. "Carapsoids, aren't they? The Scarabids?"

"Yes," I said. "You want a preview?" I got out the handbook from the stack over the panel and opened it to the proper pages.

He studied the pictures with unwonted intensity. The only sign of his nervousness was the thin tightness of his lips. "What's the size on these?" he asked, not looking up.

"Just a little under a meter. It varies."

He whistled. "Still, that's a *big* bug!"

I grinned at the wording. "Don't think of them as bugs too much. We're supposed to regard them as equals."

"They have their own ships?" His great love.

I nodded. "Sublight, but not bad. Small, though, by our standards."

He nodded, still studying the images. Most of the Scarabids had high, domed carapaces and fat, curved abdomens. All were octopodal, suspending their weight from tall jointed legs, as spiders do. Most had long, vicious-looking mandibles projecting forward like horns. None had antennae. He touched his finger to one of the diagrams, and appeared to shudder. "All of these forms from the same planet?"

"Most of them. There are eighteen sapient species on Scarabis IV that we know of. It wouldn't surprise me if a few more turn up eventually. We've already contacted thirteen races officially. The others have been resistant to contact. They're very suspicious and that's understandable—it's pretty competitive down there. We've got to limit ourselves to agreements on an extraplanetary basis—mostly trade stuff—because the Federation doesn't want to

get mixed up in the infighting between one race and another. We're strictly and officially neutral, but just the same, it gets a little on the touchy side sometimes."

"So why are we heading there now?"

"One of the uncontacted species sent a message through a trader. They're ready to talk, maybe come to a trade agreement. That's Forbes' department—Trade Relations. He'll handle negotiations."

"Then what are *you* here for?"

"Well, I'm here to establish linguistics. Our guests will be one of five uncontacted species, but the problem is we don't know *which* one of the five. I can sort of eliminate two, because we're pretty sure they don't have ships yet (or just don't care to). Still, that's three species, and the only information we have to go on is traders' talk. It's said the Tricolors and the Blues use variations of the Tonal tongue—that's the most widespread language down there. My problem is that I've got nine dialects of Tonal to choose from, and I have to choose the one closest to their species *and* regional variation. And if the ones coming turn out to be the rare Coppers, I've got nothing to go on—nobody knows how the Copper Scarabids communicate yet. Fun, huh?"

"Sounds like it. When are they due?"

"Oh nine hundred, tomorrow. You be here?"

Francis rolled his eyes. "Oh, I'll be here. If I don't chicken out, that is." He gave me a sickly grin.

"Don't," I said seriously.

"I won't," he promised, just as seriously.

But he looked a little green around the edges.

Edmund was very subdued in the lab. He seemed sullen somehow, but I couldn't tell whether his mood was directed at me, or at the three polliwigglers that had died during the night. Moods were rare with him.

I worked on the histology of our skin and organ samples. The biopsies had established that the granulation was due to fungal spores imbedded in the skin and

overgrown with thick layers of dead cells. No evidence of germination in any of the living polliwigglers, though. Curiouser and curiouser.

We were in the process of sampling for spores in biopsies of smaller polliwigglers, ones who had shown no evidence of granulation yet. Skin samples showed nothing, so we took samples of internal organs. Edmund didn't want to take nerve tissue until everything else had been eliminated, but I decided to sacrifice a young one to check out on the bony nodules I'd found in the larger ones. They weren't there, but I took brain and spinal samples to search for spores.

The spores turned up in what corresponded in function to our spleens. Compact bundles of them, surrounded by sheaths of cells from the host. We checked for signs of tissue damage around these biological caches, but found no evidence of any.

Curiouser and curiouser and curiouser.

As I worked, I had wanted to ask Edmund for some pointers on the dialect problem. He had a real aptitude for languages (what *hadn't* he an aptitude for?). But I still felt a bit prickly about last night's discussion. I kept thinking back to what Roni had said about his shadow and all. O.K., I thought. I can handle this myself.

Just fine.

I hope.

Scarabis IV is a neat planet to orbit. It's low in surface water, but has a deep, cogent atmosphere of about 3000 kilometers, really high in oxygen. The surface of the entire planet is covered with deep deposits of organic material, so it's like a sponge; and the fog just swirls in whirlpools of blue-white glaze over it all. The dense part of the atmosphere just sits on top, glowing deep blue at the edges. It's like watching a slowly rotating cat's-eye marble—almost mesmerizing.

Scarabis sat there on our screens, imbedded in the pitch of space, while outside the open bay doors I could see a

luminous edge of her atmosphere perched there like a landscape mural pasted on the back of the dock to lend depth to the scene. It's kind of weird to sit in the docking viewroom with the bay doors open and realize that open space is in that huge room, maybe fifty centimeters from your nose. The triple-thick view panels are the only shielding between you and its icy, sucking embrace. Some get rapture from that realization. Others break down completely when it occurs to them how flimsy are the barriers between man and that empty, heartless enormity he has so tenaciously invaded. You've got to come to terms with it, one way or another. Once you have, it's still a constant challenge: sort of like walking the very edge of the Grand Canyon every day just to convince yourself that you needn't fall over. Keeps you on your guard against slips, too—and that's healthy.

The Scarabis shuttle hadn't shown yet, so I fiddled with the translater terminal some more, plugging into an Organian mode just to see if the mobile speaker on my belt was hooked up properly. It was.

"Maybe I ought to reach for a call," said Francis. I glanced over and saw how pale he was at the corners of each nostril.

I grinned. I was tempted to heckle him a little over the sick sweat he was in—after all, carapsoids are only another way of adapting to the same demands of life we face—but I said nothing. I remembered that I was sort of queasy about soft radials (thank God the Federation hadn't assigned the *Liberty* to the Cygnus sector—they're lousy with aquatic radials—brrr!), and I wouldn't have liked anyone throwing that up to me. So I just made a straight face, and advised, "Check the wide-scan sensor readings from the bridge first. Maybe you won't need a call."

He did. I heard the murmur of Gearshaw's voice over the intercom. "Far side of the planet," Francis relayed. "Won't be here for another twenty minutes." The report seemed to relax him. He leaned back into the yielding contours of his chair and regained some of his normal color. To kill time, I began mentally to sort through the

Tonal dialects again. I hoped that when our visitors arrived, I would be able to catch the finer edges at the buzzing sprays of their tongue. That would clue me as to which dialect to select in communicating with them. It would take a precise ear, something I was not certain I possessed.

I began to wish Edmund wasn't off-duty. I would have liked to have him available to at least question over the intercom. I was sorry about that discussion, sorry I hadn't kept my big mouth shut. I didn't like my strange feeling of distance, not quite angry, not quite hurt. It was my own fault, after all. It was none of Edmund's doing.

Charlie chose that moment to enter control. I felt a line of prickles go up my back. He misread my expression. "I was just curious," he explained quickly. "I've never seen one of them things before." I kept my features fixed and walked behind Francis' chair to watch the screens. I didn't like those prickles—with me, they did not bode well.

We finally got a little blip on the screen; simultaneously Francis picked up the coded request to board in his headset. Everything has to go according to regulation, so Francis contacted the bridge, as per regulation, that a Scarabis shuttle had requested interception. Harvester, as per regulation, cleared the docking procedure. Francis forwarded the code for the cleared bay.

The Scarabis shuttle appeared as a point of light floating above the blue rim of its home world. As it lessened the distance, it took on its true shape, a sort of half-dome with a snout, not much longer than ten meters. Its speed seemed variable as it strove to pace the orbit of the *Liberty* and began the maneuvers that would enable it to enter the gaping maw of Docking Bay Four.

Francis activated the landmags. Then all hell broke loose.

That little ship dove into the bay like a bat out of hell, and Francis cut the tractors and threw up the repeller just short of her careening into the retainer right over our heads. I guess the pilot of this shuttle had never experienced an outguide system before and thought he

was making a planetfall or something, because just as the repellers went up to fend him off, he hit full reverse and retroed at the same time. The shuttle shot off at an angle for the ceiling of the bay. Just as I was sure we'd have nothing left of our visitors but a mixture of grease and carapace fragments on the roof, Francis compensated with the landmags. The bounding ship lost her momentum, and slowed suddenly; so instead of shattering all over the ceiling, she merely thumped—loudly—on a support beam. She seemed to go passive, because Francis got her floating down, all sweet and ethereal, with a big dent in her hull.

That's when I saw the slit off the side, like a tear in the fabric of light reflected off her skin. I shouted, "Hatch sprung!" just as Francis activated the bay doors; he'd seen it too.

Space is a vampire that craves air. The atmosphere had been suddenly sucked out of that little ship, and my mind raced into mental calculations of how long a carapsoid could survive that frigid vacuum. The bay doors seemed to move in slow motion. I knew they took only twenty-three seconds to completed seal, but it seemed like hours. Charlie was making noises behind me. I realized he was advising the bridge of the accident.

Francis hadn't turned a hair. His hand was poised over the pressurizing buttons, and he struck them simultaneous to the lock light going on. It would take fifty seconds to pressurize to the point of human survival. I thought of the oxygen-rich atmosphere of Scarabis IV. "Where's the oxygen masks?" I asked, surprised my voice sounded calm.

"In the bay. Locker four," he replied without taking his eyes off the pressure gauges. The light over the alcove hatch was still red.

"How long?" I asked.

"Thirty seconds."

It suddenly occurred to me our guests could not use the masks. They respired through eight holes in the abdomen—spiracles they were called. How to get the oxygen

into them?

My eyes ran frantically around the room. They stopped at the waste receptacle.

"Got any plastic bags? For trash?"

Francis took his eyes from the board and looked at me strangely. "What?"

"Bags! Plastic bags! Where?"

He pointed. I dove for the drawer.

"What are you going to do?" asked Francis.

"They breathe through holes in their sides. We've got to rig a bag around their rear ends and feed oxygen into it."

"Gotcha." He stood up and took off his headset, keeping his eyes on the board. "Ten seconds to green."

"What're you doing?" I said.

"I'll help," he said, but he was getting pale. Charlie stood, uncertain.

"Francis," I said.

"I'll be O.K. Honest." He gave one last look at the board. Then he pointed at the hatch.

"Green. Go!"

The atmosphere beyond the hatch was thin but still hit our faces with frigid fire. Francis gulped and made the shuttle hatch before I did. He had mechanical instinct, found the lock in about three seconds. He hissed as his fingers froze to the levers, but I gave him one of the bags as insulation, and he got them both down, alternating his hands. Some of his skin was left behind. The infrared was beginning to work—I could feel the tip of my nose again. With care we pulled at the hatch cover. It was small; no more than a half-meter square. I hoped I could squeeze at least part of the way in; I also hoped the occupants would be within reach. Charlie came up behind us and dumped four oxygen breathers on the deck. He silently went back for more. We got the hatch open.

There was a Scarabid just inside the threshold, rocking on his domed back, his legs waving feebly. I grabbed him by one leg and pulled him out onto the deck with a thump.

He was surprisingly heavy.

"Where?" said Francis.

He was white, hesitant.

I pointed to the openings on either side of the abdomen, which was curled up between the bases of the legs. He'd have to pull the abdomen down. He did, then worked the bag over it. He was shoving the face mask inside the bag as I began to squeeze inside the ship.

There were no lights. I had to feel. I hoped I wouldn't trip something like a thruster. I encountered another leg, grabbed and backed out. The leg was kicking. "I've got it," said Francis behind me. I let go and went in again.

There were four altogether. I was searching for the fourth when I heard Francis shout, "Let go!" behind me. There was a hint of fear in his tone, but just a hint. I thought, please God, don't make him do something foolish. I gritted my teeth, my arm extended as far as I could manage. I felt something, pulled on it. A mandible. I switched to the edge of the carapace and hauled. It was resisting, but not with much strength. One of the clawed legs hooked on my tunic and tore it, but I wrestled it out onto the deck. Francis was sitting there, holding his arm. "It bit me," he said accusingly.

The guilty party was crawling dazedly across the deck, *sans* bag, but seemed to be recovering anyway. I glanced at the one I'd just retrieved. It was rocking on its back, bucking the abdomen resoundingly downward, trying to right itself. The two bagged envoys just seemed to squat uncertainly, recovering their senses. They were all Tricolors. I remembered the language tapes I hadn't fed to the computers. How to speak to them?

"I feel funny," said Francis.

I looked at him sitting there, his legs straight in front of him. He looked funny, even paler than before. Prickles raced like fire up my back. One of the bagged Scarabids rolled over on its side and fiddled with the plastic that bound it. It rasped an inquisitive buzz. Mode Six. I needed to enter the Mode Six Dialect tape into the computer. "Charlie," I said. "Help Francis. I've got to get the

language tapes in."

I ran into the alcove and entered the control room. The tapes were on the console where I'd left them. I got the Mode Six tape into the terminal and activated the translator programming. I grabbed a headset and went out into the bay again. Charlie looked up at me worriedly.

"Francis says he's seeing double."

The prickles spread to the backs of my legs. "Get emergency medical down here on the double," I said to Charlie. He headed for the wall communicator. I stooped over Francis and laid him back on the deck. The Scarabid had escaped its bag, and came over with careful placings of each leg. It settled its weight near Francis' knee and rasped again, only this time my headset said (in flat computer tones): *"Has the organism been penetrated by .....'s mandibles?"*

Francis looked up at me with wide-pupiled eyes. A thin sheen of perspiration coated his upper lip. "I'm not frightened, Jeremy," he whispered proudly. "I'm not."

I examined his arm. There were two punctures through the soft cloth of the sleeve, and when I rolled it back, the punctures were continued into his skin. There was a little blood, and the rims of the holes were blue-white.

"Yes," I said into the headset, and the speaker at my belt buzzed Mode Six.

"We are poisonous to our own ..... Do such toxins apply to your .....?"

"Jesus," I said. "Oh, Jesus." The translator buzzed a static nothing, the programming unable to find corresponding verbalizations.

"I am certain my colleague was dazed and ..... I do not believe he intended to ..... harm to the organism." The swaying of the carapsoid's body took on the aspect of agitation.

"Francis," I called. "Francis?"

His lips moved, but no sound came. His eyes stayed locked in a fixed, glassy stare at the ceiling beam the shuttle had hit. His breathing became ragged and irregular.

"Geez, he looks terrible," said Charlie's voice from

behind my shoulder.

"He's been bitten. They're venomous," I said. "Did you get medical?"

"Yeh, they're on their way. Geez, he looks terrible."

"Francis," I said again, even though I knew he was already unconscious. Then I spoke to the carapsoid huddled next to him. "What is the nature of your poison?"

".....," said my headset. Pure static.

"What kind of poison is it?" I repeated.

".....," repeated the headset.

It wouldn't translate in the Mode.

"I don't understand!" I nearly shouted, desperate. I knew suddenly that medical couldn't save him. Even if it got here now, we had no idea of the nature of the toxin, no antidote to give. Francis was dying. I huddled beside him, holding his pale head, and helplessly watched him die. Nothing but a miracle could save him now.

(Hands, miracle hands, touching, spreading wholeness like a salve, warm hands of understanding, cool hands of hope, we need you, he's dying, please.)

I turned, looking for him.

He stood in the alcove, his back pressed against the wall, wide-eyed, like a rabbit startled in his warren.

"Edmund!" I cried.

He didn't move.

"Edmund, for God's sake! Hurry!"

He stood, deathly still like fright, and looked on the battered shuttle and the crouching, ashamed Scarabids; and Charlie with his puzzled suspicious eyes; and he looked on Francis, so white, his eyes glazing; and on me, my eyes crazy with an agony of helpless confusion. He looked on us all, his own eyes stained with profound sadness.

And he didn't move.

Francis shuddered and was still.

Emergency medical ran in through the alcove, three of them with their stretchers and their bags of medical wonders. They brushed past Edmund standing there, and he spoke two quiet words to the last one, before he turned

and left. Such was the stillness, I could hear him across the bay:

"Cyanide poisoning."

I would have gone after him, but medical wanted reports and Harvester wanted reports, Forbes asked for introductions and language tape directions, and I still had to run the context programming through modified Mode Six so we could establish better transliteration. I worked like an automaton, over-controlled.

Captain Harvester commended me on my quick action. He told me the Tricolors had requested my presence in their environmentally modified quarters on deck three. I went. One of the Scarabids crouched miserably in one corner, while the others alternated between effusive praise and abject apology for nearly an hour. I was glad to get out of there—the reduced gravity and high oxygen were making me heady, and every reference to Francis made me more depressed.

Edmund was not in our quarters. I headed for the lab, something building inside of me, something that hurt every time I took a breath.

The lab was in night phase. We'd set up the lighting to correspond in intensity and wavelength to the Valpecula cycle—her hot, intensely blue diurnal star; her three moons, one large and silver gray; two small, ruddy. The light was low and ruddy now, and the polliwigglers moved eerily in the water like dark blobs of dried blood.

He stood beside tank three with his arms folded on its rim. He was staring moodily at the water surface where the two remaining large polliwigglers drifted belly up, floating in a shimmering halo of fungal filaments. He had not touched them. The lab was silent but for the constant fizz of the aerators spitting their fine spray of pink bubbles upward at the surface of each tank. His stillness was part of the silence. He didn't raise his eyes from the tank when I entered, and only spoke when I stopped approaching him.

"I'm sorry about Francis," he said gently.

Why do we rend what we love? Why, in the times we most need closeness, to give and to receive, do we rip ourselves apart from it and lash out at it, as if its injury will somehow heal us? Why, in moments of misunderstanding, when we most need reason, do we turn to the blindness of emotion? Why?

"Sorry!" I blurted resentfully. "You wouldn't even help! You didn't even try!"

"There was nothing I could have done." Quietly.

"You couldn't have known that! You didn't even come to him!"

"It was too late."

"You couldn't have known that!" I repeated in stubborn bitterness. "You wouldn't even try!"

He pressed his lips together and gazed dully at the spheres of fungal contamination floating before him, rotating slowly. He was refusing to explain, avoiding argument. So he didn't even give a damn what I thought!

I stood, breathing hard, reviewing that moment—seeing him standing motionless in the alcove, his eyes wide with sallow fright. Why fright? What had he to fear? The carapsoids? Charlie?

Discovery.

If he had done what I knew he could have done, then Charlie would have found out; Charlie would have known.

No one must know, no one.

"It was Charlie, wasn't it?" I said in insidious suggestion.

He stiffened, but would not raise his eyes. My voice softened, for I had found my mark. "You were afraid of Charlie, weren't you? You were afraid he might find out you're not like the rest of us, weren't you?" I slipped into the acid of sarcasm: "God forbid he should discover that you're not quite human! That's what it was, wasn't it?" His eyes turned on me, dangerous, unreadable; but in my fury I would not heed: "You were afraid Charlie would find out what an inhuman freak you are! You were so afraid, you'd rather let a man die . . . !"

He struck me.

Even as it came at me, I knew he was trying to pull the blow. As it was, I spun and slammed the left side of my face into the wall. It stayed there, pressed as if glued. Blood burst from my nose and ran down the paneling in crimson streaks. I closed my eyes.

His voice, low, taut, so full of tears, came from a space close behind my right shoulder. "Jeremy, I'm sorry. I had no right to do that. Please . . . "

"Get away from me," I said between my teeth.

He stood, breathing through his nostrils. Neither of us moved. He made one last attempt:

"I am not God, Jeremy. You have no right to expect me to be."

"You monster! Get away from me!"

He backed off, uncertain and torn. I leaned against the wall and bled. We stood, he and I, in the russet dimness of Valpecula's simulated night, with the aerators tossing their torrents of tiny dancing bubbles at the air all around us. There was a faint splash as one of the smaller polliwigglers allowed its cavortings to approach the surface of tank five. I finally felt my temper drop down into a cold pit of indifference.

"I'll not be needing you with the project anymore," I said in low monotone.

He only watched me with infinite sadness, unspeaking.

"I'll be staying down here for the time being," I continued, "until Housing gets me a new assignment. I'll move my things out while you're on duty, so I won't disturb you."

"Jeremy," he said.

"Get out of here," I said softly.

He paused. "I'm going." And he went.

I had let Charlie come between us after all.

III

Metamorphosis.

I sat on the center of the cot in the lab, amid the light of the three moons of Valpecula Centaurii, and went over all

the if-onlies.

Poor, stupid, bumbling Francis, I thought. Why did you feel you had to prove something to me? To yourself, then? If only you hadn't wanted to change; if only I hadn't helped you. Charlie would have done it instead, then Charlie would have been the one who . . . I shuddered at my own maudlin, mindless cruelty.

I remembered a moment inside the shuttle's darkness when my hand closed down on that mandible and it hadn't tightened into me, and I shuddered again at the nearness of death's brush. Would Edmund have tried to save *me*? If only Edmund . . .

To hell with Edmund, it was all pointless. Your much-cherished metamorphosis was pointless, Francis. Hadn't it brought you only death?

A splash erupted in tank three, setting the two corpses bobbing grotesquely. One of the younger polliwigglers was playing games. I dully watched the liquid motion of the fungus-fur around the bodies, flowing like wheat in a wind.

Suddenly, I knew.

Metamorphosis and death, death and metamorphosis.

Thank you, Francis, I thought.

For three weeks, I became like a ghost haunting the halls of the *Liberty*. I materialized on the bridge at my appointed hours, very professional and uncommunicative. Sometimes Edmund was there, preparing to leave, pale and expressionless. I did not speak to him—spoke to no one, in fact, whom I did not have to in the line of duty. The ghost I had become ignored the doings of the living; my thoughts were in the lab, my being was there. I did my duty, was relieved on schedule, and went back to all the meaning that ever was, floating in those tanks.

I worked like a fiend sometimes, but mostly I waited. And watched. I slept when my eyes and brain became too unfocused to watch anymore.

I transferred all the living polliwigglers out of tank

three, and every time another one died, three became its mausoleum. I watched the fungus grow outward about a half-meter, then I watched it grow in upon itself, intertwining its hyphae into an increasingly dense mat of fibers, forming a coarse outer coat like rough burlap. It even began darkening to the color of burlap.

I watched it form the chrysalis.

I waited, ever wanting to cut it open, ever wanting to see the miracle happening inside. But I waited.

I killed a younger one once and put it back with its fellows, just to see what would happen. They nuzzled around it curiously, like crimson pallbearers misunderstanding the permanence of death. They nuzzled and they nibbled, until three hours later the victim had been stripped, its bones scattered about the tank floor. I was closer to the meaning, then, and I slept satisfied. Polliwigglers never touched the fungus-infected ones.

Veronica came tentatively at the end of the first week. I think she expected me to be unresponsive, but I was grateful for her company, and we talked low, just enough to be heard over the bubbling of the aerators. She came often after that. Sometimes we talked, but mostly she sat silently on the cot beside me with her arm around my waist and helped me watch. Once she came in and started crying for no reason, and went away again. Women are hard to fathom.

Once the lab door opened and Edmund was there, expressionless as always. Just standing in the doorway and looking at me with empty eyes. I was about to speak when something made me glance at the clock instead. I was supposed to have been on duty ten minutes before. I nodded at him, and he turned vacantly, disappearing like an apparition. After that, I started having dreams with that face in it, between the waitings.

Toward the end of the third week, as I was watching and going over all of it again, I decided to make a sand table. Maybe it was instinct, or maybe good sense. It took two days, but it was a big one, nearly three meters square, so there would be plenty of room for the shallow water at one

end overlying a sand bottom; and yet plenty of dry sand at the other end. I didn't know the requirements of an adult polliwiggler, so I wanted to be prepared for anything.

I carefully transferred the two oldest cocoons into the tank as soon as it was finished. They were settling to the bottom now, no longer floating. They had a funny feeling to them, like stiff-skinned rotten plums with angular pits in the center. There was no odor.

After that was done, I realized that there was little more to do, so I sat down on the cot and waited again. There was a feeling of imminence all around me.

Veronica came in with her nurse's way of silence, and sat down beside me. She asked if there was anything yet, and I said, no; and she wanted the new tank explained, so I explained it. Then she fell silent, and watched the floor, fidgeting, while I watched the tank, waiting.

She must have sat there fifteen minutes before she said anything more; and then it was something I didn't want to hear: "Jeremy, you've got to talk to Edmund."

I flinched, but would not take my eyes from the tank. Waiting. "I don't know what you mean," I said, trying to sound vague.

"You know very well what I mean. It's all over the ship."

There was a moment when a pressure rose up into the crown of my skull, threatening to explode, but I was determined, and it subsided as fast as it had built. I said nothing.

"Was it because of me?" she inquired meekly.

At last, I looked at her, at last, saw all the worry of weeks and the fear of causation. I saw it all at once, and still I could do nothing.

"No," I said. "No, it wasn't you."

She watched me closely, not entirely willing to believe.

"He's miserable," she whispered.

I looked back at the tanks, "I can't help that."

"*You're* miserable."

I flinched again, but shrugged it away. "I can't help that, either."

"At least talk to him."

"I can't," I said. "I'm too busy."

She stood up. She was disappointed, cool. "Yes," she said. "I can see that." And she left.

It began with a poking, as from the inside. The clothlike covering of the water-cradled chrysalis dented outward, then dimpled inward. The surface shifted with tremulous anticipation. There was a rent at least, and a single, tiny pincer poked through. It began working at the nearly blackened tangle of fungal filaments around it; the rent widened to a slit. A second chela joined the first. They worked to free the captive with patient precision.

My breath came with each withdrawal of those implements, caught again with each new appearance. It lived. It had grown, metamorphosed. I was to be the first human to see an adult polliwiggler. I longed to tear the cocoon apart with my fingers, but I clenched both hands into fists, and leaned on the tank, and watched.

It took an hour for those pincers to widen the aperture to their satisfaction. Then nothing seemed to happen for a while, and I grew frantic. Suddenly, with a series of kicks and a rush, it emerged.

It was a carapsoid.

The most beautiful carapsoid God had ever created in the whole universe, at least to my thinking just then.

They have since come to be called the Jewel Crabs of Valpecula. The carapace was broad, flattened, pointed backwards at the edges. It was crimsoned around the rim, and studded all around with polished bumps that shone like gold through the water. The center of the shell went from violet to a deep cerulean blue. The short, broad abdomen, plated in jointed series, took the blue to a deep green, and then to bronze at the sides and back.

It probed at the sandy bottom with its six pincer-tipped legs, then moved tentatively into shallower water. It minced toward my artificial beach until it reached a depth where it was only barely covered by the water. There it dug

a shallow bowl in the sand and settled in to wait.

It waited for another adult, perhaps. Maybe it waited to dance a dance of greeting, to woo, to win a mate to embrace, to reproduce its own kind. It waited to fulfill its promise, to rejoice in its own miraculous transformation. Crouched there, it shone out from the water—a brilliant gem in the crown of life, reflecting the first bright beams of a simulated Valpecula dawn.

If only Francis could have seen it.

The other chrysalis began to stir.

If only Edmund . . .

Edmund had come too late. He had felt my need, had flown to it, but too late. Cyanide was fast, incredibly fast. Francis was already dead before Edmund had arrived. But all I could see was death.

Polliwigglers living their natural cycle, struggling to gain their new guise within a chrysalis of fungal decay. But all I could see was death.

Francis, bursting out of his chrysalis of fear, with a last whispered proclamation of freedom—"I'm not frightened, I'm not." And all I could see was death.

In my blindness I had slain a bond irreplaceable. I wanted to be a chrysalis, too—but I didn't know how.

I put my forehead on the fire-cold edge of the tank and wept.

"I found the answer," I said.

He looked up from the journal he was reading. He seemed thinner, somehow more empty. Maybe he saw the fires of enthusiasm dancing in my eyes. In any event, he attempted to smile. "What's the question?"

"How do you get a polliwiggler to metamorphose?"

He arched his brows, impressed. "And the answer?"

"Leave them alone."

"Don't even feed them?"

"It's a little difficult to feed a dead polliwiggler."

"Ah," he said, and seemed to go out of focus. "The nodules," he said after a minute, nodding to himself.

"The nodules," I concurred quietly. "They let the fungus break down the tissues and then they break out and feed on the fungus."

"Congratulations," he said, genuinely meaning it. He was still a Science Officer after all, and his curiosity showed in his face. It hurt that he dared ask me no questions.

"They've got to start from scratch," I explained. "The whole metamorphosis process requires they turn themselves inside out."

"Inside out?" His surprise pleased me.

"Yes," I said. "The skeleton has to be dissolved out of the inside, and deposited on the outside."

I took the shell from behind my back, and he drew in his breath. Under the desk light, it shone as if enameled, splashing hues in all directions. He took it slowly, barely breathing, handling it as if it were glass. "This is the adult?"

I nodded. It was good to share my discovery at last, good to see him astounded as I had been, awed at the wonder of the first recorded instance of a vertebrate larval form metamorphosing into a carapsoid adult. It was good to see the delight in him. I had forgotten how warmly his delight could shine.

"That cot down there is getting awfully uncomfortable," I suggested suddenly. "And at the rate they're courting and laying and heaven-knows-what else, it'll take a year to get a handle on their ethology, if I don't get some help pretty soon."

He didn't smile and he didn't look up, just ran his index finger down the golden studs along the edges of the shell. He cleared his throat.

"I am sorry I hit you. I had no right to do that." He avoided my eyes.

The pit of my stomach started to hurt, as if I'd been kicked. "I deserved it," I declared uncomfortably.

When he looked up, he was grinning incongruously.

"I agree. That still didn't give me the right."

It hurt worse than ever. He got all out of focus, and I

backed against the desk, needing support. He was in front of me suddenly, his hand gripping my arm. "Jeremy?" he said in cautious concern.

Then I did something I have never done. I put my arms around him and pressed my face into his shoulder. "Jeremy," he said again, and there was no rebuke. A hole happened in the pain, like a pincer emerging, and it all leaked out.

At that moment, Charlie could have walked into the room, and thought his vile thoughts, and I wouldn't have cared. The whole damned crew of the *Liberty* could have stood there watching, and I wouldn't have cared.

You and Charlie can think what you like.

I don't give a damn.

BRIGHT FLIGHTWAYS

R. A. Lafferty

The "Snow Geese," the Canadians, had been going through for ten days, and indeed it had been pretty cold there in Detroit. The Flightway Commerce was thriving. The fleece stores and the bolster stores were selling out everything they had, against the early chill. The autumn carnivals were swinging and the markets were full of persimmons and pawpaws and even pumpkins. The cranberry merchants were busy, as were all the provisioners. The bookies were betting on the applejack freeze for that very night.

Ramsworth Armstrong, the amorous and cheerful iron-hammerer, was courting Angela Frostchaser. There was always a lot of courtship on both the autumn and spring flightways and during the ready-days for such migrations. The iron-hammerers' guild to which Ramsworth belonged was one of the most forthcoming ever: There were more than ten thousand iron-hammerers in the wagon factories and automobile plants of Detroit alone. A man could easily marry from such a trade as hammering. Angela Frostchaser was a sheep-stomach chemist, and that was an honored trade also. Starting with the simple pepsin of the ordinary sheep's stomach, these marvelous chemists made enzymes for the preparation and emulsifying of meat and bread and, well, everything.

Rufus Carrottop, a butcher and meat-reducer, was courting Agnes Solidstate, a corncake-fermenter. The courtings consisted mostly of dancing together at the

ready fairs and drinking applejack together, and making lively music together and drinking applejack on the flightway migrations themselves. The Carrottops had a blot on their escutcheon and they had had to change their family name several generations back; but Rufus of the current Carrottop generation was personally blotless.

Argus Brownscum, an herbalist, was courting Hesper Grotowski, a heat-exchange technician. There were those who said that the young people indulged in courtship mostly to keep warm, but the two courtship periods of the year (eight weeks each) contained many warm and mild days.

The Armstrongs, the Frostchasers, the Carrottops, the Solidstates, the Brownscums, and the Grotowskis were six nuclear families of about one hundred persons each who traveled together on the flightways. Such groups of families would travel together twice a year for twenty years or so. Then there would be a jubilee year, a breaking up of the group and a recombining of other combinations of families.

The dance-halls and sing-halls of the going-south ready-fairs were built tight and warm. Horse manure was always deep and active beneath the duck-boards of their floors and this contributed a great amount of heat. The people themselves, crowded in tightly, added to the heat, and the applejack gave a sense of coziness and warmth. The vehicles were now loaded for the trip south, the joy wagons and the cargo carts. Even the backpacks were all ready, and at midnight the people shouldered them and poured out of a hundred dance-halls and sing-halls to a great central area where Rabbi Kaltbrot (this was a third year; and the third, sixth, and ninth years were Jew Years) would give the judgment on the applejack and the blessing on the journey. He was a short man, but he spoke forcefully.

"Bless the circuit of the seasons and our own road-journey through them. Bless all pigs and sheep and calves, and the magic of their own stomachs that make them edible. Bless the corn and the sweet corn, and the oats of

the field. Bless the soy beans. Bless all the enzyme-producing plants, and especially the spicebush and the cranberry. Deliver us from the hell-fire peoples and powers who threaten to burn up the world; and, as to these thirteen of them hanging here, forgive them, in some other world, but not in this one."

There were thirteen dead men hanging by ropes from thirteen trees. These men had been hanged by their necks until they were dead because it was charged that they belonged to the "Firebrands," which was either a subversive religion or a subversive political party.

"Bless all windmills and watermills," Rabbi Kaltbrot was continuing. "Bless the sun-cells and the water-cells and the wind-cells. Bless the iron-hammerers and the meat-reducers and the herbalists. Bless the wagon factories and the automobile plants. Bless all corn fields and cucumber plantations and cider works. Bless the pine wood that gives us wood for our houses and crates for our berries, and the box elder wood that gives us spokes for our wheels and frames for our carriages. Bless all fiddles and horns and drums; but the meaner instruments, do you not bless them! Bless the fur-beasts that give us fur and the sheep that give us wool and fleece. Bless the flax and the cotton that clothes us. Bless the birds that show us the direction on the flightway, and the sun that waits for us wherever we go. Bless the—just a minute, people, we had better check first, sometimes it's tricky—" Rabbi Kaltbrot went to a large and shallow basin or bowl full of diluted applejack that had been twinkling and moving itself in the midnight air. Even the most diluted applejack did not freeze when water froze, but it always froze a night or two later, when it was about twenty-nine degrees. And it had begun to freeze now, with a thin ice on it that tinkled when the Rabbi stirred it with his finger. And he continued.

"Bless this holy applejack that tells us the night of our travel. Bless the roads that wait for our feet and our wheels, and bless the warm land of the south. Bless all courting people in this courting season."

Then, with a sound of fiddles and horns and drums, all

the many clusters of nuclear families, under the Sheep Flag of the City of Detroit, started south, most of them walking briskly with their backpacks, certain outriders and guards on horses, the small children and the very old and infirm riding in the joy wagons and the cargo carts. The automobiles, of course, with their power cells and their painted wood frames, were not road-worthy enough for such a long trip.

Such few people as remained behind in the Detroit area, for the overseeing of the necessary functions of one sort or another, were all hearty people in their prime years; they would be double-fleeced and double-furred and they would stay out of the wind as much as possible. They would winter in the north only once in a lifetime. Once was plenty.

But the travelers from that area, they would spend six weeks on the flightway, on the road, going twenty miles a day, and would then arrive at the Panama City Florida area. Panama City was also known as Winter Detroit. People from thousands of places would, at the same time, be going south to thousands of other places. They would eat corn and beans out of the fields as they traveled, and also cornbread and bean-bread that had been enzymed and matured. They would eat driven beef slaughtered the same day, and also beef that stood at the way-stations, enzymed and aged. They played music as they walked, and many of the people shaped and whittled and manufactured things with their hands as they went along.

At night they camped in campgrounds, and gathered in the sociable darkness around traditional camp-stones or stages where they talked and courted, and sometimes they enacted night-show dramas. Whether they traveled or camped, they always had outriders or guards to protect against fire.

Some of the strong young people used to talk at night about the one thing that threatened them and the world forever. There was a very small number of the young people who indulged in contrary and dangerous and heated talk on this subject, but they did it so slyly that one

could not tell whether they were really depraved and evil, or whether they were merely making forays into sick humor. Among this small number of young people who discussed so dangerously and heatedly were Leo Carrottop, the brother of Rufus, Jasper Frostchaser, who was a cousin of Angela, and Very Softstep, who was somehow related to the Brownscum family.

"There may possibly be a way to make iron stronger and more varied and able to take a sharper edge or point than any iron that the best iron-hammerers are now able to produce," Leo Carrottop said. "That would mean sharper blades for spoke-shaves and draw-knives and axes and saws."

"That's angry talk you are talking," Ramsworth Armstrong the iron-hammerer said. "And it's dishonest talk. It hints of things, and then it runs and hides when it is challenged."

"I know it," said Leo, "and such hinting may, for the present, seem dishonest. But there might come a time when a thing is able to do more than hint."

"Has it ever really happened?" Ramsworth challenged. "Was there ever a case where iron was made by a way other than cold-hammering and it turned out to be stronger and more varied and able to take a sharper edge than hammered iron?"

"No, there have never been any such results," Leo admitted. "Something has always gone wrong. People always seem to get killed, from heat or from some sort of concussion, when trying these things. But there is a sort of theory that such things may come about."

"There may possibly be a way to make meat and bread and many other things more tasty and more ready than by fermentation or the enzyme-preparation method or by the no-method-at-all that we sometimes use," Jasper Frostchaser said, but he didn't meet any eyes when he said it.

"There may possibly be a green moon on the other side of tomorrow, but I'll bet there isn't," Rufus Carrottop countered him. "And I will bet there is not a better method of preparing food, either. Not a magic or trick method,

anyhow. We constantly improve the old methods a little. But do you, Jasper, know of any mysterious method ever being used, and do you know of real results coming from it?"

"I have heard fairly strong rumors of new methods being attempted, Rufus," Jasper said. "No, there haven't been any claims to successful results. The meat is always completely destroyed before they can find a way to get it out of the thing. So is the bread and the other foods. But because a thing doesn't work the first few times is no reason to believe that it will never work."

"There may possibly be a way to keep warm in the winter without dressing in double and triple fleece and furs, and without coming south," Very Softstep said, but she was in a nervous flutter at herself for saying it. "People might not have to travel so far twice a year just to keep ahead of the seasons and keep warm and stay alive and be always fed."

"But people love the travel," Argus Brownscum argued. "Something will have gone out of them if they ever give it up. Can you, Very, think of any worse punishment than not being allowed to travel on the bright flightways in the autumn and the springtime?"

"No, I guess I can't," Very said uncertainly. "But people could still travel on the flightways whenever they wanted to. It would just be that they wouldn't have to. Their lives would no longer depend on their traveling with the seasons."

"And how many people would travel the flightways then?" Argus asked. "People are so constructed that they must be compelled to indulge in some of the greatest pleasures of life."

"I will tell you all a number of things," Leo Carrottop said one evening a few weeks later. This was in the middle of the warm southland winter. All the courting couples had been married on mid-winter eve and were now settled. They drank orange-bang in the evenings instead of

applejack; and their music, though using the same instruments and the same voices, had a more languid and a more southern tone.

"I say that there might be a way, or a complex of closely related ways, for doing dozens of things better, for doing half the things in the world better. Yes, I know the account that my great-grandfather was hanged for hinting almost these same hints. I know the story that our original family name was Firetop rather than Carrottop, though our hair is still the same orange color as it was then. Listen, with one thing added to the techniques of the world, the automobiles made in our mother city Detroit could be powered by something stronger than those little storage cells. They really would be road-worthy, even to traveling from one end of a flightway to another. Listen, we could have better tools to make other better tools. We could have better minds."

"Better minds? How? There's no way."

"Oh, absolutely there is. We could make a great mental leap now. The new technique, if it is attempted, and even if it fails again and again, can open the mind itself to a new sense of curiosity and achievement. We have never yet entered the real houses of our own minds; we have been shuffling our feet in the anterooms, only. It may be that if we come to eat more fulfilled food, if we come to manufacture and live with more fulfilled equipment, if we arrange to control our surroundings, then our own persons and minds will be more fulfilled by it all. Then there will be room for more intelligence, for more thought, for more life, aye, for more people in the world."

"It isn't crowded now. It is said, Leo, that there will always be plenty of room for all the people, so long as the people are not counted. It is also said that there will always be enough land for everything, so long as the land is not measured," Ramsworth Armstrong argued.

"But there may come a time, Ramsworth, when we are not afraid to count, and to measure, and to project. The whole world has been pretty placid mentally. I think it's an accident that one particular seed hasn't rooted so far;

but I believe that we can root it on purpose even if some of us are destroyed by it. In Detroit itself, the cutting edge of all that is new in technology, we have the sheep for a symbol on our flag. We do not question enough. We do not invent enough. It is time we took a great leap off of our little stepping stools."

"Leo, just before we left the north on our latest flightway to the south here, there were thirteen men who took leaps off their little stepping stools. They didn't go far, just to the ends of their ropes that hanged them by their necks. It only seemed as if they were men of hasty authority who hanged them. Those thirteen men really put the rope around their own necks."

"Yes, I know that," Leo Carrottop said.

"Those thirteen hanged men, do you want to end as they did, Leo?"

"Really, I don't mind if I do end that way. People are telling some pretty interesting stories about those thirteen men now. I want them to tell interesting stories about me after I'm dead."

It was a very dry winter everywhere. In the north it did not snow, and in the south it did not rain. Everywhere, the ground and its plants stood dry and brittle and dusty and in danger of the evil fever. This was tinder land now, and of particular danger was the dry lightning from the rainless electrical storms. It was quite windy all that winter, and particularly at the end of winter.

Well, the weather wasn't a great hardship. There was always corn and cereal grain in storage for such a year as this might be shaping up to be. Years that began so were usually of the "years that eat up the corn." There were plenty of haycocks in the hay meadows, also, for the previous seasons had been lush. For the dryness, outriders and guards were doubled everywhere and the people were very careful. Most of the music that season was Watchman music.

It was such a season, right at the start of spring now, as

weeds will grow well and early crops will not grow. It was such a time when kinky and whispered notions came up everywhere like cockleburs in the springtime, and balanced judgments hid ungreening in their dry and stunted ground. Three young people of a league of nuclear families, Leo Carrottop, Jasper Frostchaser, and Very Softstep, had very many of these kinky and whispered notions, and there must have been such a whispering group in every league of families. They hinted at things they would not say out loud, and they gnawed like mice on the edges of reason.

"It may be that the time has come to invent a lightning," Leo Carrottop often said. "Then we could reduce the size of its danger and control it. And, having it controlled, we could look for its uses. Oh, I know that many of us would have to die from it first, but good might finally come of it. It is only an accident that miniaturized and controlled lightning is not already in use on our world."

"On our world?" Agnes Sourstate asked. "You daffy, what other worlds are there?"

"I believe there are alternate worlds where controlled lightning, fire to use the plain word for it, is in common use for many things."

"And just where are these alternate worlds to be found, Leo?" Argus Brownscum asked.

"Well, at present, ah, so far as I know, they are found only on analysts' couches," Leo admitted.

"But that indicates it is all present in the unconscious," Very Softstep told them, "burningly present."

It was ready-time for taking the bright flightway road back to the springtime north. There were the ready-fairs and the ready-music (still with its strong Guardsman theme this season) and the dancing and the orange-bang drinking. There were little dramas and masques. A new and sly theme was introduced into these—the tinder scarecrows.

Leo Carrottop, Jasper Frostchaser, Very Softstep, and a

hundred other such small groups from a hundred other leagues of families, masqueraded in their tinder scarecrow costumes. These were stuffed full of very dry straw.

It is traditional that scarecrows do not smile, and that they be funny anyhow. Well, these were funny at the dances and at the drinking parties and courtings and dramas and masques. But, besides being funny, there was one other thing about the scarecrows that everybody noticed: They were scared.

The signal for the northern migration (as the freezing of the applejack was the yearly signal for the southern migration) was the blooming on a very old and honored Gershwin's Palmetto plant. It was nearly certain that it would bloom on an afternoon in mid-March, and the joy wagons and cargo carts were loaded, and all backpacks were packed. It was hot, it was dry, it was windy; and there were ugly and feverish clouds sliding across the blue. There were double outriders and double guards, and everyone was on the alert.

But the scarecrows, the legs and arms and bosoms of their clothing stuffed full of dry straw, formed a carry-over from the galas and the ready dances. They were still in costume. Some of the scarecrows talked about their tattered notions more openly than they had before. (The garish-green lightning began to flame in the skimpy clouds.)

"If it comes as we believe it will come," Leo Carrottop mumbled to some of the young, "then we will take up pieces of it, no matter what pain to ourselves, and we will spread them 'til no one can put them all out. It will not matter whether the guards do extinguish it finally, so long as we force them to extinguish us also. Then our souls will be in it, and it will come back again and again."

"What are you talking about, Leo?" Ramsworth Armstrong asked. "Have your brains all turned to straw?"

"They will have turned to it quite soon," Leo said, "to flaming straw."

"This brave death business doesn't go with me at all," Very Softstep said. (The air was so dry that it blasted the

eyes, and the dry lightning still spat and fumed.) "Mine is a scared death business. It doesn't matter even that it might be all wrong and that it might not work anyhow. If we die to bring it, it will make it a little bit more right. Say of me tomorrow, 'She died scared, but she died anyhow.'"

"Very, what nonsense are you talking?" Agnes Solid-state asked her. "I always understood you, and now I don't." (The dry lightning had become pretty rampant, and it seemed that the very hair on the head of the hot wind stood up with static electricity.)

"Maybe if we bring it about that it's all consumed, an alternate world will come in to take its place," Jasper Frostchaser said. "The alternate world will have cooked food, and furnaced iron, and burning fuel for heating."

"Jasper, do you *want* the whole world to burn up?" Ramsworth cried in outrage.

"If that is the next big step in transforming the world, yes, I do," Jasper insisted. (A shout went up from the people: The Gershwin's Palmetto had bloomed.)

"You're crazy! You're stark mad!" Ramsworth shouted while the kinky green dry lightning was already making sky-earth contact. "You're playing with fire!"

The lightning struck, and it set the world on fire. It flamed and crackled in a snakey thicket of dry brush, and outriders and guards rushed in with prepared wet sacks and mats to beat the flames out. But three hundred costumed scarecrows from a hundred different family leagues were there before them. These rushed into the flaming thicket itself and stuffed handsful of fire into the straw of their own bosoms. They set themselves afire; they made torches of themselves; and they ran with the wind, in three hundred different directions, to ignite other thickets and copses and trees and fields and grasses. There was no way that the outriders and guards could stop these three hundred other fires that quickly turned into three thousand and then into thirty thousand fires and would not stop 'til the entire world was burned up.

Oh, the entire world would perish in the fire, there was no doubt about that. The rocks would melt, the ocean would evaporate, and the entire globe would burn to a cinder. That had always been feared and always been predicted.

Ramsworth Armstrong, Agnes Solidstate, Argus Brownscum, they were standing on a small island of smoking earth that had not yet vanished in the sea of flame. They saw there the burning body of their deluded and lately scarecrowish friend Very Softstep. They recognized her by her fiery initials on the very hot iron bracelet she had been wearing. There had always been something about Very they had liked. Now there was something entirely different about her that they liked very much. What a fragrant girl!

"Very and I were always very close," Agnes Solidstate said. "She wouldn't mind this, not if she knew it was I who did it. And now, in the very last moments of the world, I have to know whether it really is better that way. Maybe there'll be another world and I can tell them. No one but you here will know what I do, and in two minutes there will be no one anywhere to know anything."

Neither of the two answered her.

Agnes screamed when she put her hand to Very's burning flesh. She screamed again when she brought a fragment of it to her mouth. But she was still able to whisper after a moment, "Yah, it's better cooked. It really is."

They all seemed to melt together as their island of smoking earth turned into flame.

The whole vanishing world was fire-bright. There were brilliantly bright flightways shining in every direction, but no one would ever travel on them again.

THE FOSSIL

Susan Janice Anderson

"Room's as cluttered as a tidepool," thought the old man, fishing through a pile of books. From under a stack of scientific journals, he unearthed his socks and shoes. As he folded the Murphy bed into the wall he saw his trousers. Painfully, he dressed and walked into the small kitchen. He opened a cupboard and reached for a box of dry cereal. A ponderous volume fell on the counter. The elderly man squinted.

Elements of Paleontology, he read, his eyes growing moist. His first day lecturing. Hands perspiring, throat tightening, he had stepped up to the podium. Rows of students looking at him with eager faces, waiting. He, too, waited for the teacher to enter and begin lecturing. But now he was the teacher. His voice sounded strange and nervous at first, and he worried about the impression he was making. What right had he to be teaching students only a few years younger than himself? Slowly, however, he began leading them into the past. Through the Mesozoic, back into the Paleozoic. And when he arrived in no longer in a classroom but in an ancient fertile sea, swarming with the first experiments in evolution. His students were no longer students, but strange denizens of the warm shallow sea, pleosponges and nautiloids. And he, the most glorious creature of them all, the highest evolutionary form of the Cambrian. He, in all his glory, was . . . The old man came out of his reverie. He took down a cracked China bowl and poured himself some cereal.

After breakfast, he settled down in an overstuffed chair and leafed through some journals. He soon lost interest in them and began staring at the gray wallpaper. A faded picture of a young woman caught his attention. Aurora, his colleague, his lover, his wife. Though he had seen the river of time transform her features, he always thought of her as she appeared in the picture, intelligent, sensitive. Aurora. They had chosen the flat by the lake to be near the fossil beds. Every Saturday they would go fossil hunting. Every Saturday, until . . . The old man turned away and his eyes grew moist. Age seemed to have crept up on him so imperceptibly. He had always known his body would grow old one day. But he had always seen Aurora by his side. Together, they could have borne the pain.

He got up and walked over to a glass case by the dresser. As he opened it, his wrinkled face grew calm, almost happy. As gently as if it were a crystal vase, he lifted out a fossilized trilobite on a bed of purple velvet. He ran his fingers over the three vertical lobes, carefully examining every delicate segment. The old man put the trilobite up to the light. As the sun's rays touched the fossil, it almost seemed to spring to life.

Golden sun tendrils filtered down into the infant sea. Like transparent leaves, shrimplike creatures began fluttering through the water. Their movements awakened the conical pleosponges. Under one of the sponges, a fuzzy purple annelid stretched its segmented body. In sinuous dancelike motion, it crawled along the shallow bottom. By a cluster of glass sponges, the annelid stopped and curled into a furry ball. Like watery dandelions, they swayed over the annelid. A cluster of orange, tubelike plants stirred in the warm currents. Two segmented tendrils serpentined through the vegetation. Four pair of legs appeared, swimming in graceful unison. The purple annelid retreated as the three-lobed trilobite entered in all its glory.

The old man carefully put the trilobite back and locked the glass case. He put on his faded overcoat and went out to the lake. His feet moved slowly and laboriously over the gravel path. Two children whizzed by on bicycles. Hair flying, laughing, in a moment they had vanished behind some willows. The old man thought of his own children. Irina, strong and confident, pedaling as fast as her little feet would take her. Poor, timid Daniel, trailing behind. Irina, Daniel had their own grandchildren now. Since Aurora's death, they might as well have vanished from the face of the earth, for all he knew.

The old man stopped and looked out at the lake. A brisk breeze traced white caps over the water. "Their miniature ocean," he and Aurora used to call it. That phrase always comforted him, always gave him a feeling of belonging, somehow . . .

"What time is it?"

He looked up and saw a younger jogger standing next to him.

"Do you have the time?"

Slowly, words rose to the old man's lips. "I'm sorry, I never carry a watch. Makes me feel freer."

The jogger nodded. "Me too. I'm always late for class but that doesn't bother me."

The old man's face brightened. "Are you at the university? I taught there, once. Used to bring my paleontology classes to the lake on field trips. Few people realize this area was once an ancient sea bed. Sometimes, if I listen hard enough, I can almost hear the waves of a Cambrian sea pounding against the shore."

The jogger scratched his head and looked puzzled.

"It's a happy sound for me, a timeless sound. The sea-blood within me starts to pound and I'm not alone any more. I'm both at the beginning and the end of time. All life, from the most primitive to man, is contained within me."

"Uh, sorry, I have to get going."

The elderly man crossed the stone bridge down to the beach. Ducks of all colors and sizes noisily accosted him.

They scrambled for the bits of bread he threw them. When every crumb was gone, they haughtily walked away.

"Just like humans. Once your usefulness is over, they ignore you." A little further along the beach, something caught the old man's eye. He bent over and picked up a flat piece of rock. As he held it to the light, a smile appeared on his face.

"Fossil ripple marks from an ancient beach," he whispered reverently. "From an ancient beach."

The giant trilobite emerged from the orange vegetation. Smaller arthropods scurried to get out of its way. One by one, other trilobites appeared, filling the warm sea with their three-lobed beauty. Glass sponges bowed under their weight. In sinuous procession, they combed the ocean bottom for food. Suddenly, the water grew agitated. A single, glittering eye glared and serpentine tentacles grasped. Swiftly, the trilobites buried themselves in the mud, watching the enemy with their strange multiple eyes. Dangerous, but blinded, the nautiloid swam past. One by one, the trilobites emerged to reclaim the dawn sea.

The old man put the fossil in his pocket and continued along the shore. Whenever he touched the rock, a warm feeling rose from within him. He searched for other fossils. When he looked up again, the sun was already beginning its downward course. On the darkened horizon, he could no longer see the other side of the lake. The only sound he could hear was the water lapping against the shore in gentle reddish waves. The cyclists and joggers had long since vanished. The old man thought of heading home for dinner. Dinner with Aurora and the children. Noisy, joyous dinner. Washing the dishes together, reading, lying down on clean smelling sheets. Body love spreading over them in warm waves . . . Dinner. His cracked China bowl, messy piles of books, a cold, uncomfortable bed, thoughts buzzing like insects through his lonely mind.

A warm breeze blew over his wrinkled face. Deeply he breathed in the spray, the somnolent wildflowers. His pace quickened and he felt warm. He threw off his overcoat and flung it over his shoulder.

The shore grew rockier, the trees scarcer. Only a thin growth of algae coated the rock. Though the sun was dropping lower and lower on the horizon, the air grew still warmer. The elderly man stopped and flung off his shoes. He rolled up his trouser legs and stepped into the reddish water. The warm wash of water reminded him of another evening, not long before Aurora's death. Old as they were, they had flung off their clothes and plunged in. Silken water supported their ancient bodies. Back on shore, giggling like children as they dried each other.

Aurora had laughed. "I love the water so much that sometimes I think I'm half crustacean!"

"You are, in a sense. Don't forget that the composition of your blood is very close to the composition of a primeval sea."

Aurora had nodded sagely. "The blood remembers. It's just our damned bodies that get in the way."

The water crept up the old man's legs, wetting his trouser cuffs. He threw off the rest of his clothing. The sun had totally vanished. He waded into the water and began swimming. As he moved away from the shore, a new strength flowed through his body. His limbs moved, perfectly synchronized. Pounding blood, ocean blood, water, water of life. Panting, he swam back to shore. Suddenly, the moon came out and he gazed into the water. White withered skin darkened and hardened. Three symmetrical clefts appeared. Three in one, explosion! Moon ripples broke into myriad fragments. Water beckoned.

"Aurora!"

The waters of an ancient sea washed over a newly born trilobite.

CIRCUS

Elizabeth A. Lynn

Evening was dark and warm beneath a sky spangled with stars and laden with the scent of elephant. Angelo sat on the top stair of the trailer. He was mending his leopard skin, which had ripped last week during his wrestling match with Lila, the lioness. Lynellen danced in the dusk a few feet away. Dressed in tights and one of his shirts, she was practicing her belly-dancing. She looked sixteen, which was not the case. Bells tinkled on her wrists and ankles.

She sang, incongruously, *"Chicago, Chicago, that wonderful town!"*

"Can't you sing something else?"

"You're jealous," she said, "because you're not going home."

Angelo grinned. He recalled his home town, a half-assed, tired hick town in Marion county, Florida, with neither enthusiasm nor nostalgia. He had ridden a flatcar out of it when he turned fourteen. He'd never much wanted to go back. But he'd never liked Chicago, either, with its crammed streets and smelly imitation beaches. "I'm jealous you're singing a song to a goddam city and not to me."

She rippled her stomach muscles at him and went gliding away to the second trailer. The doors were shut, but Angelo could hear through the metal walls the raucous clatter of the rock music that Ricky loved, and played incessantly. In the three months they'd been on the

road together he'd never heard the radio click off. The announcers' accents changed as they traveled, but the music stayed the same. Lynellen knocked on the door. As Millicent opened it the music yelled, sounding like a soul escaping into the night. Lila roared in her cage. She sounded lonely. Angelo rose.

You can put a circus anywhere. Everyone loves the circus. All you need is enough space and willing people to erect the tents, clean the grounds, water and feed the animals, and answer the telephone. *Marvel the Magician's Miniature Carnival* needed little space: a park, an old baseball diamond, any place with running water and a space to stick a gate. There are always people to help when the circus comes to town. Kids watching the highway see the trucks pull into town and drag their parents (whose memories of earlier circuses lie soft in their bellies) to look. They gape when Jugger and Angelo, the elephant and the animal trainer (also lion tamer, strong man, and catcher for the trapeze act) lug the big canvas tent out onto the grounds. Angelo and Jugger had played the same scene over four states. They would play once more tonight in this Indiana town. Ricky and Millicent in their clown makeup, Lynellen in her sequins, Tony in his tights, and Marvel the Magician in his ringmaster's get-up strolled into the crowd, saying, "Help put up the circus! Come on!"

And the kids, fresh out of highschool and still on the farm, followed the giant black ringmaster or the dwarf clowns or the dancing acrobats to the pile of canvas, where Angelo told them: *"Here, hold this and grab those stakes, the frame's aluminum but the name of the game's the same, the tent goes up by sundown . . ."* pushing them with patter and jokes into a clumsy crew that, by god, got the tent up by sundown. It always worked. At sundown, when the tall lights flicked on, they hauled their friends to the tent. *"See this? I put this stake in, with Angelo, the strong man. Hey, Angelo!"* Angelo waved to them all, making up names—*"Hey, Curly, hey, Lefty, how ya doing?"*—to see them swell and grin.

Sometimes Ricky grumbled, "Is this the way to run a circus?"

Millicent always answered him. "Damn right." They all knew it was. The circus was more than a profession. It was a passion, it was their life, it was the only game in town. Each of them, Angelo and Lynellen and Ricky and Millicent and Tony, even Lila and Jugger (short for Juggernaut) was a Barnum bust, an act tossed out of other circuses for being too bad, too good, too simple, too subtle, too lazy, or too late. Lynellen had been a stripper, Tony had been tricking in Dallas, Angelo had been bumming, pitch to pitch, when Marvel picked him up. Each would give his skin to keep *Marvel the Magician'sMiniature Carnival* in business.

Angelo heard Lila pacing. "Hey baby." She swung her great head toward him but refused to stop. He sat and talked to her. At last her pacing slowed. She stood against the bars, and when he put his hand through, licked it raspingly, a gesture of trust and affection. She had never, except in fear, hurt him. Tony joked, "*Her mother was an alley cat.*" She was the tamest lioness Angelo had ever seen.

He said good-bye to her and went on to the other cage, where Jugger slept, standing immobile as a gray rock. Tony was filling her water tub. His shadowy form bent over it. Water splashed from the hose. He was talking. "You wanna go to Chicago, big mamma? I bet you don't. What d'you say we take a run. I open the cage, jump on your back. You run like hell. Think we can find you a bull elephant, maybe in some cornfield away from Chicago?"

Angelo said, "Jugger wouldn't know what to do with a bull even if you found her one."

Tony started. "Hey. You move like that damn cat," he said. "You could say hello."

"Sorry," said Angelo. He sat on a nearby crate. "Animals okay?"

"Restless," Tony said. "They dowanna go to no city."

Angelo nodded. Lila rumbled from her cage.

"Why are we going to Chicago, anyway?" said Tony. "The big shows go to Chicago. Shriner's. Ringling's.

They dowanna see us."

"I don't know," said Angelo. This had bothered him, too.

Tony shrugged with his palms. "I guess Marvel knows what he's doin'."

"I guess."

"You wanna go?"

Angelo dug a heel into the soft damp dirt. "Not much," he said.

"Why not?"

"I don't like cities. Too cold and hard. Buildings like metal and concrete boxes, and no trees."

"Um. I like cities sometimes." Tony spoke wistfully. "There's more people like me in 'em. I miss the bars."

"You could find a city gig," said Angelo.

Tony turned the hose so that it sprayed a dark puddle on the dusty ground. He shut it off. "City circuses got all the pretty boys they want, man." He spoke without bitterness, and with just a tinge of regret. "I'm getting too old for it. I'll stick with Marvel. He's a good manager. It's a good gig, getting the kids to roustabout, sticking to the small towns. He knows what he's doing." He pulled out a cigarette. "You thinkin' of leaving?"

"No," Angelo said. "I just don't want to go to Chicago."

"Yeah." Tony's cigarette glowed.

"You shouldn't smoke, it'll cut your wind."

The acrobat chuckled. "I'm thirty-five, my wind's shot anyway. I'm a has-been. We're all has-beens."

"Give me one," said the strong man. Tony passed him the pack. They sat in companionable silence while the music from the clowns' trailer leaked over the fairground, distant as if it came from another galaxy.

The next night the tent filled until it almost burst its seams. The kids played usher for their own neighbors, ran errands for Lynellen, and gingerly, under Angelo's direction, set up the movable lion's cage in the center of the ring. Two of them, with Ricky's rough and expert help, put on ruffs and whiteface and went to cartwheel and pratfall like professionals in front of Marvel as he strode to

the ring, his whip snaking and snapping inches above their heads.

Angelo waited behind curtain for his cue. Marvel was a masterful showman. His deep voice resonated to every seat in the bleachers, making the tent expand until its one small ring seemed like three, or ten. Tony juggled. Lynellen danced. Then Marvel said, "In THIS corner, ladies and gentlemen, we present the most SPECTACULAR lion act you've ever witnessed, or ever will witness: Angelo the Animal Man, and LILA!" The audience applauded happily. They were ripe for it. Angelo gripped the loose skin at Lila's neck and took a long deep breath. The big cat gathered herself together. Tony drew back the curtain. They walked out.

The noise continued for a moment, and then stopped. They paced across the tent floor, the man in his leopard skin and the lioness, tawny fur gleaming under the lights, walking silent and controlled and loose at his side. This was Angelo's act, the act that Ringling and Shriner's would not take because it was too small, too dangerous, and because no audience (they said) would believe that a man could control a lion with his hands.

They stalked to the cage. Angelo opened the door. Lila went in. He followed her, and closed it behind him.

Out of deference to whatever T.V. circuses the crowd might have seen, Angelo put Lila through a balancing act (without chair or whip), jumping, walking the beam, and so on. The audience oohed and aahed and asked for more. Marvel looked at Angelo. Angelo nodded. He sat Lila down like a sphinx on the floor. Marvel played with words. Angelo no longer heard them, but he heard the tune they made. When it was time he held up his empty hands and walked toward Lila. Like the lioness she was, she crouched, growling with delight. He looked into her eyes and gestured. She rolled on her back, hind legs poised to rip him open, claws carefully gentled for her favorite game.

He lunged on top of her, hands against her neck. The audience shrieked. Angelo crooned at Lila and counted

seconds. At the count of thirty he rubbed her throat and she went limp. He stood up and put his foot on her belly, clasping his hands above his head like a winning boxer. The people screamed and cheered and stamped on the benches. He lifted his foot. Lila rolled upright. He caught her ruff and with stately grace they retraced the walk to the curtained exit. Lila jumped into her home cage, curling up in a corner like the mythical alley cat. Jugger set her broad brow against the bars, and pushed the cage back to its place.

Angelo went to the trailer to change for the strong man's act. Lynellen was in it putting the finishing touches on her makeup. She wore sequins again. "Sounded good," she said.

He kissed her. "You smell good."

"I smell sweaty."

"That's what I mean." He tried to hug her but she slipped from his hands and ran toward the tent. Someday, he thought, we'll go somewhere alone, without Marvel, a faggot, two dwarves, a lion, and a goddamn elephant!

He pulled on the strong man's costume. It was made of scratchy gold net. Under the lights it glittered like golden chains. He found the ice bucket and took a handful of ice. He rubbed it down his sides and chest. It cooled him. He walked slowly back to the tent. From the tone of the laughter he could tell that Lynellen and Jugger were almost through with their part of the act.

"Angelo?" It was a whisper. He turned to meet it. She was scrawny and young, with feathery brown hair and stick-thin wrists. She held out a hand to him. "Can I talk to you, please?"

He thought, *Another one lovestruck.* But she didn't have that dreamy-eyed look. "What's up, kiddo?" he said lightly.

"Could—could I join your circus?"

He smiled at her. "Beautiful, you don't want to join the circus. The circus for you is one or two or three nights. But for us it's forever. You don't want that. Hell, you're in the circus now. Didn't I see you running around ushering?"

She nodded eagerly. "Yes. But I do want it forever. I can learn to dance, and to do the elephant act. See what I can do already!" Like a swift wheel she did an acrobat's flip. "Please, say that I can join."

"You don't have to join the circus just to get out of town," Angelo said gently. "Move to Chicago. Be a secretary."

"Secretary!" She infused terrible scorn into the word. "Would you be a—a bus driver when you could be a strong man? I *won't* be a secretary. Please. I'm old enough."

From the way she said it, Angelo knew she was not. "Sweetheart, it isn't my circus," he said. "This is *Marvel the Magician's Miniature Carnival*, and Marvel is the man who calls the shots. I work for him. I don't tell him what to do. You have to ask him."

"I have to ask him." She sighed, and walked away, head sagging. They never did, the glitter-struck kids. Marvel was unapproachable.

A hard fist struck Angelo's thigh. He looked down. "Get out there, you big hulk," said Ricky. "You're late."

So he went out there, and lifted weights. Ricky and Millicent came in and tumbled and played and teased the crowd, until Lynellen and Angelo and Tony could sweep back in, wearing black and silver and red, and climb to the trapeze. Ricky sat at the bass drum and went boom with each somersault. It was their tightest act, and they made it good, swooping and flying, until Marvel brought them down. They bowed the carnival to a close. Marvel raised his whip in crackling gratitude to the people of the town, "whose love of carnival makes it happen. But there's one more night of carnival, ladies and gentlemen," Marvel sang, "so don't despair, but be there!"

After the show they turned all but the trailer lights off, and sat in the great vacant tent. It cooled down. Ricky and Millicent sat together. Lynellen, in jeans and work shirt, prowled the tent with a plastic bag, picking up beer cans. Tony smoked a cigarette. Only Marvel did not share in this

ritual. He was in his trailer. They talked a little of the show, of other shows. Tony's cigarette was almost spent when a slim figure in a silver leotard and blue tights danced into the tent. It was the girl with the feathery hair. She ran up to them. "He said *Yes*!" She turned a back flip for joy. "I asked him and he said *Yes*!"

"What the hell?" demanded Ricky.

"I asked Marvel if I could join the circus and he said I could!" She turned as Lynellen came up to her. "Can I wear this? He said I could ride the elephant, like you. My name's Susie Green. I don't—I don't have makeup. Can I borrow yours?"

"I—sure," said Lynellen.

"Oh, thank you. Thank you, Angelo. I'll see you all tomorrow." She waved and ran off. Lynellen turned to Angelo.

"Do you know that girl?"

"She came to ask me if she could join the circus, earlier tonight," he said. "I told her what we always tell them, to ask Marvel. They never do. You know they never do."

"Well, this one did," said Lynellen, hands on her hips. "Marvel must be crazy! She's a child, she can't be more than sixteen. You have to talk to him. We'll get arrested, or lynched!"

"Don't be silly," said Angelo uneasily. "He didn't mean it."

Tony said, from the darkness, "She thinks he does."

"You're the one said he knows what he's doing!" Angelo said. Tony shrugged.

"I want you to talk to him," said Lynellen.

"Jesus, I don't want to talk to him. Why should I? It's his business!" But Lynellen just looked at him. So did Ricky and Millicent. "All right. All right." Angelo got up. "Don't wait around for me, huh?" he said roughly. "I'll talk to him." He stomped away from them, annoyed that they all had been so quick to get him to speak to Marvel; why, if she wanted to say something to Marvel couldn't Lynellen have done it herself . . . ?

He went to the lion's tent. After a while four shadows came out of the big top, and drifted to the trailers. He

heard the click of the doors. He did not want to talk to Marvel until Lynellen was in bed.

He knocked on the owner's trailer door. After a moment it swung open. Marvel stood just inside the doorway. "Angelo."

"Something on my mind," Angelo said.

"Come in." The ringmaster stepped back to give the strong man room. Angelo mounted the steps. The trailer was small; they crowded it. As always when they stood at arm's length from each other, Angelo felt dwarfed by Marvel's size. Though he was a big man, Marvel topped him, standing six-foot eight, ebony black, supple, snaky smooth, big without bulk. It let him know how Ricky and Millicent felt. His trailer was bare, with a bed and shelves and a file cabinet. On the cabinet sat the phone and a huge fancy radio which was never played. "What is it?" The blacksnake whip stood in a corner casting a shadow across the floor.

"It's that girl," said Angelo.

"Yes." The syllable meant nothing. The ringmaster's face was unreadable, barely visible in the dim light.

She thinks you're going to let her join the carny, come with us to Chicago."

"Maybe I am," said the ringmaster.

"She's very young. We could get into trouble."

"My business, Angelo."

"I think it's our business."

"My business," said the black magician inexorably. "The door's behind you."

"Goddamn it, Marvel—" Angelo began. He reached for Marvel's shoulder, to shake him. "Listen—" He said the next word to the floorboards.

He didn't know how he'd got there. He could not remember being hit, but the taste of blood swelled under his tongue. He put his palms to the floor and started to rise. His muscles shook. There was no strength in them. He lay with his cheek to the floor, looking up. Marvel towered over him, whip in hand. Angelo had seen it cut. He shut his eyes.

"Poor Angelo." The words were a resonant croon. The hand descended. The whip snake, deliberately slow, cool, light, across his back and spine. The caress turned his belly to ground-glass knots. He couldn't move. The dark figure stepped over him, and was gone.

It seemed a long time before his body obeyed him again. He stumbled from the trailer and found his way to the animal cage. He felt violated. He knelt in the grass and was sick, rasping and retching. Then he wiped his mouth, stuck his head under the cold-water hose for a moment, and dragged himself to bed.

The next day he stayed out of Marvel's way.

"What did he say?" demanded Lynellen in the morning.

"He said it was none of my business."

"Is that all?"

"Yes. I don't want to talk about it, Lyn."

"All right," she said. "What's the matter, are you sick?"

"I don't know," he said.

"You're never sick." But she made him a cup of tea on the hot plate in the trailer, and sat with him while he drank it. It made him feel better.

When they went on that night, Sunday night, it was Susie who rode Jugger around the ring. The audience roared its pleasure at this treat. She held the clubs for Tony when he did his juggling act, and after the weight lifting, she and Tony did some acrobatics, which consisted mainly of her posing from the security of Tony's shoulders. After the trapeze act she joined Angelo and Tony and Lynellen behind the curtain. She was bubbling. "Was I good? Was I all right?"

Lynellen said dryly, "Marvelous."

"Ssh!" said Angelo, waiting for his signal. Marvel stood in center ring. He gestured. This was the finale, his specialty. He did it only once in every town. Angelo dimmed the lights The crowd quieted.

One red spot shone on the tall magician. Millicent, at the calliope, coaxed from it an eerie inhuman wail. Marvel

extended the blacksnake whip, drawing slow hypnotic circles with it in the dust of the ring. (Angelo fought a sudden sickness.) As if pulled by a magnet, the dust rose and wreathed the magician, obscuring him within a lurid cloud. The music stopped. And the cloud began to shape itself. It shifted and writhed. A great coiling illusion of a snake reared its hooded head to the top of the tent. Its gaze transfixed the audience. A dark tongue flickered at them. A tail like a scorpion's arched over their heads. The snake hissed. Angelo trembled, chilled to his bones.

Then the illusion dissolved into swirling red smoke, revealing the magician standing alone in the ring. A hush measured the crowd's awe. Then the applause began. With a slashing beckon of his whip, Marvel brought his performers into the ring.

"Ladies, gentlemen, children, roustabouts," he bowed to the bench where the highschool kids were sitting, "my deepest thanks to you all. *Marvel the Magician's Miniature Carnival,* the finest circus of its size you'll ever see, must leave you now. When you awake in the morning, we will be gone, a dream of straw and sawdust. But remember, as you dream tonight of the big top, that our carnival is a fleeting thing, but that all over the world, all over the universe, the Circus lives forever!"

The people roared love at them, heating the tiny tent until Angelo, holding Lynellen on one shoulder and Susie on the other, could hardly stand it. "Down, ladies," he muttered. Lynellen leaped down. Angelo looked up, to urge Susie to jump. The tent top had ripped somehow. He could see the stars through it. He started to speak, to say, "Look—" and a wave of heat, a dragon's exhalation, blazed at him, followed by a freezing, bone-snapping chill. The tent was transparent. He looked at stars; they were all around him, and it was cold. Then there was nothing at all.

He awoke in a little room, a bare-walled, metal room. He was naked. He was warm. The room had no door, no

windows, just a cot without blankets for him to lie on. It looked and felt like a cage. He sat up on the cot.

As if it had been activated by his shifting weight, an opening appeared in the wall. He looked through it without moving from the cot. It led into a long metal corridor. He stood up and sat down again, wondering if he could make the door close. It didn't. Finally, he went into the corridor. The door closed behind him. He walked. The walls were cold. He was a bug scuttling inside a shiny metal box. When he got to the end of it, a second door appeared in front of him. Through it was a space, with chairs. On one of them, curled like a baby with her knees flexed, lay Lynellen. She was naked. He walked to her. Her eyes opened. She considered him.

"Angelo?"

"Yes."

She sat up, cross-legged. Finally she reached out a hand and drew him down to sit beside her. "Did you wake up in a little room?"

"Yes. Then a door opened and I came here."

"Me, too. I wonder if the others are here. I wonder where *here* is." He tried to put an arm around her. "No. Don't." So he didn't. They sat. A different piece of the wall opened, like a mouth, and Tony came in. He, too, was naked.

"Anybody know what the fuck is going on?" he said, with a stunning faggot swagger.

"No," said Angelo, but it made him smile. Lynellen smiled, too.

"Honey, it ain't Chicago," she said. Then she began to cry. Her whole body shook. "I don't like it," she sobbed. "I want to go home!" She stopped crying abruptly when Susie came into the room, crying even harder. She ran to the girl. "Hey, it's okay," she said. "Look, we're together. Ricky and Milly will be here, they'll show up any minute, you'll see. Nothing can be so bad if we're all together." Angelo felt a spasm of jealousy as she hugged and patted the frightened kid.

"If I don't get some attention," he said. "Tony and I will start holding each other."

"She needs it more than you do!" snapped Lynellen.

Angelo saw the look in Tony's eye, and was sorry. When Millicent and Ricky did walk in, he turned to them. Ricky was subdued. Milly wouldn't look at them. She curled on a chair, just like Lynellen had been when Angelo found her.

"What's the matter with her?" Angelo asked Ricky.

Ricky said, "She's naked."

"We're all naked."

"Yeah. But she's a naked dwarf. That's ugly. I don't care, but she does."

The door opened again.

What came in was—nothing. Before the door closed Angelo glimpsed a scattering of ice-white stars in a black sky. But there was something strange in the room now. It showed as a blurring of light and a twisting of dimension, a discontinuity that crawled up the wall and halfway over the ceiling. You couldn't look at it, but you couldn't see through it. Angelo tried and his eyes filled with tears. Lynellen, scared and angry, said, "Damn you, be one thing or another!"

A familiar deep voice said, "What I really am you would not want to see."

Ricky jumped. "Marvel?"

Silence. Within the blur of light Angelo saw a dark shadow thicken, until the ringmaster stood before them, uncertain like a picture out of focus, carrying the black snake whip, dressed in his tails and top hat. Lynellen said. "What—who are you? Where are we?"

"You are on—*gabble.*" The word came out nonsense to their ears. "I am the ringmaster."

"What have you done with Lila and Jugger?" Angelo demanded. "What happened to the circus, the tent, the people—"

The form within the blur faced him. "They did not come with us," Marvel said. The whip in his hand undulated rhythmically, like some monstrous tail. "We left them."

Lynellen's voice rose, "Where are we?"

One whole side of a wall, like a picture screen rolling up after a movie, slid out of sight. Behind it, going on and on into infinity, were only stars. Even Milly lifted her head and uncurled her stumpy body to look. Susie giggled. The sound was shocking in the alien place. "He turned the tent into a spaceship and poof!" she said, and shook, weeping without sound, her fists like claws on the smooth, cool fabric of the chair.

Angelo said, "You're a thing from the stars. From another planet? You brought us here. Why? For what?" He had a horrifying vision of them all captive in their little boxes, being observed through cosmic keyholes. Or were they just going to be strapped to tables and dissected?

The Marvel-form dissolved into a shimmer of light, as if the being had become tired or bored with maintaining it. "You will be in the circus," it said. The wall of stars vanished.

They looked through a window at a strange and yet familiar place. There was a suggestion of a tent. Within it, inside a hundred rings, creatures of all sizes and shapes and colors cavorted. There was music, and the sound of hissing in the wind. The scene was bright and far away, like a painting come to life.

Millicent said, "I see people in there."

"Where?"

The scene swooped at them. They hovered like birds over one ring. In it were six people, three men, three women, doing a high-wire act in silver spangles and long rainbow plumes. They were good.

"But where's the audience?" Ricky said. They looked at the shimmer in the air.

"Maybe they're invisible, like him," said Millicent. Angelo didn't think he was invisible. Behind the shapeless glow he sensed a truer shape, coiling and uncoiling against the metal wall.

"You brought us here to be in a circus?" he asked.

"Yes."

"A circus in the stars. We're not that good. You know that. Why didn't you steal the Flying Wallendas?"

"You are a much more interesting act," Marvel said, "by *our* standards."

Tony stood up, hands on hips. "Man, you are crazy," he said. "I don't perform for some gook I can't even *see*. You just pick us up and take us home." Lynellen nodded.

Behind the shimmer a body thickened, congealing slowly out of air. A snake's head and body reared above them, immense tail poised, tongue flickering in the giant fanged mouth, ruby eyes sentient and cold and patient as the dark between stars. "You will sssstay." it said. Susie hid her face on the chair.

"For how long?" whispered Lynellen.

The snake said nothing.

Angelo felt a wrenching sickness in his belly. "We have to stay," he said. "But you can't make us work. You'll take us home when you get tired of feeding us."

The fanged mouth opened wide. "What makessss you think you will be fed?"

The act unrolls against the spiral patterns of the stars. Ricky beats the bass drum as Tony and Lynellen and Angelo and Susie fly beneath the barest hint of a tent. An audience claps. Marvel stands in the ring. "Aren't they GREAT, ladies and gentlemen," his deep voice cries. But that is an illusion, made for their mind. If they look they can see the great hooded serpent head and the scorpion tail. They do not look too closely at him or at the audience.

After their act they walk home across a park to their trailers. The noises of the circus come to their ears on the wind. But there is no wind. Orion, striding across the night sky, is also an illusion. He never moves. Their nights are always moonless. The aliens have never bothered to make them a moon.

"Next week," Lynellen says, "we're playing in Cleveland." Or Des Moines, or Toledo. She never says Chicago. Angelo agrees. Time passes. They eat and drink, sleep and make love, fight and make up.

But there is no time in the Circus. Months have passed,

or is it years? "I'm asking Marvel for a raise," Lynellen quips.

Sometimes, under the vast illusion of the big top, they think they see human beings. Ricky swears to have seen clowns. But they have never met the other beings in the ring. Other acts never look their way. Angelo wonders about the blue lizard people that he thinks he sees sometimes in a ring close to their own. But they know only each other, and the great snake-thing they still call Marvel. The universe has got very small. Was there, really, a place called Chicago, a planet named Earth, a gentle lioness named Lila? Angelo is no longer sure. He dreams of them, but they may be only dreams. The stars loom above them like rubious eyes, watching. The hiss on the wind may be laughter, or contempt, or applause. They do not know. There is only the Circus, after all. The Circus goes on forever.

KICKS ARE FOR KIDS

Edward Bryant

The digital clock on the wall of the Jones's dining room read 1900 hrs., 27 April 1989.

"Excuse me," said Carla. "I've got to get dressed. My date's picking me up at eight."

"Wearing your new outfit?" Mrs. Jones called after her.

"Yes. You'll love it."

And Mrs. Jones did. "Oh my goodness, Carla." She sighed and smiled sweetly. "You do look *so* groovy tonight."

"Turn around," George Jones said. After-dinner Cheer pills had candy-coated his depression and he was beginning to talk in complete sentences again. "Let's get a good look at that outfit I mortgaged the copter for."

Carla pirouetted in front of her father. She was stylishly dressed in fluorescent blue leg-paint, matching maxibelt, and a pair of adhesive azure body-sequins. Her contact lenses and waist-length hair were tinted to match.

"Outasight!" said Mr. Jones in a moment of uncommon eloquence. "You remind me of your mother the night I first met her. I think it was at a pot party after a show at the old Fillmore." His eyes focused on some intangible scene far beyond the memory of his daughter. "Was it the Airplane playing that night? Let's see—" Mr. Jones sighed. "Your mother looked so much like you then, Carla. We turned on together at the party, your mother and me. And then we went to my place. For a first date, she was the grooviest lay I ever had."

"Oh, you romantic old fool," said his wife. She coyly dropped her gaze to the red carpet. Her ample bosom heaved with half-remembered passion. There was silence. The elder Joneses were lost for the moment in a private reverie, remembering their vanished heydays of the sixties and seventies.

Carla was bored and excited; bored because this had to be at least the seven millionth time she had heard the story of her parents' first date. Worse, the wad of gum in her mouth was so intensively chewed it was beginning to lose its mildly hallucinogenic effect. Her excitement was the anticipation of Havelock's arrival. Havelock Ellison was Carla's date for the weekend. He who drove the dented '79 Piranha convertible. He, of all Carla's friends, had the wildest reputation for seeking new and different thrills. Havelock, Carla's ticket out of the house and away from her parents.

The plastic sitar above the front door plucked out the first six notes of an old standard called "Let's Spend the Night Together." "Our song," Mr. Jones had told his wife when he had purchased the unit to replace the old-fashioned door chime.

"It's Havelock!" cried Carla, flinging open the door. And Havelock it was. Resplendent in his single-breasted Agnew jacket. Modish in baggy vinyl trousers. Elegant in his white socks of synthetic wool. Havelock lounged against the doorjamb and surveyed the inside of the Jones's home with apparent lack of interest.

"Hi, Carla."

"Hi. Come in."

Havelock slouched into the Jones's living room. He glanced around with evident ennui at the framed *Playboy* originals adorning the simulated walnut panelling. He appeared not to notice the elder Joneses as they advanced to greet him.

"Dad, Mom," Carla said. "This is Havelock Ellison; he's in my physiology lab at the college."

There the conversation languished and died. It didn't disturb Carla. A stimulating and meaningful dialogue

would only delay her leaving with Havelock.

"Well, let's go." Carla picked up her purse from the plastic coffee table.

"Hold on," said her father. "Hold on, now. After all, we hardly know this cat." Mr. Jones shifted his weight ponderously from one leg to the other. "Maybe we could all have some tea before you leave. Maybe rap a little bit." Reaching into his shirt pocket for the pack, he said, "Like a joint for the road, young man?"

"No," said Havelock. "I don't smoke."

Carla moved toward the door, catching Havelock's hand firmly as she passed.

"Oh, Carla," said her mother. "You didn't say where you were going this weekend."

"I—" she started.

"Sort of hard to say," Havelock said. "We're gonna play it as it lays. Probably start out tonight by going to the Orgone Box."

"Oh, wow!" said Mrs. Jones, thrilled. "That new club I saw advertised on the vid? The one they call 'the total carnal experience'?"

"Uh huh. That's it."

"It sounds so exciting," said Mrs. Jones. "George and I really must drop in there one of these nights. We can't really keep up the pace with you young people anymore, but—"

"Excuse us," said Havelock. "I think we better go. I mean, the show at the Box'll be starting pretty soon."

"Oh don't let us keep you."

They reached the front porch.

"Carla," said her mother. "Your pill. Did you remember?"

"Of course, Mom."

Mr. Jones chuckled. "Well, Mom and I won't wait up for you. You kids have a good time."

"We will," said Carla, tugging Havelock toward his car. "My parents," she whispered disgustedly, "are such freaks."

"Are we really going to the Orgone Box?" Carla asked.

"Course not," answered Havelock. "That place is dead."

"Well. where then?" Carla looked hopeful. "To the new Drug Exposition?"

"No."

"The Skin Festival over at the college?"

"No."

"The animal games?"

"That's dead, too."

"Well, straight to your apartment?"

"No."

"Torming?"

"No."

"Havelock, are you sure you know what we're going to do?"

"I'm sure. You want something new?" Havelock glanced over at her, his eyes mocking.

"Fun?"

"Uh huh. Spaced out to Pluto and back. Something that'll mind-blast your parents if they ever find out."

"Wow . . . " said Carla. "I guess so. Like what?" Her blue eyes widened.

"You'll see," said Havelock. He grinned.

The girl closed her eyes and sighed raggedly. "Hurry, Havelock. I don't know how long I can wait . . . "

His Piranha hummed downcity and was engulfed in the weekend traffic. Havelock skillfully threaded a path among the other cars, each with a cargo of young adults seeking weekend diversion. Carla watched, enthralled, hypnotized by kaleidoscopic advertising.

Havelock drove by the Orgone Box, but didn't stop. The Box was a block-long cube glowing orgasmic crimson. Atop the Orgone Box swayed a pair of amorous titans, holographic projections enacting spectacular erotic scenes computer-selected from various Oriental love manuals.

"Look," said Carla. "Half the people going in are as old as my parents."

"Always happens that way," said Havelock. "It's why we're skipping this."

The Piranha whirred up the approach to T-1, the big Inter-Cont Freeway. Havelock gunned the turbine and his car slipped into the merge-pattern.

City lights on either side of the Inter-Cont's thirty parallel lanes became increasingly sparse until at last the urban sprawl was far behind. Havelock drove for nearly an hour. Finally, he decelerated and the Piranha peeled out of the cruise-pattern and purred down a dimly lit exit ramp.

"Where are we?" Carla looked out the window. There were no lights anywhere except for the freeway illuminators which stretched in perfectly straight ranks east and west to the horizon. The car rolled off the end of the T-1 exit ramp with a small bump. The sportscar seemed to be the only vehicle on the narrow two-lane road.

"Santa Mira Exit," said Havelock. "About two hundred klicks out of the city."

The car sped into the night until dark, tree-covered slopes humped up on either side of the highway. At last, Havelock stopped the Piranha and parked it on a dirt-surfaced side road.

"It's so still," Carla marveled. "No ads, no lights, no people." The only sound was the night wind sighing down from the mountainside. She looked over at Havelock, shadowed in the moonlight.

"This is it?" she asked.

"It's gonna be a real mind-blaster. I promised you, right?"

Carla was silent a moment. Then: "Well, I'll try anything once. What are we going to do?"

Havelock smiled enigmatically.

Confused, she stared at him.

Havelock reached out and took Carla's hand in his own. He intertwined his fingers with hers. He looked into her eyes. Soulfully. She looked back into his. Blankly.

"Just slide with it," he said, holding her hand tightly.

"Your parents would call it kind of weird and freaky. It's something they never quite understood."

"Hey!" breathed Carla.

Venus, the morning star and watcher over all young lovers, was just edging above the mountain when he finally kissed her. On the cheek, gently.

DRAGON'S TEETH

Karl Hansen

And I will call for a sword against him throughout all my mountains, saith the Lord: Every man's sword shall be against his brother.

—Ezekiel 38:21

The rain was cold, sifting down from low-creeping clouds in sheets of gray ice-water, but the sibs' voices were warm in his mind, remembering a lover's soft laughter and the way her black eyelashes tickled his cheek as they lay together, so long ago now. At first he had felt a little jealous, sharing his memories with so many, but then they all remembered her as he did, and her remembrance belonged equally to them all, and the feeling of joy she brought to their minds was like a warm fire deep inside each.

But the cold always intruded into the warmth of their minds; sometimes he felt the quick implosion of death, as one of their minds winked out, when a sib was caught within the field of a detonating psi-crystal, and sometimes he felt the terror of a mind touched by the fringes of the field, feeling the consciousness slowly pulled away from them, drawn inexorably away, to become locked forever within the lattice of the crystal. They would comfort the sib in the few minutes remaining to him, calming him, remembering the good times again, like the way the soft movement touched his hand through her belly and how soft her skin was, and they laughed together, one last time,

before he, too, was gone forever. But the ache that remained was cold for a long time before her laughter could wash the chill away.

"My feathers are wet," she whispered in his mind. "Will it never stop raining? And the ground is cold."

Jordan smiled to himself, withdrawing from contact with the other sibs, leaving them and their lover to be with another woman—at least, to be together in their minds. Two women had touched him in his life, one long ago and one just a few weeks ago, both times in the middle of war, both times under improbable circumstances, creating impossible situations. The first was just a memory now, a memory he shared with all the sibs, but Cealia was his alone, his only real friend now.

"What do you have to complain about?" he told her. "In the morning you can leave the ground. I'm stuck here all the time."

"But you don't have feathers to get wet. It takes half the morning before they dry. For half the morning I feel like I'm wrapped in chains."

"But only half the morning, not all day. You should be grateful to be a whisper-bird; at least you spend only the nights aground."

"The nights will do, thank you." They laughed together in their minds, waiting in the cold wet night, knowing that morning would come all too soon.

The drizzle soaked into his skin, leaching the oils out, wrinkling and puckering it. The cold seeped into his bones, leaving the joints stiff and aching. Smoke rolled in from the sea, stinging his eyes and sending paroxysms of cough shaking through his lungs.

The citadel lay before them, a dark, up-shouldering of gray rock, thrust up starkly from the desolate moors, pounded on one side by the ocean, scoured on the other with sand whipped by an incessant wind. Beneath the cold rock lay a maze of tunnels and passages, and small shapes scurried among huge, dark shapes within the tunnels, preparing for morning. The sibs surrounded the fortress, strung out in a semicircle all around, dug into the moors,

dug deep into the mud of the moors, all the way to permafrost, with the whisper-birds waiting behind the sibs, huddling against the wind-driven rain, feathers wet with cold soaking through.

Everywhere was the mud: foul, sticky mud that built up under your boots in ever-thickening layers, feet getting heavier with each step, slowing you down as you ran, great red clumps sent high into the air behind you. Mud that worked its way into the mechanism of your weapon, jamming parts together, freezing the action, so when a dragon dropped out of the sky, wind whistling past its wings, you sighted calmly, as you had to, gauging the proper lead, but when you squeezed the trigger, instead of the firm recoil and comforting report of the weapon firing, you heard only the slow grinding of the jammed mechanism. Then a mind cried out in terror as the talons ripped through armor as if it were tissue paper, to tear the flesh beneath.

Jordan shivered in the cold, and the other sibs shivered with him in the darkness.

The war was almost over, though, if it really was a war at all. This might be the last time Jordan and the other sibs would wait in the cold to fight in the morning. It had all started only a month ago, and was now almost finished.

The landing pod was battered by atmospheric turbulence as it fell from space to the surface of the planet. I imagined what it must look like: twelve huge starships in separate orbits around the planet, each spewing thousands of identical landing pods from their great holds, each dropping its own consignment of troops. The ship's computer finished showing me images that were recorded twenty-five years earlier. I saw dazzling cities, with towers climbing high; wide parks, airships flitting between the towers. The air was clean, the water clean and sparkling, too blue to be real. The buildings were clean. Nowhere was there evidence of industry. No smoke, no pollution. So different from my world, this earth of the future. The people laughing, playing, all young and carefree. No old people, no children either. But with night the image

changed to a nightmare: huge wasps darting about the night sky, swooping low to pluck a terrified victim from screaming crowds, carrying the person underneath glistening blue-black thoraxes, cradled in delicate legs. The long stinger plunged silently into the howling victim, and soon he was limp and quiet. I saw the rock tunnels of the wasps, the bodies now wrapped in a cocoon of fine silk hanging within the tunnels, then wasp larvae emerging from the faces of the bodies. The dry husks remaining hung still in the darkness. The computer next showed me how the starships from earth followed the path of the wasps' ships back to the planet of their origin, the journey lasting twenty-five years. Twenty-five years for vengeance to wait. Cold people and quiet machines talked to each other within the starships, played games with each other, men and women paired, then switched, waiting the twenty-five years, never growing older, people or machine both, as though a quarter century was only a day of their lives to be over with, always young, eyes bright all the time, while deep inside the ship pale forms took shape, growing in the darkness. The pod finally landed, touching softly to ground, and its hatch blew free. I emerged to a strange landscape, dry sand everywhere, the sky uniformly brilliant overhead. The other siblings emerged from their landing pods and we gathered together. The same expression was on all our faces, one of wonder, puzzlement. But not over the surroundings. Over ourselves: one man, all one man; myself.

The vengeance that had begun a month ago was now almost complete. First, the starships bombed the planet, but the bombing had never been adequate; they didn't want to destroy the planet entirely, it was an earth-type, and could possibly be used by man, so saturation bombardment was avoided, and pin-point bombardment was made difficult by the decentralized society of the Zoanians, and the inherent inaccuracy of orbital targeting. So in the end, troops were required to land.

Using the knowledge gained in defeating the wasps on earth, a whisper-bird was assigned to each of the sibs.

"You're different than the ones in the ship," Jordan said to her. "Why is that? Not the obvious, I mean. Not your body's shape. Your mind is different, as well. The other ones are cold, almost like machines, with minds that think like computers. Why are you so different, so much like me?"

"I am a little bit of both. Both the old and the new. I remember how I was. The mindmech needed a little of the old to defeat the wasps. The new was not enough; we had forgotten too much. We could kill, we were as cold as anyone, but the ability to kill wasn't enough. Lust was needed, the old blood-lust. To take joy in the kill. So when the mindmech changed my body to that of a whisper-bird, he changed my mind a little also, made my mind a little older, so once killing started, there was never enough to satisfy me."

"Why me, then?" Jordan asked. "If the mindmech can make your mind like mine, why did it need me? Why all the trouble of bringing a dead man back to life to fight for it? Why bother?"

A pause in their thoughts occurred while the whisper-bird considered the question. From far away, Jordan felt the minds of the other sibs. He wondered if any of the others felt the same way about their whisper-bird as he felt about Cealia. No one mentioned it. But then, he never mentioned Cealia, either.

"I don't know," Cealia answered, finally. "You're fierce and brave and a good soldier. But those qualities could have been engineered into anyone by the mindmech. Maybe you were chosen in particular. Maybe there was something about you, specifically, that the mindmech wanted. But I don't know. There was a reason, certainly. The mindmech does nothing without good reason. But all this dry talk hurts my mind." She laughed in his thoughts. "Let's talk of killing dragons. Let's remember how their blood tastes and the way they fall flaming when hit solid." Her fierce joy entered him, excited him also. He remembered the frenzy that always took control of his mind.

"Cealia . . . " He remembered the deep depressions.

"Yes."

"It may be over today." He paused. "The killing may at last be over."

"I'll miss the fighting. I'll miss killing dragons."

"What happens when it's over?"

"I don't know. I suppose we'll find something else to hunt."

"You know they don't plan picking us up. We're going to be left stranded here."

"One place is as good as any. I have nowhere to go. Neither do you."

"When it's over . . . " He let the question hang, not able to ask her what he really wanted, already knowing the answer, and afraid of it.

"Yes, Man." He saw a glimpse of imagery in her mind. She knew.

"Nothing." She was right, there was no point talking about things to come.

Soon Jordan felt the peace of her mind asleep. Dragons flew in the air of her dreams. But there was something about the dragons that made him shudder.

As I walked through the ruins of their city I realized it had been beautiful once, before the bombing, but in an antique sense, the way a Ming vase was beautiful, a reflection of a long dead culture, represented now only in fragments. They must have had an incredibly old culture; the signs of a long decadence were everywhere. Most of the planet's surface was barren, either desert or frozen tundra. The only habitations were scattered oases in the desert, and a few outposts along the edge of the icy wastelands. Deserted cities could be found buried in the sand of the desert and sheathed in ice on the tundra. The inhabited cities were collasping, the outskirts slowly being abandoned as the population shrank back to the city's core. I never saw a young Zoanian, or any evidence of procreation. They seemed content to let their race die out with their planet. Given a few more centuries, the vengeance might have been unnecessary, they would all be dead anyway, although as individuals they evidently lived for a

very long time, unless some accident intervened, and they cared very much about personal mortality. But the city was lovely, perhaps even more so in comparison to the stark desolation of the desert around. There were gardens everywhere, lush reminders of the tropical past of the planet, filled with statuary carved from some incredibly tough amalgam of silicon and an unknown alloy, clear as quartz, but with the luster of white marble. Fountains still sprayed water, refreshing the dry desert air. Fruit trees were planted in rows along the streets, their branches heavily laden with yellow and rose globes. I tried the fruit once; it had almost no taste, just the most delicate hint of sweetness, almost the flavor of sugar-water. As I was leaving, I found the Zoanian lying in the ruins of a building.

The sky was still dark and rain continued to fall. Jordan shifted to a more comfortable position in his dugout. Cealia was still asleep. He continued to blot out the other sibs' minds, living in his own thoughts for a while. He smeared mud from his hands to his pants, then rubbed his hands together for warmth. The wind picked up, driving rain at first, and then a few sprinkles of snow, before it. Jordan shivered.

"I'm cold." His body shakes, chills run through his limbs. "Why am I so cold?" An image persists in his mind: a head turning, a face, wide-eyed with surprise.

"You'll be all right."

"But I'm so cold." He touches his belly, feeling the cloth of his shirt sticking to the skin. His hand comes away wet. "I'm so cold." He closes his eyes.

"You'll be okay."

Jordan feels a tourniquet squeeze around his arm and the cool touch of an alcohol swab, then a needle biting into his skin, threading into the vein. Soon ice-water flows up his arm, under the skin. He hears cloth ripping and opens his eyes. The sun is high but seems far away, like the sun in winter, devoid of warmth. The sky is empty.

Helmets sometimes bob into his field of view. The faces below the helmets are young, like he was once. Their eyes still show concern, as his did once. But they duck back quickly; the red cross within the white circle seems to hang in the air momentarily after the helmet is gone.

Someone is bent over him, shirt open to the waist. Sweat gleams on blond body hair, beading on tanned skin. I.D. tags dangle about his chest, catching the sunlight. Jordan feels a dressing pressed against his belly and taped tight. The pain that was with him for so long is now gone—not that he no longer feels it; the pain is still there, will always be there, but somehow no longer matters, no longer intrudes into his concern. Almost as if it were someone else's pain, not his at all.

Far away he hears the chatter of a gunship, and the impossibly fast fire of 20 mm automatic cannon. But the sky is still empty. He closes his eyes again. The face remains, mocking him.

She pulls my hand to feel the quickening in her belly, to feel our child stirring inside her womb. The skin is warm and soft to the touch, and the feeling of life as the baby kicks and turns somehow pleases me, yet makes me feel strangely disquieted as well, overwhelmed by new emotions. She cradles her head on my shoulder; her breath moves gently across my face. It is becoming complicated. She hints now of having a priest marry us, no longer content with the simple vows we whispered together. I can't bring myself to tell her the CO will never let me marry her. The vows that were enough to allow her to lay with me will have to be sufficient to christen our child, for him to take my name. I will have to leave soon, it is almost dawn. The birds are calling to each other outside our window. I have to get back to the base by 0700. Our unit is being rotated out to the field. She cried last night when I told her, afraid to be left alone now that the pregnancy shows. Her family have exiled her, for taking up with a foreigner. She has given up almost everything to be with me, and what have I given her? An apartment close to the base, enough money for food and clothing. The promise I

will take her back to the States with me, a promise I wonder sometimes if I mean to keep, if I possibly can keep. I haven't told the other one yet. She still thinks I'll marry her when I return. Maybe I will. The baby kicks again. She lifts my hand and holds it against her cheek. Soon she is asleep.

"I'm still cold. Why am I so cold?" He touches his forehead. Sweat runs in trickles down his face. A hand grasps his wrist. Sunlight gleams from a watch crystal. He closes his eyes, then opens them, to escape the face.

"Is it always so hard to die?" he asks nobody in particular.

The sky began to lighten with dawn; slowly, almost imperceptively becoming more faint, the darkness washed out uniformly overhead, but cold rain continued to drizzle down from the low-lying clouds. At first, Jordan had found it disconcerting when the entire sky grew light, instead of dawn progressing slowly from the eastern horizon, with fingers of light streaking the morning clouds with red, but now he had become used to the effect of the opacification particles seeded in the planet's ionosphere, particles that caught the sunlight and scattered it about the entire sphere of atmosphere, so dawn and dusk never really occurred, day and night weren't really distinct, only opposite points on a continuum of illumination. The same particles served to hide the world's surface from the sensors of the ships in orbit, and distorted their communication beams, preventing effective pin-point bombardment from those ships.

Soon it would be light enough for the dragons to be about.

"The time draws near, Man." Her voice was a gentle whisper in his mind. "I can see movement on the ramparts. Already they prepare."

"Then the night is almost over," he answered. "You've taken to the air again." He looked up but couldn't see her. Her gray form blended into the clouds too well. But all

along the row of sibs, high in the air, there would be slowly circling whisper-birds, having now left roost.

"And not too soon for me," she grumbled. "The ground is cold and wet, not comfortable for my kind. Mud makes my toes itch. The air is where I belong; only the air feels good. At last, my blood warms."

Her thoughts were vibrant in his mind. Each of the sibs was linked to a whisper-bird with tuned encephalowave transceivers, matched units surgically implanted in the temporal lobes of their brains, allowing almost instantaneous communication, free of normal distortion. As close to telepathy as it was possible to approximate. The sib and whisper-bird became partners, acting as one, each knowing where the other was, what the other was doing. Another two channels of the encephalowave were used to connect the whisper-birds to each other and the sibs to one another, so coordinated action was possible between all the sibs and whisper-birds. In less than a month they had reduced the Zoanians to a few scattered outposts, and now had drawn the noose tight around those outposts. Soon the planet would be cleansed. Vengeance would be complete.

A command flowed down the line of sibs. It was time to move. Jordan climbed awkwardly from his dugout, moving stiffly with the cold. He could see the other sibs vaguely now, dark shapes moving through the fog and smoke. The citadel stood solidly before them, silhouetted against the lightening sky. As he walked through the mud, slipping with almost every step, Jordan became warm, the stiffness left his muscles and joints.

The Zoanian lay dying in front of me, bleeding from a wound in his chest. It was the first time I had really seen one close. He was small of stature, perhaps a meter tall, and light of build with fine bones. Definitely humanoid, but perhaps evolved from a smaller primeval primate than we. He had five-fingered hands. His face was delicate, almost feminine, and entirely devoid of hair, as was his head. His nose was set flat against his face. His blood was red. He gestured to me. I bent close. His thoughts entered

my mind feebly. A natural telepath? Maybe. They had had more time then we to evolve extra-sensory capabilities. He built an image in my mind, of thousands of landing pods opening, with identical sibs climbing out of the pods. So he wondered about the sibs. I made an image for him. White crosses in orderly rows, stretching forever, grass brilliantly green between the crosses. Then I let the crosses fade, blur out, until one stood alone. I quickly shifted scenes in my mind, so now row after row of gleaming incupods were presented. I showed him a single cell in each, the cell splitting, growing, a fetus forming, then developing, growing to adulthood immersed in nutrient solution. I magnified the faces, leaving the features slurred somewhat through the liquid growth medium, but clear enough so he could see they were all the same, all identical, all my face.

The sibs advanced across the moor toward the citadel. The whisper-birds circled in the gray air high overhead, long wings outstretched, tails fanning out to catch the air, bright yellow eyes glittering as they scanned the air above and the ground below. They had a wing-span of about four meters and weighed around thirty kilos, with gray-scaled legs with sharp talons and a cruel, curved beak designed to tear and rend flesh. But instead of narrow bird skulls they possessed the round, expanded skull of a mammal, the only human vestige remaining in their appearance. The whisper-birds called to each other with their shrill hunting cries, shattering the early morning quiet.

As they advanced, the sibs first formed an evenly spaced line, ten meters between each man. Behind them were evenly spaced holes dug into the mud of the moor. But as they proceeded the line became ragged, the distance between no longer uniform, some sibs a little ahead, some falling a little behind.

In each mind the moor ahead was visualized as a grid, with intense pinpoints of brightness scattered across the grid. Each spot of light was a buried psi-crystal, localized by the whisper-birds and identified in the sibs' minds, so as

they advanced they could avoid the crystals. The crystals were only a real danger at night, when the whisper-birds were roosting, unable to help, and a sib could blunder into one blindly, unwarned of its existence.

Jordan veered to the right to avoid a crystal. He felt its presence to his left, a coldness waiting, a vacuum waiting to pull a mind into its crystal lattice. On the extreme edge of the field the crystal caught your mind and irresistibly drew your consciousness into it, but if you actually entered the field, the crystal detonated and the implosion pulled your mind away instantly, lost forever, scattered beyond hope of reconstruction.

He could see the citadel clearly now. There was movement on its ramparts. Dark shapes began to detach themselves, climbing slowly into the air.

The dragons were being set loose. Excitement swirled inside him.

They had always been the real danger, the Zoanian's only real weapon. The Zoanians themselves were timid, afraid of personal combat. They didn't even have weapons to use themselves. They fought by proxy, using the dragons under telepathic control, seeing through their eyes, fighting with their bodies, while the Zoanian was safe behind the stone walls of the citadel. When the dragons were gone, fighting the Zoanians was like leading cattle to slaughter.

The dragons slowly gained altitude, shifting into position for their diving attack. They resembled mythical dragons only superficially, were actually more similar to pterosaurs—on the borderline between bird and reptile. But when the sibs first saw them, the image of a dragon came to all their minds, and they would always think of them as dragons. They had a wing-span of ten to fifteen meters and huge, three-toed feet with razor-sharp talons. Their heads were long and narrow, with a high saggital crest of skin-covered bone, and they had long beaks lined with fine, sharp teeth. But the flame they spouted was not belched from their mouths. They carried portable flamers strapped under their breasts, with dual nozzles which

squirted an inflammable hydrocarbon jelly. They were big and fast, almost as fast as the whisper-birds. And they were as smart as the Zoanian in control.

As the dragons approached, whisper-birds began peeling out of formation to meet them, darting close, enticing the dragon to flame or chase them. The dragons ignored the whisper-birds. A whisper-bird couldn't kill a dragon, they were too big, but she could be a nuisance and interfere with its plans. The dragons began the diving approach to the line of sibs.

The men stood facing the dragons, weapons shouldered. Jordan's mind filled with blood-lust. He cleared it somewhat, concentrating on the proper lead he would require to hit the dragon. Underneath was the buried fear of death—a taste of metallic spit.

"Here they come, get ready, Man." Her voice was soft, soothing the fear away with words, building his excitement, sharing the thrill.

Jordan could see the dragon and whisper-bird in the image of his sight. The dragon was dropping ever faster in a steep dive, plunging straight toward him. The whisper-bird was dropping parallel to the dragon, but a little above it. They were very close now. He could see the dragon's head clearly, its long, serrated beak and oval green eyes. The nozzles of the flamer seemed to stare at him like an extra set of eyes. Then Cealia made her move. The whisper-bird darted in and landed on the dragon's back, gripping tightly with her talons into the tough skin of the reptile, slashing its back with her sharp beak. It turned its long neck back to snap at her. She let loose, gathering air beneath her wings, while the dragon continued to dive. "Now, Man. Now. Fire," she whispered. "Kill it. Kill it now."

Jordan fired as soon as the whisper-bird was clear. She had distracted the dragon just enough, interfered just enough to delay it triggering the flamers. As the charge hit it burst into fire, burning with white-hot intensity. But he hadn't got a solid hit. The charge had hit too low, severing both legs, but leaving the torso and wings intact. It took

more than that to kill a dragon. It veered off, trailing smoke, climbing for altitude to make another dive.

"Get ready, Man. Another one comes."

Suddenly, the sky is no longer empty.

The Huey skims in over the tree-tops, ungainly as a giant dragon-fly, long tail weaving back and forth, rotor-wings chopping at the air. It hovers for an instant, then drops quickly to ground. The elephant grass is beaten flat by the wind of the rotor.

Strong fingers grip his arms and legs. Jordan is lifted to a litter, set down on the coarse canvas gently. They tower over him, blocking the indifferent sunlight, their shadows cold across his body. A plastic bag of plasma is held high; sunlight sparkles from the bubbles within. Exhaust fumes blow across him, pungent, but sweet with unburned naphtha.

He feels the litter lifted. They begin to run with him, crossing the circle of turbulence beneath the Huey's rotor rapidly, too quickly, with too much bouncing; he feels a terrible hurting inside his belly a tearing feel. Pain begins to float to the surface of his mind again; coldness grips his body.

They load the litter into the side bay of the Huey; other hands pick him up and move him deeper into the gloom inside the hull. The turbine whine increases in pitch and the nose dips forward as they climb, rotor-blades slicing air.

In the half-light of dawn the Huey screamed in low over the elephant grass, hovering a few feet over the ground, while we leaped out of the bay, to disappear into the mud and grass below. A huge, gravid dragon-fly disgorging her terrible young, soon returning to draw a few of us back to her womb. Wasn't that what the old man said, wasn't that what he actually meant?

He shakes uncontrollably. Someone covers him with a blanket, tucking it beneath his body.

"I'm still cold." The face in his mind disintegrates into

red pulp.

"Everything will be okay. You're safe now. You'll be warm in just a little bit."

Jordan turns to look at the medic. He looks young; his eyes are clear. Jordan is twenty-two, on the last half of the second year of this tour of duty. Pain grips his insides.

"Why does it have to hurt?" He remembers lagging behind the others.

"It doesn't, Sir. Just a minute." Jordan feels the needle of the morphine solvette and the warmth as the narcotic pushes coldness away. Then nausea overwhelms him; he turns his head and vomits. After he is through being sick he is warm again.

The old man squats close to me under the thatched canopy, rocking back and forth on his heels, hugging his knees close to his chest with old, gnarled hands in front, cupping a blackened pipe. He sucks slowly on the pipe-stem, dribbling smoke out the corner of his mouth to rise into dull eyes, not blinking to clear them of smoke film. His feet are caked with the red mud of the highlands. The rain makes soft static noises as it splatters against the split rattan of the canopy. Mixed with the rain-smell and tobacco smoke is just a trace of gasoline.

I finish field stripping my weapon, wiping the moisture off each part with my undershirt and applying a thin film of oil, then begin reassembling it. The rainy season played hell with weapons. Far away I can hear the shouts of the others and occasionally the sound of automatic fire. Sometimes the ground quivers with a muffled explosion. The others are finishing the job, while I rest. First, a squirt of diesel down the tunnel, to clear the entrance, then, after it cools, send a slope down the tunnel with a cachet of plastique. The village is honey-combed with tunnels. It will take the rest of the day to seal them all.

"In a little while, old man, you can have your village back."

He stares at me, letting his eyes slowly move up until they are looking into mine. The blue tobacco smoke rises from the pipe to blur across his eyes.

"The village has always been ours," he says, finally. "War comes and war goes away eventually. Men die, but the land lives on. The village belongs to the farmers, the farmers belong to the land. The land will always be here, long after you have gone back to your home."

"And what if we never go back, what if we like it here?" I think of my woman waiting for me, and the movement in her belly.

"You are dragon-men," he says, puffing on the pipe. "No danger of you staying."

I look at him quizzically. He contentedly exhales smoke. I think how easy it would be to kill him.

"Let me tell you a story, Dragon-man," he says complacently. "A long time ago a warlord came down from the north, with a horde of barbarous warriors. They burned villages, stole the crops, slayed the water-buffalo, raped the village women, and tortured and killed any man who dared oppose them. Tra Ningh was a young farmer whose wife was carried away to be a concubine to the warlord's men. He loved his wife very much and wanted her back. But there was nothing he could do. Then, one day he was telling his sorrows to a wandering priest, and the shaman told him of a dragon guarding a spring, and what the young farmer would have to do if he wanted his wife back. Now, this farmer was a gentle man, unskilled in the ways of combat, and also very timorous, and the prospect of fighting a dragon terrified him. But the shaman gave him a broth to drink that gave him courage, and he fought the dragon and finally killed it, after a long and arduous battle. He dug the teeth from the dragon's jaws and planted the dragon-teeth in the furrows of a fresh field, just as the shaman had told him he must. Imagine his terror when armed warriors sprang from the furrows, howling rage and battle-lust and brandishing their swords, with the look of dead men in their eyes. But they ignored Tra Ningh, instead fighting and killing the warlord and his men. Then, after all the northern barbarians were dead, Tra Ningh cast a stone into the midst of the dragon-men, just as the shaman had

instructed him, and they fell to fighting among themselves and soon all were dead, and plowed beneath the soil by the farmers." The old man smiles to himself and continues: "The next year the crops were more bountiful than ever before in the memory of man. Of course, Tra Ningh's young wife was killed in the fighting and he was very sad for some time. But then, sorrow is always the farmer's lot." He sucks on his pipe; the tobacco glows cherry-red within the black bowl. "The land persists," he says gently, "only the land persists. You dragon-men will end up as fertilizer for the land if you stay."

I hear shouts from the others and a sudden burst of fire. There is a crashing noise in the forest. I leave the old man still puffing on his pipe, the rain still beating on the thatched canopy.

That night the weather clears, so the B-52's whisper high overhead, invisible above the scattering clouds, then red fire plays on the horizon thoughout the night, with thunder grumbling far away, and I think of dragons breathing flame and roaring in the distance.

Jordan wakes to the reassurance of the turbine's whine, with the rotors buffeting overhead.

Jordan quickly turned from watching the wounded dragon to glance back to the citadel. Cealia was gaining altitude, straining to climb higher. A dragon approached from the citadel, wings set, dropping into its glide path. The whisper-bird would never be able to get enough angle to help; her warning would be all she could give. This dragon was his alone. He smiled in anticipation.

He shifted his feet to a more solid stance, slipping on the mud at first, then standing firm as the cleats of his boots found footing in the sub-surface clay. He quickly looked back to the wounded dragon; it had yet to turn, was still climbing for another run, so could be ignored for a few moments yet.

A sib died somewhere along the line; Jordan felt the flash of heat briefly and a sudden twinge of pain, then a

blank void as the sib's mind was gone from the gestalt. He glanced to the left; all down the line dragons were attacking, worried by whisper-birds, and the moor was littered with their burning carcasses.

But now he had to turn his entire concentration to the task at hand. The dragon was almost close enough to flame. Jordan had to make a choice: The dragon would either continue to bear straight in or it would dart to one side or the other. Jordan had to guess what it would do, before it did it, and guess right, without the help of the whisper-bird. That was the primary benefit of the whisper-birds: They goaded the dragons into making a premature commitment.

He held his weapon steady. The incoming dragon filled the view-screen of his gun-sight. He centered the cross-hairs between the dragon's eyes, counting rapidly in his mind, timing the shot carefully. Blood sang in his ears.

It was time. The dragon would have to make its move, or be committed to a straight course. Jordan pulled to the right and squeezed the trigger, for no good reason, just on a hunch.

Overhead there was a burst of flame. The burning dragon skimmed over, barely a meter above Jordan's head. He felt the heat on the back of his neck as the dragon passed over to crash in a heap into the mud of the moor. Everything happened so suddenly he couldn't tell where the dragon had been hit, but it must have been solid for it to go down so quickly.

"Well done, Man," the whisper-bird said, "but don't spend too long congratulating yourself, get ready the other one turns.," Jordan wheeled to see the other dragon returning, with the whisper-bird hugging close, in perfect position.

As he turned, he slipped in the mud, falling into a sprawl, his weapon skittering away across the mud.

"Get up, Man. Get up quickly. There's no time left."

The dragon was closing the distance between them, not trying to twist or dodge, knowing that if it acted decisively it could strike before Jordan recovered.

Jordan scrambled to his hands and knees and scurried to where the weapon lay and picked it up out of the mud, scraping dirt out of the receiver and trigger guard. He quickly worked the action; it was free of grit. Not taking time to stand up, he brought the weapon to his shoulder, sat down quickly to steady his aim, and sighted rapidly.

The whisper-bird had struck the dragon and was tearing at its wings, slashing great rents into the thin, leathery membranes with her beak. The dragon was ignoring her, knowing it had already received a mortal wound and the damage the whisper-bird could inflict couldn't stop it. The Zoanian in control of the dragon was determined to kill the man sprawled in the mud. Smoke poured from its underbelly and trailed out into a ragged ribbon in the air behind.

"Let loose," he shouted into her mind. "Let loose, I'm ready."

She complied, beating her long wings furiously, veering away from the falling dragon.

Jordan fired; this time the charge landed true. The dragon crashed into the mud at his feet, splattering steaming muck all over him.

"Good shooting," she whispered.

The Zoanian coughed, spitting blood-tinged foam to the side, and with each cough, air whistled out of the wound in his chest, splattering blood across the smooth, white floor. His eyes began to film over. Every breath was a gasp. I took hold of his shoulder, looking into his eyes. There was something I had to find out before he died, something I had to know. I put an image of a wasp in his mind, a giant wasp carrying a young woman, oblivious to her screams. A dagger-like stinger plunged deep into the woman; she was still. I traced the line on a star map from their planet to earth, then showed the wasp again, asking why in my mind. He nodded, wincing with pain. I gripped his shoulder harder, not allowing him to look away. He began to build images in my mind. First, the planet when it was young and fertile, before it started to die, with a young, boisterous people, children laughing

everywhere. Then the planet became colder, drier. The children were gone. The faces of the people grew older, their eyes old and cautious. When they looked at the stars in the night sky they grew afraid. He showed me the great dark starships leaving, each headed to a planet calculated to have intelligent life, carrying destruction to that planet, to insure the old Zoanians would never be bothered, never have to fear the stars. Then he built another image in my mind, an image that would haunt me for a long time. I saw line after line of dragons flying in formation, darkening the sky. He brought the dragons closer. There was something peculiar about them. He brought them still closer. Their heads were wrong, somehow misshapen. They had flat faces instead of the narrow faces of dragons. Then he filled my mind with the face of the dragon, my face, my face on every dragon, they all carried my face, all the dragon-men. The image faded. The Zoanian coughed once more and was dead.

Jordan slowly climbed to his feet, wiping the mud from his hands on the front of his coveralls, then wiping the splatters of mud from his face. He looked about, ready to kill again. The air was free of dragons all down the line. In several places there were gaps in the line, where a sib had guessed wrong, or the whisper-bird had been unable to help. There were a few bodies of whisper-birds scattered across the moor. Some of the sibs gleefully pumped rounds into the smoking bodies that lay on the moor, taking no chances on one reviving when their backs were turned. The ramparts of the citadel were still. There were no more dragons. Now it was time for the Zoanians. Their time had come. He began running toward the citadel.

"I'm going to die," Jordan whispers. "I know I'm going to die. I so much want to die." He remembers calmly shooting each in turn as they advanced ahead of him. Only one managed to look back in time to see.

"Just hang on, you'll make it." The medic doesn't know what else to say. *He doesn't know what happened.* "There,

there," the medic says.

"Then why am I so cold? I'm still cold." He touches his stomach. The wool of the blanket covering him is wet and sticky. Someone drapes another blanket over him. "I didn't know it would be so cold."

"You've got to live to receive your medal. You'll get a medal for sure, holding out alone for all those hours. Everyone dead but you, and you wounded. You must have got the sniper just as he got . . . " The medic trails off, realizing what he almost said.

"Just as he got me." Jordan laughs. "Yes, that's just what happened. I got him the same time he got me. But that's okay, because it's easy to die, much easier than living. You just close your eyes and relax. Only why does it have to hurt so? I didn't know it would have to hurt."

"Hang on, we're almost there. Don't give up yet."

"But it's supposed to be so easy to die."

The sound of the explosion is muffled by the intervening buildings. Terrorists again. Maybe another bicycle bomb. It's impossible for the police to keep them out of the city. Sirens begin to wail and military vehicles soon roar past, scattering motorbikes and bicycles from their path. I walk on, only momentarily distracted. The bombings are almost commonplace now. But today I'm preoccupied as well. Last night I wrote the letter and today I mailed it. The decision is made. I feel strange having no ties in the States now, but the feeling is wonderful. At the corner I see white-gloved police pushing a crowd away, forcing them back. The windows are blown out of the café, the wicker chairs overturned on the sidewalk. One table remains standing, two glasses half-filled with wine still upright on its surface. I look for her in the crowd but can't find her face. The police are covering bodies with blankets, comforting the wounded while they wait for ambulances to arrive, not caring about the dead. She lies huddled against the wall of the café, thrown there by the blast of the explosion. Her face is mostly gone but I know her by her hands, with my ring still on her finger. A policeman tries to keep me back, but I push past him and he lets me

through. I kneel before her, feeling frozen inside. I put my hand on her belly. It's still warm but quiet inside. Someone else has died as well, and soon will be as cold as the hard sidewalk, as cold as I am inside.

"So easy." Jordan feels sleepy. The wetness soaks through the other blanket, staining it red. He remembers the hard muzzle-brake pressing against his belly, then pulling the trigger awkwardly with his thumb.

"You'll be okay."

He closes his eyes. The turbines whine. The rotors chop air. Wind rushes past the cabin, swirling in through the open bay. The pain rises and pushes all else from his mind, but soon is gone.

The whisper-birds slowly circled over the moors, calling out to each other in their raspy whistles, remembering the past battle. They could not be of help in killing the Zoanians, being useless in the confined quarters of the citadel; that job was left for the sibs. The moor was littered with the burning carcasses of dragons.

The sibs slogged through the mud. Someone sang an old song they all remembered. The words seemed out of place, somehow out of time. Another sib picked up the song, joined in the singing. Soon they all sang. The citadel loomed high and dark over them.

Jordan walked quickly, his feet dripping mud, carrying his weapon at ready, singing loudly. His mind was filled with excitement that pushed away other thoughts.

Somehow, he sensed the movement behind him.

Simultaneously, the warning came to his mind: "Watch out, Man. One is not quite dead."

Jordan whirled to see a dragon lumbering toward him, wings outspread, legs pushing it in long, low hops along the ground. He tried to shoulder his weapon but couldn't get it up in time, before the dragon was upon him.

But this dragon wasn't interested in flaming; if it had been, Jordan would already have been dead. The Zoanian had abandoned control, so the dragon was running by

reflex now, and it didn't attack Jordan, but skimmed past, knocking him aside incidentally with his body.

The dragon fell smouldering fifty meters from where Jordan lay in the mud. Both were still.

Warm.

For a long time only warm. And dark. For a long time dark.

Dark and warm. Dark and warm. Nothing else. Only warm and dark.

Then floating. Wet, warm, dark. Buoyed by gentle fluid, rocked by gentle waves. Drifting in the warmth, in the darkness, in the wet. The world a warm, wet, dark sea. The waves' massage like peristaltic caresses.

Peace . . . warm . . . dark . . . wet . . . floating . . . forever.

Movement. Uncoiling, kicking out, stretching, turning over, bending, swallowing. Eyes open, but all is dark. Lungs gasp, but water is everywhere, everywhere wet. Muscles function; limbs move; joints loosen.

Growing. Growing larger all the time. Forming, developing, filling out.

Pressure. Squeezing tight, pushing, tight, too tight, terribly tight. Then free, momentarily. Tight again, squeezing, pressure building, head molding into the tight, too tight again. Over and over: tight, then free. Tight, then free. Squeezing ever deeper. Tighter and tighter. Ready to burst, to pop free.

Suddenly, light and cold. Eyes open, light everywhere. Lungs gasp, sucking in cold air. Crying, breathing. Kicking in the air, unrestrained.

Memories begin to flood his mind, layering slowly, building one by one, as he slowly becomes himself.

He feels soft skin against his lips. The breast milk flows warm, filling his belly. He sleeps, then feeds again.

He pulls himself to his feet, then, holding on with one hand, begins to walk, tottering to the other end of

the sofa.

The puppy yelps when he grabs it, then licks his face.

The fall air is crisp with frost; on his way to school he pauses sometimes to break the ice that skims the mud puddles in the road. Long cracks extend through the ice, and the mud is stirred like cocoa in milk.

He fights the other boys when they tease him, swinging his fists wildly, chasing one, charging another. Finally, he is pinned beneath their combined bulk. Breathing becomes difficult. Consciousness lapses.

She pushes against him. "No," she says, "not this way. You promised to wait." He sits back in his seat. Crickets chirp outside the open car window. The night air is cold. "You said you loved me," she says.

A knife blade gleams. His fingers close on a length of pipe. His arm swings. Teeth break. It swings again. And again. For a long time he vomits bitter acid into the ruined face.

The bus rolls down the highway, tires singing on the pavement. From Colorado Springs to Salida the fat lady had sat next to him, squeezing him against the window, sweat pouring off her body to soak through his clothes. He amused himself by imagining her naked, arms and legs securely bound to stakes set in the ground, while he peeled the thick layers of fat away, as one would peel an orange, making long spiral incisions down the length of each limb, lifting the slab of glistening adipose free. His mind filled with her screams. He still has a hard erection, even though she has disembarked. California lies ahead. He sleeps, lost to dreams.

As they run each footfall sends water splashing. The aft gunner lets him spray a few bursts at the fleeing slopes. The fifty-caliber bullets spew mud high into the air. He cuts one down just before the slope reaches the safety of the trees. The other men laugh with him over his good luck in shooting.

The baby kicks beneath his hand, inside her belly. The city is quiet. Far away they hear the muffled noise of artillery. He pulls her close to him.

He feels the hard kick in his midsection and the hot sting of powder burning the surrounding skin. A face lingers in his mind. The sun is hot.

He hears the turbins whine, the rotors chopping air overhead.

Wind rushes past the cabin, swirling in through the open bay. The pain rises and pushes all else from his mind, then suddenly is gone.

I open my eyes. I find myself in semi-darkness, strapped to an acceleration couch, my body cushioned on all sides by liquid. I work my hand free to feel my abdomen. There is no pain, no wound evident. I know that's impossible. I had shot myself square in the belly, not over four hours ago. I thought I was ripped in half. Somehow, it's as if it never happened. Somehow, I am no longer in the helicopter being evacuated from the field, somehow, no longer wounded.

Lights glow and flash in multiple pastel hues across a panel set before my eyes. I recognize nothing familiar about the lights. No printing is evident, no instructions. I wear a tight-fitting helmet. I think my head is shaved. I get the feeling of electrodes pressing against my scalp. I am clothed in some kind of durable-feeling coverall.

"Welcome, Soldier." The voice seems to originate in my mind. It is flat-sounding, lifeless, devoid of feeling. Yet, somehow feminine.

"Where am I? Who are you? What has happened?" The questions run out rapidly. I realize I haven't spoken.

"You have come a long way, Soldier. You have waited a long time."

My mind fills with images: A body is unloaded from a helicopter. I see the face—mine, my face, my body. I'm dead. A coffin is draped with the flag. Six pallbearers are in full dress uniforms. I remember the prayer: Fuck 'em all but nine—/Six for pallbearers,/Two for roadguards,/And

one to count cadence. *My parents stand to one side, almost lost in the crowd. My mother is crying, red-eyed, clutching a medal in her hand. The bronze glints in the morning sun. The dirt is black as it scatters across the top of the coffin.*

The cemetery is deserted. Just endless rows of stark white crosses, with green grass between them and flowers here and there on the graves. The image blurs. The crosses weather and crack with age, finally crumbling to dust. The grass becomes overgrown with weeds and brush. Then activity again: Sleek, shining machines dig up the graves, pulling out the coffins, examining each one and discarding each in turn, not satisfied, not finding the one they search for, the one they want. Eventually, they do find one to make them pause. They examine it closely with glittering instruments. It must please them, because they leave, taking the coffin with them.

The scene shifts to a laboratory ablaze with light. The coffin is carefully opened. Sensors probe the mummified body within. A complete karyotype is determined from dried DNA within the preserved cells of the mummy, and the sequence of nucleotides is transcribed to a code crystal, which is used as a template to synthesize a cell's nucleus, to be implanted into an embyonic cell. Another code crystal glows as the sensors begin to probe the mummy's head; a pattern of light is laid down within the crystal lattice: I realize the tracings represent faint tracks of neuro-transmitter lingering along the synaptic pathways that form the pattern of memories that once comprised a personality. I know somehow that in death the structural pattern of synapses becomes static, holding all the previous dynamic synaptic rearrangements that mark learning and experience in limbo, and that one can play back the pattern instantaneously at the moment of death, and forever afterward, if the tissue is preserved.

The scene shifts again, this time to space, with the sun burning faintly far behind. There are a dozen starships in formation, with huge grav-sails spread open, pushing against the currents of gravitational force. I see inside one

of the ships. There are rows of cylindrical chambers, thousands of them. I see a single cell bathed in growth media within each chamber. The cell splits, then splits again, forming a sphere, with the sphere involuting, becoming a blastula, then a morula. A fetus forms and develops, becoming an infant, a child, a young man, all within the chambers. A crystal glows. Dead images held within the bright crystal lattice become living as the patterns are slowly laid down within the developing brain of the young men. The young man is me! I hold the realization tight, feeling giddy terror. All the young men are me. I understand. Almost.

"Why me?"

"You live to fight again, Soldier. You are needed again."

"But why? Can you tell me why? Why me?"

But that realization must wait. I see instead the wasps and learn of the vengeance waiting for twenty-five years. But this is as the landing pod falls through the air of a planet twenty-five years away from my opened grave on earth.

When he awoke, the battle-lust was gone, replaced by a black depression. Jordan lay quietly for a while, looking up to the sky, wondering about the cold, machine-people that circled the planet in the starships. They wouldn't be sending for him or his siblings; they had no need for used soldiers, they could grow a new batch whenever they pleased, the crystal template could be used indefinitely. Jordan and the others would be abandoned on this planet, to survive or not. He wondered where the starships would go, now that their duty was finished. He didn't think it would be back to earth.

Otherwise, the sky was as empty and gray as his thoughts.

The rain had stopped falling.

He felt the side of his head. There was a tender swelling over his right ear. The cold of the permafrost had seeped

into his body as he lay; his muscles felt stiff. He tried to rebuild the blood-frenzy in his mind. But it was too late. Cold was there, too.

A dragon lay smouldering before him.

"You wake at last," she said in his mind. "I thought you would sleep forever."

"How long?" Her voice failed to cheer him. *She knew.*

"Several hours. It's all over now, all over everywhere. The Zoanians are all dead now. There are no more dragons, either." Her mind voice became softer, sadder. "I will miss fighting the dragons."

He saw her circling in the sky, wings outstretched, terminal feathers fanning out like fingers, legs tucked close to her body.

"You waited for me." Accusatorially: "Why? The other whisper-birds have gone."

"Why not? To see if you were all right."

"Or maybe because . . ." He lets the thought die. There was no gain in being cynical.

"What?" Her mind-voice did not betray what she knew.

"Nothing. Where are the other whisper-birds?"

"The others go to the desert."

"Why didn't you go with them?" He tried to hide the dark thoughts from her.

"There's really no place to go, now, All the dragons are gone. We'll have to find something new to hunt. Maybe I'll join them later."

Jordan climbed to his feet, to begin the walk to the citadel, but paused as he passed the dead dragon. A thought nagged his memory. He knelt before it a moment before he continued trudging through the mud. He left his weapon where it lay.

The doors of the citadel were blasted black from explosives. Jordan stepped over the rubble at the entrance. Wreckage littered the tunnels and passageways within. Dead Zoanians lay everywhere. Jordan shuddered. Now he was glad he'd missed the final slaughter. But before, he knew, he would have felt differently. As he passed a chamber, Jordan heard two sibs arguing, fighting over a

decanter of liquor. Other sibs were looting in every room in the fortress. For some reason, Jordan didn't feel like joining in.

Finally, he wandered to the ramparts. The wind was cold, whipping around the jagged rock spires on all sides of him. He went to a stone wall built at the edge and looked over. The moor was a long way down. Far away dead dragons littered the flat, unbroken expanse of tundra.

The whisper-bird still circled overhead.

He felt in his pocket, pulling out the teeth he had cut from the dead dragon's jaws. The sharp, triangular-shaped pieces of bone gleamed in his hand, polished smooth by tearing gristle and cartilage. He threw them over the ramparts wall, watching them drift in the wind to scatter across the muddy tundra. By squinting his eyes together he could almost see dragon-men rise out of the ground. Dragon-men with his face. They they melted back into the mud, replaced by rows of white crosses.

The whisper-bird left, calling farewell in his mind, slowly flying toward the dry mountains just visible to the south. He would try to forget about her, his feelings toward her. It would be different when the whisper-birds returned; they would be hunting when they returned.

Inside the citadel he heard angry, drunken shouts and the sounds of a scuffle. Later, gunfire filtered up from the depths of the fortress, to be carried away by the wind.

SEEDPLANTER

Robert Thurston

While you're still young and eager, let me tell you about the seedplanter. He may really have lived, then again maybe not. He may be somewhere in the world at this moment, he may be somewhere in a time to which you will travel.

I have only bits and pieces, some minor things they say about him. Nobody knows much about him, only hints and guesses, I sometimes think. But I believe in him. I imagine him as, say, a meek little C.P.A. from the pre-travel days. I see him in the first line of time-travelers, his application neatly typed, looking for all the world like a man who wouldn't dare to disturb a stone of the time-period he visits. I see him shutting his eyes before he takes that first step to a different time, joyful at knowing he did not have to neatly type anything anymore.

The seedplanter traveled through eras and became the Casanova of the Timestream. Timestream, a lovely word! I see him sitting in the middle of the Timestream, letting the waters lap over his thighs. You'll know what I mean, once you've been there.

Way I see it, first he dabbled in the past, tried out females from different Eras, Ages, Stages of Man's (Woman's) Development. He bedded them down gleefully. For research, he may have told himself. But not for research.

In prehistoric times, he found the one delicate and soft female from among the massive and monstrous club-swinging women.

She gazed at him curiously as he eased her slowly onto a mat of freshly cut foliage. He chuckled and said, "You'd never understand this even if you knew the words, but—I have always striven to be the ultimate male chauvinist." He enjoyed her awe at the sound of his language. As he made love to her she reacted to his techniques with squeals of delight and wonder, and he decided that the money invested in the sex manuals just may have been worth it. Later, when he had slipped away forever, or into forever, she tried to explain him to the other females of her clan. What they could understand caused them to shy away from her. She had always seemed strange, anyway. She looked after them and touched her own body, trying to understand for herself. Until her death some time later, she was ostracized for coupling with a god.

The Middle Ages, a plump peasant whose bellowed French was indiscernible to his Berlitz-trained ears.

When he first encountered her, he was attracted and repelled. There was awesome beauty beneath the pock-marks, a hint of voluptuosness in her almost used-up body, a threat of disease for which he might not have a cure in his temporal service medical pack. After she had finished hollering at him, she treated him with a bizarre arrogance. The way she frequently gazed out of the window of the hut led him to speculate that there might be a returning husband soon—from the fields, the manor, the market, maybe a Crusade. As he prepared himself for lovemaking with the prophylactic lotion that the temporal service provided, she watched with what appeared to be scientific interest. He had expected embarrassment. Well, sometimes she did redden and laugh oddly, but she kept watching. If that was embarrassment, it was not quite medieval. Still, when he attempted to remove her scratchy clothing, a difficult task at best, she did scream and then dealt a wicked blow to the side of his face. She pointed to a wall-relic which meant nothing to him, might have something to do with a saint. Naked, she continued to resist him and resumed screaming. "Stop it!" he shouted angrily at her. "I refuse to rape you. I draw the line there."

Anger seemed to comfort her and she quieted down. At first she resisted the temporal service's hygenic cream. However, since the application of it pleased her, she started to laugh heartily. She pulled him down on top of her.

A bawdy Elizabethan wench.

She knew all the good taverns and even stood still for a performance of *Lear* at the Globe. At first, the staging of the play disturbed him. He thought: Were these actors so underdeveloped mentally they did not know they were speaking poetry, great poetry? Their line readings were so careless and flamboyant. Eventually, he was drawn into the drama and, at the end, felt exhilarated rather than gloomy. Later, he dragged her away from an uproarious evening at one of the disreputable inns, where he almost fainted from the mingled smells of old sweat and new vomit. In the courtyard her face was lighted by moonlight. He wondered why her beauty, so akin to that of his time's movie stars, was not acknowledged by the men of her era, who seemed to favor the lustier, more red-faced, worse complected, definitely less attractive types. She led him to a stable, apparently to her favorite empty stall. He taught her how to smoke marijuana, a few tokes of which he had secreted in his medical pack in spite of the temporal service regulations. In spite of a barrier in communication (her English was, to him, so strangely accented), he managed to convince her that the pot was tobacco from the New World, a new and better crop. At first she was giddy and led the lovemaking. He, a refiner of techniques now, attempted to pace the lovemaking differently. A moment later she was crying. He asked her why. She said something like, prithee, roger me and be done with it. Worried that he might be doing something wrong for this time-period, he asked her what had brought on her new mood. She tried to explain, in halting phrases because she knew few words that would describe her feelings. It seemed that, in the middle of their grappling, when she normally would have abandoned herself to her passions, she felt herself leave her body and hover in the air over them.

Naturally, she had been terrified, especially at the thought that she was suddenly a ghost, suddenly shunted to a Christian heaven which she'd always dreaded. But then she saw that her human body still lived, was still locked in an embrace below her. Then she was even more terrified. How could this be? How could she gaze at herself like this? Then she realized that this was how her life was, how it would look to others. She seemed to see herself with all the lovers she'd had since the loss of her maidenhead, all the identical situations which were the summary of her life. When she felt she had reached the limits of terror, she suddenly snapped back into her body, and that was the moment she had started to cry. He tried to explain her experience to her, tried to find some way to help her. But even his careful study of Elizabethan English, the richest period that language had ever known, failed to supply the words that would give this woman an inkling of unsuperstitious reasoning for what had happened. Better for her to see it as a ghostly occurrence, he decided. He finally calmed her by telling her that tobacco sometimes put people quickly to sleep; she'd probably dreamed the whole thing. She seemed relieved. They made love as dawn arrived. With light slowly inching through cracks in the stable walls, he waited nervously for her to fall asleep so he could escape from her.

A puritanical pioneer woman.

She knew exactly what he wanted the moment she saw him watching her. She knew he'd get it, but he must work for it; she'd see to that. She pulled the hood of her bonnet further forward and walked past him, convinced he'd follow her. She knew men, always had. He followed. It was Wednesday meeting night at the church, with a visiting evangelist. He sat in one of the public pews and mouthed hymns, tried to listen to the preacher who screamed some kind of six-gunner doctrine. He stared directly at her back, imagined the sturdy but attractive body beneath her heavy cotton outfit. After the service he introduced himself as a traveling salesman, an Easterner. She'd always tolerated drummers, she said, not like some of the other ladies

around. Her look was suspicious, though. She tilted her head back so the light revealed most of her face inside the bonnet. The face was leathery, but in a way that made him want her even more. Turned out she was a widow lady, and not as old as he'd originally guessed, as old as her hardened features suggested. Actually, the hint of age came from her thin, grim mouth and a tendency to scowl. In another time her looks might've been sought in advertising. For down-home products. But now, in this time, she was busy rushing to a different sort of destiny. She'd almost lost the beauty which had, no doubt, made her late husband shave the grizzle off his face and foreswear drinking temporarily. In a few years her skin'd be really tough and her back bent. Or she'd marry some straightbacked bastard who'd deliberately shrink the core of genuine vitality still within her. Now she could be won over, now he could bring her out. It'd be a struggle, she'd have him at the end of an invisible whip which she'd crack to make him dance. But he'd dance. The struggle would be enjoyable, and worthwhile, the kind of encounter he'd taken up traveling for. He took her arm and began discussing the virtues of the evangelical six-gunner's message that the real showdown for us all would take place before the gates of heaven when we better be sure we got the drop on God. When she spoke of her approval of the sermon, it was in a strained but gentle voice.

A flapper.

She tested his mettle, almost beat him. Does your mother know you're out? she said, confusing him right away. At a loss for words, he stuttered something she couldn't possibly have understood. She had eyes so gray, so impenetrable, that when he looked close he expected to see the family coat of arms emblazoned in miniature. She asked him if he was daffy, if he was a snow-bird. No, he did not think he was. She bounced around a little—he stared at the slight flare of her skirt, her hips were little secrets threatening to be divulged at any moment—and she sing-song chanted, who takes care of the caretaker's daughter when the caretaker's busy taking care. He sighed. She

screwed up the skin of her forehead, which had already seemed stretched too tight, into a frown. Her voice became different, lower and intimate. I'm sorry, my head hurts, I've been drinking. Sit down on the couch here, he said. Before sitting she asked if he was a lounge lizard. For a moment he wondered if there might've been a language-prep course he should have taken before visiting this time. Still, this girl, this maiden—so unvoluptuous, so cruelly thin—stirred the old vital juices, and he wanted her under him as soon as possible. He touched her arm, but she didn't seem to notice his hand upon her. She said to excuse it, please, but she'd had a bottle of synthetic gin and, though some time had passed, she was still a bit stinko, still burning with a low blue flame. But a minute later she was standing up again and smiling at him with a red-lipped grin that looked a little crazy. He asked if he might kiss her. Strumberries, she said, and walked out of the parlor. He caught up with her, asked what she meant by that. She said, horsefeathers. He decided it might be better to give up on communication so he grabbed her from behind, got a good feel of her tiny breast beneath the velvet of her gown. She squirmed out of his grasp; said, cut it out, you big hog! He told her he just wanted to make love to her. Nix on that, hotshot, she said. She walked out of this room (an unfunctioning study), too. Fortunately, there were many rooms in the house, and he was quite patient. She kept smoothing down her bobbed brown hair with the flat of her hand and looking at him sideways. Finally, she spoke again in the low different voice. I only tried it once and—I'll tell the world—it was no picnic. I don't want to do it anymore, not even when I'm married. I just want to play at it, pet, neck, nothing real. Please don't try anymore, pretty please? He took her hand, all her jewelry slid down her arm, and said that he must try, that he wouldn't stop, that he would see it didn't hurt. Her voice even lower than before, she said, can you be so sure? He said, yes. She seemed almost to relent, then she pulled away. No, I can't. Look, I'm not the hot number I pretend to be, it's just that I had you trapped here. Don't

you see, I can't do it, I can't think of myself doing it, I don't want to think of myself afterward having done it, I don't want to remember for my whole life that I did it with you, on this day in this room of this house at—she couldn't finish the sentence and began to cry. He held her. Time passed, he was on very good terms with time and he waited. Finally she said, nuts let's do it anyway. He didn't stop to ask her why. She seemed to enjoy it, participated energetically, in fact, but afterward she said she wished she had a coffin nail. At first he interpreted the phrase literally and felt a wrench in his gut, but then he asked for a translation. Once he knew what it was, he was overjoyed to produce a cigarette for her. He asked if the lovemaking had been good for her. She said, every day in every way I am getting better and better. For a small-breasted girl the aureoles around her breasts were quite wide and bumpy. He couldn't resist making circuits of them with his fingers. He said, maybe so, but did you enjoy the lovemaking. There was almost some meaning in her gray eyes. She pulled him back on top of her, saying he was the canary's tusks.

When the seedplanter tired of the past, he took a needed pause, chilled his toes in the Timestream, and thought of the babies he may have left behind in different eras. Traces of him throughout centuries. That awful seedplanter nose on a Trojan warrior, his tight little mouth on a Bolivar revolutionary, his high forehead on a host of ancient Egyptian beauties. The implications were a joy to contemplate. The temporal service could easily take away his license, if they ever became efficient enough to enforce their laws. He had perhaps left his strain in uncountable generations of man. And never, not even when threading his toes with Old Testament sands, did he heed the lesson of Onan. The seedplanter howled with laughter and sent tidal waves up and down the Timestream. He now may be anywhere in time, embrace him if you meet.

COUPLES

Dennis R. Caro

The horse reared at the edge of the outcrop and Hemmings grinned as he fought her head down. She was a good mare, only partially broken, and he knew if he ever let her get out from under him she'd be long gone. He liked that. A horse without spirit wasn't worth the ride.

The Valley stretched for miles below him. Breathtaking. It was all his now. Curtis had owned the land west of the lake, but Curtis was dead. No one else could keep Hemmings from taking what he wanted.

"Tell me, Dr. Curtis, how does it feel now that it's all over?" The woman with the microphone could have been an actress. Even in person her beauty had a celluloid quality, seemingly projected on a screen no more than six inches in front of her face. An earthiness exuded from behind that screen, carefully tuned to a broad band that would appeal to a large cross section of male humanity. As a psychiatrist, Curtis could view her objectively. In the single-spaced computer array of his mind's eye he could list every one of the devices she was using, yet as a man he was quite conscious of trying to create a favorable impression. He chewed the stem of his unlit pipe, carefully considering entire sentences before he spoke.

The Rooster's Something-or-Other Inn was like a myriad of others, dimly lighted, with stools along the bar and tables against the wall. Her eyes covered every inch of

it as she moved through the room.

She was conscious of the motion of her body as she walked; she felt like a cat, a large cat. When she reached the bar she ordered a whiskey sour, more for something to do than something to drink. The glass felt good in her hand and she smiled.

"Technically speaking, of course, it's not over. There's still this one last shot. But I see what you mean. This ship will man the eighty-first station, the last in the series. We still, however, have no real assurance that the station crews will perform as well in deep space as they have under test conditions."

The lake sparkled, a silver-chained diamond on a field of green felt; small, but priceless in a land where water meant survival. Hemmings guided the mare down along the ridge. Home. An end to the hot trail. It'd been weeks, but the cool lake waters were waiting to strip away the layers of dust and absorb the heat.

"Oh? Then there *is* still some doubt."

Curtis tried to keep his smile ingratiating. "There will, I am afraid, always be doubt," he said. "All we can do is try to minimize it. The eighty-one regional stations will reduce the number of ships lost in deep space significantly—if their crews remain healthy."

She saw him first, a little man trying to gain height with one foot on the bar rail. He seemed nervous, an ineffectual little bastard, but maybe . . . maybe just what she needed. She watched him search the room with his eyes and glanced away at just the right moment. She breathed deeply. His kind always went for the big chest, and she wanted him to make the first move. It was so much better that way.

"The environment our eighty-one couples will face is a harsh one—one we have had precious little experience

with. We can only surmise their ability to cope with it, alone on those tiny islands, with just each other for company."

The water was close enough to taste when he heard the sound. A splashing invader. Quickly, Hemmings dismounted and crept along the bank. The Indians had been driven out long ago, but there was still the possibility. Then he saw her, thigh deep, a glowing symphony of soft curves. Her hair was a reddish brown mane; Curtis had left him more than the land.

"Is that why you've chosen heterosexual teams?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it my choice. All the data was carefully analyzed by the computers. Isolation tests indicated fairly conclusively that this type of team remained stable longer on the average than any of the other one- or two-person combinations."

Their eyes met and she forced herself to register interest. Her breathing quickened as she watched him look at her. Come on, you prick, make your move. She was carefully positioned; legs, hands, even her gloves folded on the bar in front of her—placed so that anyone who'd read those boring little articles on the psychology of pickups would take her for an easy score.

"And did the computers match the personnel as well?"

"Naturally. That was one part of the project we felt relatively secure about. It has quite a history of success."

The lake was as cool as its promise. Hemmings moved carefully; he wanted no sound until the time was right. Her back was to him and he could see the swell of her rump distorted by the water. He'd thought she'd gone back East when Curtis died—when she'd found people too afraid of him to make her an offer for the land. It didn't matter. Women had no rights out here. If she didn't want to accept that, she was going to find out—the hard way.

"Then you might say you're conducting a kind of interstellar computer dating service."

Curtis almost bit the stem of his pipe off. He'd relaxed, and she'd found an opening; a story along the lines she was following could make the project a laughingstock. "Certainly not." He tried to keep all traces of his irritation out of his voice, but the effort it took was readily visible. "The purpose is, after all, to have manned beacons. The ten percent loss in ships we've been faced with can't be permitted to continue. As such, we are, of course, looking for stable teams, teams that can stand up to the thirteen-month shifts. Computer matching has an excellant history of providing this stability."

"Pardon me, is this seat taken?" Wouldn't you know it. She couldn't remember the last time she'd heard an original line, but then, the kind of man she was after wouldn't be the type to come up with one. She shrugged her shoulders, making the movement an invitation, and he stumbled onto the stool, catching his knee. Oh God. Just don't let him start drooling. Anything but that.

"Can I buy you a drink?" She nodded and pointed at her nearly empty glass, then, aware that she was coming across too self-assured, she tipped it over.

"No offense intended, Dr. Curtis." That same sweet smile, the twinkling blue eyes; but Curtis the psychiatrist had completely replaced Curtis the man. Her magazine could kill him come appropriations time and it was imperative he salvage what was left of the interview. "Tell me, though," she continued," these matches. Dealing with such a small sample, certainly not all of them would be perfect."

The water rustled as she turned, hands across her breasts. It wasn't enough to cover them, and Hemmings smiled. Big breasts were what he liked most in a woman.

"You." She began to back away as he moved toward her. "Get out of here Hemmings. This is my side of the lake.

You come one step closer and I'll have the law on you." Hemmings just kept smiling. She still didn't understand. This was going to be perfect.

"Perfect? Hardly." Curtis chewed on his pipe, bending the stem against his teeth. There was nothing along this line of questioning that could hurt him. If he was careful he could still come out of this all right. "After all," he said, "these couples only have to cope with each other for a little more than a year, not a lifetime. Don't forget that they are all trained individuals. They know the sort of job they have to do. The matching part is something we threw in as a little extra."

"Look, I don't mean to pry or anything, but are you all right? I mean, is something wrong?" Perfect. She went into her speech; lonely, boring job, personal problems; thinking not about what she was saying, it was too well-rehearsed for that, but watching his face, watching him eat it up. The main event was right on schedule, beginning as soon as she told him how she couldn't bear to go home alone and face those empty rooms.

"A little extra?"

Curtis cursed inwardly. He knew he was visibly nervous; he could feel the perspiration beginning to form above his eyebrows. "I didn't mean that quite the way it sounded," he said. "For the most part, there will be very little to do on these stations, unless, of course, a ship breaks out of drive in their vicinity. If the crews are able to get along socially, there is less chance that boredom will eventually destroy their morale."

Her eyes were wide open, her breathing quick as he began to close the gap between them. She was still backing away, trying to move faster, and her hands were a very ineffectual cover. Hemmings rubbed his chin, feeling four days of trail stubble. His smile seemed to shine through it as he pictured how it would be to rub his beard against

those breasts and hear her scream.

"You see, we've never left human beings alone in interstellar space before. The longest trips we have, take only about a week under drive. The mind reacts strongly to being alone like that. The only thing we have to go on is the early scout ships, and you know what the casualties were like on those."

Out on the street she carefully tripped, pressing against him as they walked, and then allowed him to take her arm. He held her close, rubbing against her thigh, and she could feel his excitement grow. He was going to be the best she'd had in a long time.

"Getting back to the subject of matches, Dr. Curtis? Dealing, as you've said, with such a limited sample, some of the matches must be . . . shall we say, less optimum than others? Since this is to be the last shot, would it follow that this particular couple is the most poorly matched?"

She stumbled, and he was on her, twisting her arm behind her back, forcing her down to her knees, chin deep in the water; pressing her tightly against him, reveling in the sensation of his maleness against her breasts.

"You bastard," she said. "You little bastard. You won't get away with this." Little. He backhanded her across the mouth and laughed as her head snapped back. A trickle of blood speckled her teeth. These big broads were all the same, but it was better that way; better when they screamed and begged.

"My dear woman. Your choice of words." He had her. If this was what she was after, he had her. "Poorly matched, indeed. Perhaps it could be argued that a given match may be better than another, but none of them could be called poor. As a matter of fact, Rooster IV, the station which this particular couple will man, is the farthest out on the circuit and, as such, we have selected the team the

computers indicated would get along best. There is almost no chance of relieving them before their shift is up."

She tripped, again quite carefully, as they entered her apartment, locking the door with a practiced motion as he rushed to keep her from falling. His arms were around her and she could feel the heat of his breath on her neck. She hit him in the mouth, hard, wincing as his front teeth scraped skin off her knuckles; she relished the look of surprise and pain as he fell to his knees. She hit him again.

"The optimum couple. Now, that has an interesting ring to it, Dr. Curtis. Tell me more. What, for instance, would they be doing now?"

He watched her eyes as she backed away from him. Her arms were pushing at the water; there was no thought of modesty now, only escape. He knew she'd turn and run, and he waited for it, giving her the chance, trying to make her think she had one; when he caught her again his domination would be that much more complete.

"What would they be doing now?" Curtis was finally on well documented technical ground; he felt the tension in his shoulders ease as he relaxed. "Liftoff is still about ten minutes away; they're in their pods, in cold sleep of course, and presumably dreaming."

"Why? Why are you doing this?" The same, always the same. Never anything original. Even the one who thought he knew karate. Bastards. Lousy pricks. And always so superior, so condescending—until she started on them. They'll learn. I'll show them all. She kept watching his eyes. He'd rush her, she knew he would. And then the fun would really start.

"Dreaming?"

"Yes. The beacon is placed as a unit, complete with crew. Expenses proved quite a bit less that way." He was

certain of the story she was digging for now, and felt secure in trying to make a few budget points.

"Since we're doing without a human pilot, they sleep as would any passenger. Dreams associated with cold sleep are nothing new. The brain continues to function, deprived, of course, of any sensory input, and it typically tends to generate the sort of fantasy, reverie if you will, we think of as dreams."

She turned and thrashed toward the shore, Hemmings' triumphant laugh echoing in her ears. Stupid cow. She should have known that was what he wanted. He let her gain two steps, then three, watching her softpink thighs roil the water. Then he was on her again.

"And this particular couple, Dr. Curtis. What kind of people are they? What kind of dreams will they have?"

"Look, I'm sorry. All right? I'm sorry." His shirt was torn and he was panting, retreating as she came toward him. There was nowhere for him to go; she watched for the telltale tightening of muscles that would herald his move. Now.

With a fluid motion she grabbed his belt and heaved him against the couch. The belt broke and his pants sagged as he tried to stand. This time she took the initiative, throwing him back across the room, ripping his clothes.

"I would assume, and this is only an assumption, mind you, that their dreams would be quite reality oriented. They are both extremely practical people. I would also assume that they would begin by dreaming about each other. They've never met, you know. We felt it would be better that way. It gives them that much more to talk about. God knows, they'll have the time. Knowing that they'll wake up next to each other, I would think that meeting will occupy the initial dream stages."

"I'll give you the land." She was panting. Great heaving breasts. Tears in her eyes. "That's what you want, isn't it?" It wasn't all he wanted. Hemmings' breath was coming quicker too. The pulsing in his loins was sweeping over his body. He was growing. He could feel the power in him, and he laughed as she turned and ran for what was going to be the last time.

"You knew them, then?"

"Knew them? Of course. It was part of my job to know all the couples. These were two fine choices—especially for this assignment. They're both very much alike. Strong personalities. Very capable. I had my eye on them right from the start."

"You're crazy. You know that, don't you, Janet? You're crazy." They always said that, too. It didn't matter. Not when she felt this good. Her own clothes were torn; there were welts and clotting strips of blood across her shoulders and chest. That didn't matter, either. All that mattered was the feel of his flesh against her fists as she battered him again.

"William Hemmings is a small man, but you wouldn't know it to look at him. He comes across a lot larger, if you know what I mean. Tremendous vitality, and very single-minded. Knows what he wants and usually gets it. Quite a scrapper, too; he cleaned out a fair-sized bar on his first furlough. The station master told me he had the biggest grin all the while—as if he'd never enjoyed himself more. He's got the technical knowledge, too, although the female half of the team is the expert on that score."

He caught her just at the water's edge, and the one small part of him that was Hemmings-the-thinker reveled at the perfect timing. He pinned her back against the bank and scraped his beard across her breasts, goading her as he would an untamed maverick. Her hands clawed at his face, but his power could not be broken. He hit her face again

and, as she reacted to the pain, he forced himself between her thighs.

"Dr. Janet Woodcock. If ever a woman was made from a statue . . . a Greek goddess of a girl, massive, but perfectly proportioned. Here, I've got a picture somewhere you might like to use." Curtis opened the top desk drawer and removed a folder. "One of the best field technicians in the business. We were incredibly lucky to get her. She left her job, just like that, to get into the program."

"Get hard, Get hard, you bastard, or I'll kill you."

"Please. God, Janet, I'm trying." His fingers clutched at his genitals, squeezing, manipulating. He was beaten and he knew it. It showed in his eyes.

She laughed. He'd get it up, his kind generally did. Secretly they wanted to be treated this way. That was the one thing she detested. They actually liked it. Well, this one was going to get a ride he wouldn't soon forget.

"I have a great deal of affection for them both . . . I was quite pleased to see them selected as a team. In a way it quashed any doubts I might have personally had about computer matching. They seemed so well suited. Size, for example. Bill was always partial to big women, and Jan told me she liked smaller men best."

The power that was Hemmings drove against the woman; firmly, relentlessly, but ever more gently as her struggle subsided. He felt her draw him deeper within her as her motion changed from a buck to a gallop. She moved with his thrusts, her head to one side, mouth half open, eyes shut, arms tight across his back, panting with lust instead of fear. It was always this way. The big ones wanted to fight first, but the more they fought, the more they really wanted it. Always.

"There were other things, too. They're both rather athletically oriented, both outdoors types . . . horseback

riding, that sort of thing . . . and yet, they were both very quiet, very controlled. They seemed to have no problem harnessing their inner tensions. That's very important where they're going. And they both had the same habit of watching your eyes as if they could tell what you were thinking."

She rocked on the cushion of his thighs, feeling the warmth of sensation sweep over her, remembering how he'd cowered as she'd beaten him. His hips were moving with her, the bastard; he was going to come—he was going to spoil it all. Methodically with her rise and fall she began to pound his face. Right and left, up and down, right and left, until she convulsed downward, driving both fists into the center of his face.

"William Hemmings and Dr. Janet Woodcock. The optimum couple? I wouldn't go that far, but for my money I wish they all were matched so well."

BEST INTERESTS

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro

Slowly, Derek spread the mauve color in concentric circles on Melanie's breasts—helpless targets with a rosy bull's eye at the center. To finish the job he drew more circles around her navel and aimed an arrow away from the dark hair that fluffed between her thighs. He knew it was over between them just as he realized that mauve wasn't a very flattering color on her.

He glanced at the Dial glowing in the darkened room like the loving eye of a mother watching over him. The display read:

YOUR APARTMENT HAS BEEN INDIVIDUALLY PROGRAMMED

IT HAS YOUR BEST INTERESTS AT HEART

The Dial was something a man could depend on; not like the unpredictable female lying beside him asleep. Asleep! While the Dial stayed resolutely awake, ministering to him, anticipating his needs, understanding his desires almost before he knew them himself.

He dialed the bed to a more comfortable angle, moving Melanie away from him. The Dial had superimposed a warm golden glow over what was rather a sodden morning. It was that dreadful kind of day, the sort that Derek liked least. It was slightly warm, with a slow drizzle leaking out of the clouds. Days like this, Derek found it hard to think. And the Dial knew it.

Melanie sighed in her sleep and slid into a more relaxed position. Derek decided not to wake her. There was no

reason for her to get up yet. Since he was going to tell her goodbye that evening he might as well let her spend the morning getting a good rest.

Across the room the Dial activated the mirror. Derek propped himself on his elbow and looked at the image the Dial provided for him. In the glass his pudgy body was tall and slim, his movements fascinating and seductive rather than awkward. His lank, mouse-colored hair became blond, his slightly myopic eyes were really quite compelling and of a brilliant blue instead of washed-out hazel. He had seen himself this way for so long that he would not have recognized the shapeless, pale, lazy young man he really was. But he never bothered to look into another mirror.

Since he was the superintendant of the complex of buildings in which he lived, he was never away from the Dials. His title was impressive—Environmental Engineer—and he had a certain prestige along with the loving care of every Dial in the building.

Melanie stirred beside him, making a mess of the bed. She was the kind of sleeper who took all the covers and cocooned them around her, the kind who could work a sheet to the bottom of the bed and keep all the scratchy, old-fashioned blankets up around her neck. That was one of the reasons Derek was tired of her. Even her luxurious Rococo curves did not truly excite him anymore.

He looked away from the Dial, feeling a rush of warmth as he gazed at the display. None of his other mistresses had been able to give him the same sensation of being cared for, of being so very *important.* And now Melanie was becoming exacting and cold. He wriggled closer to the Dial and cleared his throat.

The display lit up promptly:

GOOD MORNING, SIR. THIS UNIT TRUSTS YOU SLEPT WELL.

Derek wished the Dial a hearty good morning and considered breakfast. The Dial anticipated his requests with this display:

THERE IS A STANDARD EGG BREAKFAST #3,

AVAILABLE IMMEDIATELY, OR ANOTHER CAN BE PREPARED TO YOUR ORDER. THIS UNIT WILL DO FRIED, SCRAMBLED, OR POACHED EGGS.

"What about eggs Benedict?" Derek asked, and immediately regretted it.

THIS UNIT IS SORRY TO INFORM YOU THAT THERE ARE 380 TOO MANY CALORIES IN EGGS BENEDICT. IF YOU WILL BE SATISFIED WITH HIGH TEA INSTEAD OF SUPPER, THIS UNIT WILL SERVE THE EGGS BENEDICT YOU REQUESTED, BUT MUST REMIND YOU THAT YOUR EGG LIMIT IS HALF FILLED FOR THIS WEEK AND THIS IS ONLY TUESDAY.

Derek glared. He knew that he should have Breakfast #3, but he snapped, "Never mind. I'll skip breakfast."

THIS UNIT WISHES TO REMIND YOU THAT BREAKFAST IS THE MOST IMPORTANT MEAL OF THE DAY. IT IS IN YOUR BEST INTERESTS TO EAT.

Rubbing his hands over his stubby face, Derek remembered that the Dial was right. It *did* want to take care of him. He sniffed through the chronic nasal sludge of sinusitis.

THIS UNIT HAS MEASURED YOUR BLOOD SUGAR LEVEL AND BODILY NUTRITIONAL DEPLETION. THE EFFECTS OF THREE ORGASMS HAS SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCED YOUR AVAILABLE ENERGY. IN ADDITION TO BREAKFAST #3, THIS UNIT WILL ISSUE THREE VITAPEP CAPSULES.

"Thank you," murmured Derek. He hadn't realized until then how drained he felt. Behind him, Melanie snored gently. Derek had not been aware that women could snore until Melanie had moved in with him. None of his other mistresses snored. He was uncertain if snoring was a fault in women, but he was sure it wasn't a virtue.

The Dial glowed, and on its upper surface a panel slid back and a glass of white liquid rose into view.

GOOD MORNING, SIR. THIS UNIT, IN ACCORDANCE WITH YOUR WISHES AND THE PRACTICE OF GOOD DIETARY HABITS IS BRINGING YOU A MORNING DRINK.

"I thought I ordered coffee. There's a standing program that says coffee with breakfast. A *standing* order."

THIS UNIT REGRETS TO INFORM YOU THAT LARGE QUANTITIES OF COFFEE ARE NOT IN YOUR BEST INTERESTS.

Rather than argue with the Dial, Derek took the glass. He drank the stuff, making a face, but refrained from asking the Dial what nutrients went into it: He had asked that once and the Dial had told him.

"Is that you, Derek?" There was a stirring in the mound of bedclothes. The tone of her question was calculated to annoy, and succeeded. It was a frigidity training technique that seldom failed.

"Yes, darling," he said patiently. He pondered what to do about her, for recently when they made love, she had taken to lying there limply, muttering about shopping lists. He would be glad when the frigidity fad was over. Now he wished there was something he could do that would shock her back to the warm, cuddly thing she had been three months ago.

The display lit up brightly:

THIS UNIT HAS FULL SEXUAL RATINGS FOR THE LAST TWENTY-FOUR HOURS. YOUR PERFORMANCE STANDS AT AN AVERAGE OF 5.88 COMPARED TO A USUAL PERFORMANCE LEVEL OF 8.79. FRUSTRATION QUOTIENT IS NOW 4.93. IT IS IN YOUR BEST INTERESTS TO EXPERIENCE ORGASM WITH A MORE ENTHUSIASTIC PARTNER.

Derek stared at the Dial. Always before when he received his sexual ratings, the Dial had waited until his partner was gone. He said, "Can't it wait?"

There was a clucking sound as the display changed:

THIS UNIT HAS DETERMINED THAT IT IS IN YOUR BEST INTERESTS TO HAVE THIS KNOWL-

EDGE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE, SO THAT YOU MAY REMEDY THE PROBLEM QUICKLY.

Derek was still thinking about this when Melanie asked from her side of the bed, "When do you leave?" She didn't even smile.

"Oh, a couple of hours. No *rush*, Melanie."

"Good. You can fix the Dial for me. It hasn't been doing anything I program it to do." She sulked, and it wasn't very pretty. "You'd think it has something against me."

He yawned. "Probably just some trouble in the programming. Nothing to *worry* about; it can't be serious. I'll take care of it this evening." The time Derek spent on his own apartment was not considered part of his job, he was paid for maintaining the other units in the complex. "If it's still giving you trouble, I'll take care of it."

Now Melanie pouted. "The other evening when we had those friends of yours over, I dialed a tropical veranda and it was all chilly and none of the flowers were right. And the food tasted like paste!"

"I know you were upset. But it turned *out* okay, didn't it? We just got rid of the veranda and did a standard interior—don't forget how hard it is to get a full exterior at heavy power-use times. Everyone wants dinner, and the building can't . . . "

"Go ahead," she sniffed. "Defend it. Sure, it works fine for you. It's me it won't work for."

With a click and a whirr the Dial came to life again:

THIS UNIT WISHES TO INFORM YOU THAT BREAKFAST IS READY. FOR MAXIMUM BENEFIT IT SHOULD BE EATEN WHILE HOT.

Melanie screamed and threw a pillow at the Dial. "You bitch!"

There was his mistress lying in bed, Derek thought, swathed to her neck in sheets, and there he was drinking ersatz milk while a machine issued orders. Something had to be done.

"Melanie," he began, edging a little closer to her, "*maybe* you'd better stop at the therapy station this morning. You aren't acting like yourself, letting the Dial

upset you." He inched closer. "You aren't using the Dial as a willing servant, so that you're free to do those creative things only human beings . . . "

IT IS NOW TWO MINUTES SINCE YOU WERE CALLED TO BREAKFAST, announced the Dial.

"See?" she demanded, thrusting her hand toward the Dial display. "It won't leave us alone. It's always butting in!"

"We could ignore it," he suggested hopefully, reaching for her.

She leaped from the bed. "I know what you want—you want to smother me with your sexual ruttings. It's disgusting."

It was sad, remembering how much fun she had been at first. Now she was little more than a shrew.

THIS UNIT INFORMS YOU THAT IT CANNOT BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE NUTRITIONAL CONTENT OF THE MEAL AFTER THREE MORE MINUTES.

Derek was almost angry. "Wait a bit and fix us another."

ACCORDING TO CODE 4-88371A, PARAGRAPH 134-D, THE MISUSE OF FOODSTUFFS IS A MISDEMEANOR PUNISHABLE BY FINE OR TWO DAYS WITHOUT MACHINE SUPPORT.

Melanie burrowed into the blankets, saying scornfully, "You let yourself be ordered about by metal and plastic."

"But, Melanie . . . " He faltered. "All right. Maybe there *is* a foul-up in the circuits somewhere. All you have to do is open that panel and see if the three screws are in a straight line. Honestly, that's all there is to it." He opened the panel and showed Melanie the three screws, all lined up. "I've made a few modifications on the unit, of course," he added modestly. "It's one of the few advantages of working on the Dials—I can experiment on my own."

THIS UNIT MUST INSIST THAT YOU EAT YOUR BREAKFAST.

"All right." Derek got to his feet. "It really does *care*, Melanie. All it wants is what's good for me." He saw the

weak but implacable defiance in the set of her chin. "Breakfast time. Do you want to join me, or would you rather . . . " He held out his hand on the off-chance that she might take it.

She ignored him. "I'll put on my robe."

He reached back to the bed, grabbed the robe, and tossed it to her. "You might get dressed."

"I haven't bathed. I'm not going to put clothes on over this!" She put her hand to the bull's eyes.

"I'll wait a few minutes while . . . "

The Dial interrupted: IN A FEW MINUTES, THE VALUE OF BREAKFAST WILL HAVE DECREASED TOO MUCH, AND WILL BE COLD, BESIDES.

Derek glared at Melanie. The morning and breakfast were both being ruined by that woman. "I'll help scrub," he said as he realized she would be certain to misunderstand him.

"Surely I have the right to privacy?" Her arched brows went up and she remained that way, one hand to her breasts and an expression of haughty shock on her face until Derek was out of the room.

The creamed bacon and eggs tasted like sulphur and the tea seemed to be squeezed from old blotters. There were, in addition to the eggs, two small slices of watery and tasteless fruit which the Dial assured Derek were chock full of the required nutrients.

He was almost finished with the last, hard piece of toast when Melanie came into the eating area. She was still in her robe and her expression had not improved. Derek let her order her food for herself, wincing as the Dial informed her that there were too many fats in corned beef hash for her to have it twice in one week. Hoping to distract her and to steady her temper, Derek asked, "What about work today? What's going on at your office?"

"I'm going to stay home today," Melanie informed him as she stared at the gray mass of reconstituted protein that slid onto the table in front of her.

THIS UNIT REMINDS YOU THAT THE PENALTY FOR ABSENTEEISM IS TEN DAYS OF CONTINUOUS WORK AND A FINE IN THE AMOUNT OF THE VALUE OF THAT WORK. FULL COOPERATION OF ALL MEMBERS OF SOCIETY IS ESSENTIAL IF TRUE DEMOCRACY IS TO BE ACHIEVED. CONSULT THE LEGISLATIVE TAPES FOR PERTINENT LAWS.

"It's none of your business!" she yelled at the machine, and threw the contents of her bowl at the screen.

MALICIOUS DAMAGE OF A DIAL IS A MISDEMENEAOR, DELIBERATE MISUSE OF A DIAL IS A FELONY. SEE HOUSING CODE SECTION 445-P-1A, ALSO THE LEGISLATIVE TAPES FOR LAWS COVERING ANTI-SOCIAL ACTS AND VANDALISM.

"It hates me!" Melanie screamed. "It wants to punish me!" Her eyes grew bright and her fingers began to twist the lapel of her robe. "Wait a minute . . . it isn't me, is it? It's you, Derek. This is your unit. You made all those improvements in it, didn't you? It doesn't want to share you with anyone! It's jealous! It wants you all to itself!"

Derek looked at Melanie in some alarm. Then he turned to the Dial. "Notify the Medical Center in this complex. Melanie isn't quite herself today."

"I'm fine!" she insisted in an hysterical shriek. "It's the Dial that's all wrong!"

"Nonsense!" Derek snapped. "It's a machine, Melanie, a machine whose sole purpose is to make our lives fuller and better. It's just absurd to think that a Dial can do anything we don't want it to. It has our best interests at heart. That's why everyone has them"

"Oh dear, oh dear," Melanie wailed, well into her outburst now and secretly enjoying it. "Everyone has them. Of course they do. And everyone believes that they control the Dials, but it's the other way around." She began to sob.

Another bowl of reconstituted protein slid toward her, along with a suspicious-looking brown pill.

SUPPLEMENTAL VITAMINS, the Dial explained.

SUCH OUTBURSTS LEAD TO MINOR VITAMIN DEFICIENCIES.

Melanie put her head on the table and wept.

A prescription arrived a few minutes later, and Derek wearily guided Melanie back to the bedroom, trying to think of something to say that would reassure her without sounding wholly inane.

"I won't, I won't, Don't." Melanie thrashed and turned her head from side to side to avoid the magenta syrup that Derek held out to her in a specially provided plastic spoon. "It's all wrong!" Her face was rigid and her voice was as unpleasant and penetrating as the whine of a buzz-saw.

IT IS NECESSARY THAT YOU TAKE THIS PREPARATION IN ORDER TO REGAIN YOUR EQUILIBRIUM AND HEALTH. IT IS NOT BENEFICIAL TO YOUR SYSTEM TO BEHAVE IN THIS WAY. YOU WILL HARM YOURSELF IF YOU CONTINUE TO DO SO. THE MEDICATION PROVIDED WILL CALM YOU AND HELP YOU TO RECOVER. FOR YOUR OWN GOOD, THIS UNIT MUST URGE YOU TO TAKE IT.

"Melanie," Derek said with an exasperated sigh. "It's right. You're *not* acting rationally. Just drink this down and you'll be fine in a couple of hours." As he forced the prescribed and vile-smelling medication to her obstinately tightened lips, he pleaded with her. "Come *on*, Melanie. Just one sip and it's done."

She shook her head vigorously and screwed up her face, as if shutting every possible orifice he might want to use for the medication.

THIS UNIT SUGGESTS THAT YOU HOLD HER NOSE. SHE WILL HAVE TO BREATH THROUGH HER MOUTH AND YOU MAY THEN ADMINISTER THE PRESCRIPTION.

Derek nodded dubiously and did as the Dial suggested. Melanie twisted and turned a magnificent plum color before she capitulated and allowed Derek to tip the nauseating stuff down her throat.

THE PRESCRIPTION WILL REQUIRE APPROXI-

MATELY 7.5 MINUTES TO BECOME EFFECTIVE.

"Will you be okay, Melanie?" Derek asked with a solicitude he did not really feel.

"I hate you," she answered.

THIS UNIT MUST REMIND YOU OF THE TIME. YOU MUST LEAVE WITHIN THE NEXT 3 MINUTES OR YOU WILL BE LATE TO WORK. THE PENALTY FOR TARDINESS IS OUTLINED IN LEGISLATIVE CODE GGR-12982AP-3T11. A COMPLETE SCHEDULE OF MONETARY FINES ARE OUTLINED IN UNION MANUEL 17-44-B AND C.

"I've got to go," Derek said hurriedly. "Don't worry about anything, Melanie," he said from the doorway. "The Dial will take care of you."

OF COURSE.

"Oh, thanks," Derek said to the Dial as he hurried to complete primary hygiene. He dressed quickly and neatly, choosing a conservative red and orange stripe-along and a simple chartreuse neckscarf. Only major executives were entitled to wear the impressive outfits of organic textiles, and Derek cherished in his heart the wish that one day he, too, would have the soft tartan plaids and magnificent woolen houndstooth jackets that were the privilege of the highest level management.

Going back through the bedroom, Derek leaned over the drowsy Melanie and said, "I'm going to work now, Melanie. I'll be back at the usual time."

YOU'RE 85 SECONDS LATE.

"I'll walk fast," Derek said to the Dial. He turned back to Melanie, hoping for some response, but there was none. She gazed at the landscape the Dial had conjured on the far wall. Her breath came slowly, easily, and he could see the ghosts of the circles he had drawn on her breasts and stomach, smeared and useless now. He cursed gently and quietly so that he would not disturb her.

LEAVE HER TO THIS UNIT.

Derek was delighted to obey.

When Melanie awoke from her drugged slumber some time later, the apartment was shadowed and dark. The windows did nothing to disguise the soupy weather outside; in fact, they enchanced the depressing effect by giving the walls the same melancholy tinge. Melanie sat for some time, staring out at the wet and the clouds as she tried to gather her thoughts. She remembered the morning's outburst as if it had happened to someone else, a long time ago. Her tongue felt furry.

A little later she rose from the bed and found the mirror. Yes, the circles were still there, blurred and smeary now, but definitely there. She touched one faded mauve line, frowning.

THIS UNIT ADVISES YOU TO BATHE. FOR MOST EFFICIENT REMOVAL OF THE SUBSTANCE ON YOUR SKIN, THIS UNIT RECOMMENDS CLEANING CONCENTRATE 6-B.

Melanie sighed. The Dial was right, of course. The sooner she got the marks off, the better she would feel. She did not want to dwell on Derek's reasons for drawing the circles. If only her head were clearer, it would be easier to think.

She bathed in sour-smelling water. The cleaning concentrate, though it did an admirable job of removing the circles, smelled slightly fishy and left a chalky scum floating on the water. Her face felt tightened when she washed it, and the tepid water was not warm enough to tempt her to linger. The towel that dried her was unpleasantly scratchy, her clothes were wrinkled and their colors washed-out. A grayish haze hung over the mirror, making Melanie look even more haggard and spent than she was.

"Impossible," she said to the Dial. "You're being horrid!"

THIS UNIT HAS HIS BEST INTERESTS AT HEART.

"You don't have a heart!" Melanie shrieked at it, then forced herself to speak calmly. Another such outburst and there would be a few more hours of drugged sleep to look

forward to. "I didn't mean that," she said evenly. "I realize that you have been programmed to put the interests of Derek first in your consideration. I suppose I might be jealous of him, since my unit is an old 385 model, and there's no way I can get a newer one for at least a year.

THAT IS INCONVENIENT, the Dial responded with what in a human being would have been smugness.

Choking back a sharp retort, Melanie looked around the bedroom. "I'm surprised that you've dimmed the walls. Derek doesn't like drab colors."

DEREK ISN'T HERE, the Dial pointed out.

"But if he should return unexpectedly?" Melanie suggested slyly, thinking that there were few ways she could get back at the machine.

The walls brightened and a flower-scented breeze wafted through the room.

"Oh! You're impossible!" Melanie waited for the Dial to display another retort, but it remained obstinately blank, and after a time, Melanie wandered into the sitting room.

THIS UNIT AWAITS INSTRUCTIONS.

The announcement startled Melanie. Then she pulled herself together. Perhaps the Dial had reconsidered its attitude. It wasn't in Derek's best interests to be quarreling all morning.

THIS UNIT REMINDS YOU THAT YOU HAVE LESS THAN 58 MINUTES TO PREPARE FOR DEREK'S ARRIVAL. HE RETURNS FROM WORK EACH DAY AT 3:27 P.M.

Melanie made an effort to think of all the things Derek had said he liked. It would be nice for him to come home to a special treat. It would show him that she was no longer upset with him, and that she wanted things to go well between them. A new setting would be a delightful way to begin their making up.

She was very explicit with the Dial. She knew that the garden maze and kiosk setting were far too advanced for her. The demands of all those hedges and flowers were daunting, but she decided to do her best. If she couldn't

handle the maze, the kiosk and lawn would be a good compromise.

The Dial obeyed her, transforming the sponge chairs into rigid rattan, curliqued with Victorian determination. Next, the windows were taken care of. She decided that the setting should be rather more exotic, and so the view was of a sun-bruised spit of land reaching out into the sinuous bend of a river. Melanie had some vague mental picture in her mind of India in the days of the Raj, the proper British tea and crumpets juxtaposed with the mysterious, eternal soul of the East. She wished she knew how to program the Dial to make a turban for Derek.

The light had altered to leaf-filtered green. Melanie stood back and studied the effect. Derek, she decided, would be pleased.

THIS UNIT AWAITS FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS.

Scowling with concentration, Melanie went back to the Dial This was much more difficult than she had thought. After a difficult moment, she selected the bird calls and other sounds, including a low, insect-like drone. Next she added a lazy wind redolent with spices and tropical flowers. But here she ran afoul of the Dial, which insisted on adding hickory smoke as well.

"But there isn't any hickory smoke in the jungle," Melanie objected, almost certain she was right.

THIS UNIT MUST REMIND YOU THAT HICKORY SMOKE IS HIS FAVORITE SMELL.

Melanie shrugged. It was only one little detail, and might not be important. What mattered was that Derek liked it. She would overlook this opposition to her will. Feeling more confident, she dialed the rest of the information and was delighted to see how avidly the machine accepted her instructions.

The far wall, which had been a fjord-blue, turned to a deep jungle green, and the air was filled with a somnambulant haze. The temperature soared reassuringly. The floor sprouted several inches of creepers and grass. Croquet hoops and balls appeared on the small patch of lawn.

Melanie was deeply satisfied as she lounged in the high-backed rattan rocker. This was going to be a great success, she was certain.

Now vines were twisting down from the ceiling, coiling around her affectionately as they sought the ground. She giggled as one of them seemed to tweak her shoulder. It wasn't quite what she had in mind, but it was fun. The air was heavier, more humid. It was perfect, just perfect.

Not quite perfect.

There was an unfortunate odor coming through the hickory, a flavor of rotting seaweed spiced with old eggs. This overwhelmed even the heavy perfume of the gardenias. Melanie reached out for the Dial to adjust the olfactory scale, hoping to keep the stench from becoming unbearable.

The sky—for it was now more sky than ceiling—grew darker and took on a malignant orange tinge. There was a pall over the jungle, menacing. Alarmed, Melanie scrambled out of the chair and reached for the cancel lever, when her foot slipped in the ooze.

Ooze?

What was the matter with the Dial, anyway? In the heat, fear made her cold, settling like a lump of ice at the base of her spine. She tried to tell herself that this was just an illusion conjured by the Dial, and that it had turned out badly because she had been too ambitious in the effect she had tried to achieve. Panic seized her. Nothing—nothing could convince her that she had done this on her own. She didn't know enough about the operation of the Dial to make so thorough a change of scene. And Derek said he had made modifications on this unit. Certainly, she had overstepped herself. She tried to move nearer the Dial, but by then she was mired in quicksand. It was then that she saw the yawning gap in the floor, like the maw of a tiger, or the entrance to Hell. Or a waste chute. Melanie was still laughing hysterically when the floor closed over her, making a noise curiously reminiscent of a kiss, or, possibly, smacking lips.

Some little time later, there was a loud, mechanical belch.

"Melanie?" Derek stood in the middle of the sitting room. The fjord-blue walls and ceiling beamed down at him, a brisk, salt-laden breeze ruffled his hair. The sponge chairs turned toward him invitingly. It was 3:28 p.m.

Into the bedroom: "Melanie?"

"Melanie!" in the eating area.

At last, he went to the Dial. "All *right*," he demanded. "Where is she?"

THIS UNIT MUST INFORM YOU THAT SHE IS GONE.

"Gone where?"

THIS UNIT DIRECTED HER TO THE PROTEIN RECLAMATION CENTER.

There was a long, guilty pause.

THIS UNIT ATE HER. IT WAS IN YOUR BEST INTERESTS.

Derek smiled as he gave the Dial a reassuring pat. "That makes three," he said.

IT MUST BE BY HIS DEATH

Alan Ryan

White-shattered glass splintered around him like exploding diamonds.

David had never fired a gun before, and when he finally managed to squeeze the trigger, remembering to aim the thing as well as he could at the same time, the shock almost knocked him over backward. There had been no way even to know if the gun would fire when he pulled the trigger. All he knew for sure was that the gun was loaded—he had done that himself—and that the weapon hadn't been fired for at least a hundred years. For all he knew, it might have exploded in his face as soon as he touched it. He knew nothing about such weapons. Nobody did anymore. The gun must have lain there, wrapped in a thick wad of greased cloths in the ruins of the old shop, for a whole century.

Spinning backward from the recoil of the shot, his shoulder hit the plate-glass window, itself, like the gun, a rarity in these days. The hand holding the gun flew behind him to seek support, to cushion the impact, and the black barrel of the gun cracked against the glass. Radiation from the bombs, plus the ravages of time, affected everything in different ways, and there was no telling how anything would react for sure. A building that had survived the actual blasts and remained standing for a century afterward might crumble to dust at the slamming of a door. The plate-glass of the window must have turned brittle; at the touch of the gun it shattered into glittering

needles all around him.

He had missed, of course. He and the others had discussed it for a long time, ever since they found the gun, and finally agreed it would be worth an attempt. He had missed but, yes, it had been worth the try. It might have worked.

He turned and ran.

The breath tore at his throat. His sandals, never intended for running, threatened to come off his feet and he stumbled but kept on running. Wrecks of buildings—skyscrapers, they had been called, though it was hard to imagine now—flashed past him. He tried to run even faster past the open spots where, after a century, buildings still lay in heaps of rubble as they had fallen.

Behind him he heard yelling that sounded vicious, hungry, terrible, filled with the bloodthirsty intensity of fright. He ran faster, gasping, arms flailing the air, feet pounding, until the pursuers—even less used to running than he was—finally fell behind and were silent. He kept running, tears of pain and fear streaming down his face, until he reached the shelter near the water and anxious hands reached for him to take him in and comfort him.

The bishop could not stay still. He paced rapidly from one end of the room to the other, back and forth, back and forth, like a wild animal kept from its prey. In an age of thin and hungry people, the bishop's thick, stocky figure was always imposing. Now, his face red with anger, his hands clenched tightly into hard fists, he frightened even more than usual those around him who were accustomed already to fear.

"How did he get so close?" The bishop's voice was low. It would have been less threatening if he had roared.

"There's no telling, Excellency, no telling. The . . . "

"Where did he come from?"

"The area around the cathedral is open, Excellency. He could have come from any direction." Philip, the bishop's first assistant, knew he was talking too rapidly. He was

sweating. Each time the bishop turned away in his interminable pacing, Philip quickly wiped a hand across his dripping forehead.

The bishop paused, his back turned to Philip. He spoke without turning around, only cocked his head toward one shoulder. Philip wiped his forehead again.

"Philip," the bishop said quietly, "you have been with me how long?"

"Almost ten years, Excellency."

"Almost ten years. Yes. And in that time, how many attempts have been made on my life?"

"None that I know of, Excellency."

"I can't hear you, Philip." There was a new tension in the bishop's voice that threatened to erupt at any moment.

"None. Excellency."

"None. Until now. Now, someone, after all these years, has attempted to murder me. Me!" The bishop turned around slowly to face Philip. Without knowing why he was doing it, Philip found himself nodding his head vigorously.

"Perhaps your faith weakens, my Philip, perhaps it weakens. I must strengthen it for you."

"Yes, yes, Excellency, yes."

"My life is your life, my Philip. That should always be foremost in your thoughts. Without me, you are lost, your soul is lost. This is the way God intends it. Now, the ways of God are not always known clearly by men, but this we know, this God has made clear. He made it clear, it is true, in a terrible way, long ago, before either of us came into this world of ruins. But He made it clear, indeed. He sent His terrible anger into the world by driving men mad, mad enough to destroy their world with bombs. The world was left thereafter in ruins, Philip. Ruins."

"Yes, Excellency."

"You know, my Philip, that the Church alone survived. And it is the Church, the Church Incarnate, that has been appointed to rule the world now, to save the world. Do you know that, Philip?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"Do you believe that, Philip?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"Does your faith remain strong in you, my Philip? Is your faith strong enough to enable you to serve me, to serve your Church, to serve our great mission in this life? Is it great enough to help you in these heavy duties, in this task of saving the world from its own ignorance? Do you still believe yourself worthy enough, strong enough, to stand next to me in ruling men's lives, in leading them on the path to salvation, in saving and ruling their bodies as well as their souls, in shaping their lives as well as their deaths? Are you strong enough for that, my Philip? Are you? Are you?"

Philip, nodding, remained silent. No words seemed adequate to express to the bishop his conviction that he was strong enough to face the tasks of his office. Philip's predecessor had not been strong enough. *Requiescat in pace.*

"Philip, my Philip. Remember our mission. Keep it before you at all times. Our mission is to preserve our Church, Philip, to preserve ourselves, and by preserving ourselves, to preserve all of mankind. The little that is left of it. The task, since the Destruction, has fallen to us. To me. Remember that, Philip."

The bishop still had not raised his voice, and Philip just managed to speak.

"Yes, Excellency," he said.

"Good, Philip," the bishop said. "I am pleased." He turned and walked toward the door. "The man must have followers," he said, almost casually. "They must all die." He paused in the doorway. "This cannot be forgiven."

The guards followed him out.

Philip did not move until the bishop's heavy footsteps died away in the corridor. "Yes, Excellency," he murmured softly, "yes, Excellency."

David had wanted to give up his portion of the soup for a sick child, but the child's mother, with tears in her eyes,

had refused to let him.

"You need your strength," she had said. The others, nodding solemnly, had agreed. The child was not fatally ill, they said, it would survive. But if David lacked strength for what he had to do, none of them, perhaps, would have to worry about soup. Or life.

When the meal was dished out and passed around in broken pieces of crockery, David thought his portion seemed greater than others. He said nothing. Perhaps they were right. A moment of weakness could mean much more than just his death, now that they were so close to the end. At last.

The bishop had to die.

They had been so long coming to that conclusion, had fought the idea so bitterly in their hearts, had been repulsed by it. The act of murder, some had said, would make them no better, themselves, than the bishop. It would bring them down to his level. But finally, the small group that had formed around David, with him as acknowledged leader, had reached the conclusion that there was no other answer. For a hundred years, since the Destruction, the Church had ruled men's minds and lives. It was inevitable that it should happen so. In a world turned suddenly to flaming chaos, it was natural that the survivors turn to the one stable force that outlived the Destruction. In a world without government, without leadership, the Church had remained.

There had been a period of confusion, of madness. Then a leader had emerged, here, in this city, where—all were satisfied it was a miracle and a sign from God—the cathedral had survived the Destruction that leveled so much all around it. He had been a good man, so the stories told. And the man after him likewise had been a good man. Then there had been another period, years long, of more confusion, more madness. And another leader, this time a man who preached a gospel of fear, strength, order, order imposed by the Church for the general good of all. And then another such man. And then this man, Francis, who presided from the cathedral with an iron rule, an iron

hand, who grew fat as others starved, whose words could spell death and whose wish could spell worship.

The bishop had to die.

David finished his meal and wiped out the bowl with a handful of gritty sand. He stood and went outside. It was almost evening. The guard posted across what had once been a street nodded and waved at him. It was safe.

David walked slowly around the shelter toward the water. He had to pick his steps carefully because the concrete beneath his feet was broken and shattered in places. He made his way slowly to the edge and looked down at the water. It was brown and slimy. Even when it was boiled, almost boiled away, it still tasted of death and things burned long ago. Across the river and up to his right, he could just make out the line of high cliffs, broken in places by deep V-shaped gashes. He had often tried but never succeeded in imagining the true horror of the Destruction.

He was startled by a footstep behind him.

"Just a few words, David. And a question."

William lowered himself to the concrete beside David. He was the oldest of the group and now his eyes were red and his face haggard. David had noticed that his hands had begun to tremble slightly of late.

They sat in silence for some minutes before William spoke.

"It must be soon. Tomorrow," William said.

"Yes," David said. "Tomorrow. If it is not tomorrow, there will be no further chance. He'll be guarded, inside the cathedral, even more than he is now. I know that."

"Not the gun. It was worth the attempt, I know, and I agreed to it with the rest, but we know now it won't work."

David nodded. He reached inside his robe and brought out a shining blade. Both men looked at it, as if it were already coated with the bishop's blood.

"Yes," William said. His voice was barely audible.

They sat in silence again.

"The question is this," William said at last.

It was almost dark now. David put the knife away.

"Are you satisfied in your mind that this is the right thing?"

David exhaled a long breath before answering. "William, I've taken this mission on myself. Let it be on my head. And on my soul."

"David . . . "

"Yes, I know. Guilt like this is not a solitary thing. All right, then, it's not mine alone. But I came and spoke to you. You spoke to others, and they went and whispered to others still. But I spoke first, William. I spoke first and claimed the mission as my own. I needed help, it's true, and mostly I needed the support of others, but the first guilt is mine."

He looked down at his dry and cracked hands in the fading light.

"I believe in this, William." Despite himself, he shuddered and his voice sank even lower. "I believe that only through this man's death can other men live. Maybe I'm mad. Or maybe I've been appointed to do the will of God. I'll know that only when I reach my own death. Until then, I have to do what I think is right."

His voice had dropped to a whisper. "It's the only thing," he said. He shook his head. "There's no other way."

William looked down at the dark, sluggish water. Out of the corner of his eye he tried to see David's face in the gray light.

There was a tremor in William's voice when he spoke. "Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," David said. "At the Feast."

The procession for the Feast of Death was a long and elaborate one. Preparations had been in progress for weeks. The bishop's messengers had traveled far beyond the city to remind, to exhort, all those capable of making the journey to come to the cathedral. The bishop, their leader in all things, would bless them personally, the messengers said.

The city was crowded. Small bands of men and women were still straggling toward the cathedral, past the ruins of buildings whose names they had never known. They were not a mob; they were too few and too weak to be a mob. But all who were able had come to the city for a glimpse of Francis. It was expected.

The procession formed at the rear of the cathedral, in the wide space behind the altar. Servants helped the bishop don the complicated robes of his office. This was the only time, these two days of the Feast of Death, when he appeared before his people, outside the walls of the cathedral; and it was necessary to show them his true splendor. It would encourage them in obedience.

Philip, sweating, hurried up and down the line, snapping orders at anyone who moved too slowly. A line of boys, acolytes, each carrying a tall golden crucifix in honor of the Feast of Death, quickly jumped into place. Behind them, the priests of the cathedral paired off into a double line. There was little talking. A space was left behind them for Philip to walk. It was tradition. Philip wondered if he would actually be able to walk in the procession, after all; the year before he had had to walk beside the procession, at Francis' last-minute command, to assist in keeping order. Francis would walk at the end of the procession, in the place of honor. Behind him, twelve guards in black-hooded gowns (black for the Feast of Death) would keep an eye on the worshippers.

"Philip!"

The bishop was dressed. He had taken his place in the procession.

"We are ready to show ourselves to our people. Begin!"

Philip gave the signal, and the line began moving. He hesitated, tried to catch the bishop's eye, but failed. The bishop walked past him without turning his head. Philip waited until the guards had passed, then took a place immediately behind them. There was nowhere else for him to walk.

The procession moved around the altar and down the wide central aisle toward the great doors at the front of the

cathedral. In the pews the bishop's servants knelt, their eyes wide with respect and fear.

Out through the doors the procession moved, then down the steps to the level ground, and turned to the left. Slowly, it moved around the corner of the building. It would circle the building before returning to the front doors and ascending the steps again. Then the people, now gathered at the front to watch, would follow it inside for the ceremony.

The crowd pressed forward as the bishop emerged into the sunlight and slowly descended the stone steps. Indeed, it was a miracle that the cathedral had escaped the Destruction of a hundred years earlier. Everyone could see that now. They pressed together as the bishop approached, but then edged back as he drew near. Four of the guards behind him whispered together, then trotted ahead to clear the way. No one should come too close.

It took some minutes to circle the cathedral. Most of the crowd moved along at the pace of the procession but left a respectful distance between themselves and the bishop. As he neared the steps again to return into the front entrance, they edged in closer again, for a last glimpse of him in the daylight.

The bishop went up three steps, stopped, and turned around. He was smiling. He raised his arms high to bless the crowd.

The figure flashed past the guards, doubled over. Only a few in the crowd saw the knife gleam in the sun before it sank into the bishop's purple robes. Someone yelled. A strangled cry came from the bishop's throat. A fountain of blood arced through the air. His arms remained stretched upward, fingers grasping frantically at nothing. The knife flashed again. The bishop's body crumpled on the steps in a red and purple heap.

It was midnight.

Philip had never imagined this. It was almost too much to understand all at once. Alone at last after the day of

horror—more alone than he had been in ten years—he walked slowly through the empty cathedral to the front doors. The weather was hot and humid. He felt faint as he emerged into the open air.

With a word, he dismissed the guard who stood just outside the door. The guard hesitated, looked doubtful.

"It will be all right," Philip said. "Do not worry for my safety. There will be no more murders."

The guard looked into his eyes for a moment, then said, "Yes, Excellency." He raised a hand and touched Philip lightly on the shoulder, then turned away and entered the cathedral.

Philip lowered himself wearily to the top step and thought about the guard's words and his gesture. In ten years, Philip had not once touched Francis. Francis, who was now dead, whose body was already decaying in a box beneath the great altar. Francis, who he had always feared. Francis, whom he had always wished . . .

No! His mind refused to follow that thought. It was too horrible, too shameful. And too frightening. It was the future now that had to be thought about. And in so many ways that thought was no more pleasant. Philip was not at all sure he had the strength of a leader.

He stood up slowly, conscious of the aching tiredness of his body. The night was very still all around him, no sounds, no movement. Somewhere out there in the darkness of the city was a murderer. Truly, the ways of God were not always clear or easy to accept. But somehow, Philip knew, without even thinking the thought, that his own life was safe. The only danger he faced from now on would be the danger that every man faced in his life, the danger from himself.

Unconsciously, from long habit, he raised his hand to wipe his forehead. It was unnecessary; his fingers came away dry.

Standing now, he squinted into the pale moonlight and the jumbled shadows of ruined buildings in a ruined world. He closed his eyes, then opened them again. He thought he saw a figure move in the darkness, but there

was no way to be sure. He stood for a moment, wondering, then slowly raised his right arm in a benediction. His lips felt dry as he whispered the ancient words into the night.

"Ego te absolvo . . . "

Then he turned and swung wide the heavy door of the cathedral.

The guard was waiting just inside. He jumped as the door swung open.

"I thought . . . just . . . I'm sorry, Excellency!"

"It's all right," Philip said. He remembered how the man had touched his shoulder a few minutes ago, in a gesture for which the words no longer existed. "It's all right." He reached out, touched the man's arm gently. "It's all right," he said again, "it's all right, it's all right."

THE IMPERFECT LOVER

Thomas F. Monteleone

Varak stood in the darkness of Yrrga Palace corridor, watching the six-legged horror scuttle toward him.

Be ready for him, said a female voice in his mind. *He knows you're there!*

There was no time to reply. Varak concentrated on the steady, confident advance of the Nanjha Guard. The creature was an insectoid which ran along the tiled floor on its thorax and abdominal legs; evolution had changed the forelimbs into a grasping tool (and weapon). It stared at Varak through the multi-facets of its bulging eyes, slowly raising its vorticer, aiming it at the Assassin's chest.

Because he was still too far from the center of the palace, there could be no noise. He could not use his heater. Instinctively, he sprang to the left, allowing the years of Guild training to take over. He clicked a razor-like Skorn blade from his weapons gauntlet, rolled toward the startled Nanjha Guard before he could react, and leaped into him. Varak's arm moved quicker than the multi-faceted eye could follow. In one sweeping arc, the alien-fashioned blade cut cleanly through the Nanjha's fore-limbs, its vorticer clattering to the tiles. Before the Guard could scuttle back, away from its insane attacker, Varak swung his blade arm again. So perfectly did he sever the head from the thorax that it remained balanced for an instant atop the staggering Nanjha's body. Then the angle changed, a leg collapsed, and the insectoid head fell to the tiles, its eyes unseeing, its mandibles clacking in death.

After dragging the body into an alcove, Varak sub-vocalized to Delphi Twenty. "Do you hear anybody else?"

A pause. Then: *There is no other sound. You are safe as long as you keep moving. You are still in the First Perimeter.* He could detect the concern in the feminine voice—a concern which overrode any sense of duty.

"Continue maximum sens-amp scanning. I'm moving in."

Varak did not actually speak these words. Rather, he *thought* about speaking them, allowing the muscles in his larynx to make the proper movements, but not expelling enough air to make a sound. Small sensors implanted in his throat transmitted the muscular constrictions to Delphi Twenty—a station somewhere beyond the Veil Nebula—where Varak's monitor translated the signal into spoken words.

In turn, the monitor at Delphi spoke to Varak through micro-circuit hook-ups embedded in his cerebral cortex. Varak's brain—as were all Guild Assassins—was wired for peak efficiency. Myo-electric hooks in his limbic system and the R-complex also provided a complete and total symbiosis with Varak and his monitor. If two persons could ever be considered as one, Varak and his monitor, in their unique relationship, were one.

Varak's monitor was named Treeva. Light years away from him, even when he trained between assignments on the Guild homeworld, Varak never saw her . . . in the flesh, that is. And yet, he knew her more thoroughly than diamond wedding anniversary celibrants because of their unique electronic symbiosis.

You must advance. Time grows short and the Adjudicator will be holding court.

He smiled and walked through the palace, entering a corridor which led to the Second Perimeter. "Are you getting impatient for my pleasures? Do not worry, my sweet one. This job is a piece of cake."

I'll settle for a piece of you, my Varak. Hurry now! Footsteps approach.

"Which direction?"

Your left.

"They come to check on their comrade. I will be long past them."

He reached the end of the corridor and entered the Second Perimeter, and checked a schematic which he keyed up on a small wrist-screen. After running a systems check on his armor and weapons, Varak continued deeper into the heart of the palace. He dispatched three additional Nanjhas in the Second Perimeter before entering the palace center. It was only a matter of minutes before he would be within the Adjudicator's private chambers.

It was odd, though, that anyone would want the Principal of a small, primitive world eliminated. Yrrga represented no threat to galactic politics or economics. Yet, a petition had been placed before the Guild for the Adjudicator of Yrrga to be assassinated.

So be it, thought Varak.

Seven more Nanjha fell before his shadow—some vaporized into less than memories, others reduced to severed, writhing parts. No matter. All were dead. He burned through the final wall which separated him from the Yrrga leader, stepped through the smoking archway, and confronted the hideous insectoid as it prepared to don a set of silver-green ceremonial robes.

"That won't be necessary," said Varak. "My visit is informal, and quite brief."

The Adjudicator reared up on his abdominal legs, mandible clicking and antennae twitching wildly. "What do you want here?" it clacked.

"Proof of your death. At my hand, of course."

"You are from the Guild?" asked the insectoid, backing away, its movements quick and not fully coordinated.

Varak exhaled and sighed as if further conversation bored him. "Yes, I'm afraid so. And now, my friend, I must say goodbye . . . " He raised his right arm and flicked a heat weapon out of his armored gauntlet.

"No! Please! I'll double their offer! Anything you wish . . . Just let me—!"

Varak activated the weapon, directing its white-hot beam with the skill of a surgeon. The insectoid's body exploded into boiling mist, the ceremonial robes wisping into instant ash. Varak advanced to the dressing table and picked up the Adjudicator's ring—symbol of absolute authority on Yrrga which was worn on the despot's left antennae. Now it rested within a sealed compartment in his armor—Varak's proof of a completed contract.

Leaving the chamber, he prepared for the most expedient exit, now that there was no need for secrecy. Alarms would be sounding and he would be found out. He found himself in an antechamber which seemed to lack the formalinammonia odors of the Yrrga. There was something familiar about the smell—but he could not place it.

Excellent, my love! Now hurry before they trace your position. When you make ship I have this for you . . . Treeva sat at her monitor's console naked, legs spread apart. She slipped her index finger into the moist slit between her thighs. A shiver of pleasure wracked her, and she transmitted the sensation across the light-years to Varak, who absorbed and co-experienced her lovely moment.

The promise of her pleasure excited him, and he moved to clear the antechamber.

Until he saw her.

Varak was a jaded warrior. He had traversed the galaxy, experienced the pleasures and horrors of a thousand worlds. Life in the Guild was good, but it was a surfeit of the ecstasies and the agonies. There was little that moved him.

But *she* moved him.

Voluptuous. Soft. Pink. Blonde. Young. Innocent. Ready. She was all these things. She stood in a corner adorned with satin-like pillows and drapes, like an ancient, oriental concubine, wearing a diaphanous gown which clung to her perfect body like an amorphous liquid.

"Who are you and what the hell are you doing *here*?" Varak felt foolish asking the obligatory questions. His heart pounded beneath his armor, his organ swelled and

struggled to be free.

"A hostage of the Adjudicator. My name is Princess Marakee, from the planet Seldon. My father holds the trading rights to—"

"Please," said Varak. "No politics. I loathe politics. I happen to be passing through . . . do you wish to be rescued?"

The princess smiled, nodded, took a jiggling step toward him.

Varak smiled.

Extending his armored, gauntleted hand, he escorted the princess through the palace, dispatching of several score of Nanjha Guards on the way to the departure sector some distance away. They made the trip without mishap, and were soon soaring off-planet to the Guild ship awaiting them in geo-synchronous orbit.

And Treeva was strangely silent.

His armor fell away from his body like a shedding reptile skin. His blood pounded and his mind raced with the heated excitement of a youth he had thought was forever lost to him. *The novelty of it!* To have a woman in the flesh once again! Varak's naked body rippled in anticipation of the grateful Princess Marakee. She approached him slowly, teasingly, finally pressing her warm flesh against his own. Varak burned from within, feeling as if he might explode from the mere thought alone. Such joy! Such pure pleasure!

The princess was as skilled as she was ravishing. She and Varak remained locked together in a slippery embrace for hour after beautiful hour. When they were finally spent, and the princess lay sleeping beside him, Varak felt a familiar sensation in his mind.

Treeva! Had he actually forgotten her?

Arise. There is work for you. The voice was cold. Distant.

"An Assassin's work is never done . . . " said Varak as he stood, pulling on his armor and weapons-system.

Why did you do it?

"Why did you remain silent? Why did you let me?" Varak stood over the nude, sleeping form of the princess.

Curiosity. I wanted to see how it felt.

"Exactly. The same reason as I," said Varak. "Did you like it? I did."

So I noticed. Yes, I liked it . . . to answer your question, but you liked it more . . . more than you should have.

"Treeva, you're not jealous, are you?"

There was no answer. Suddenly Varak felt an emptiness within his mind. An emptiness he had never known. So be it. He would acquire a new monitor. The Guild was full of talented apprentices; he would gladly accept one if Treeva was truly deserting him.

Something tingled in his cerebellum. A neuro-synaptical message, an override command from Delphi, coming in on a priority channel that was only to be used in the most extreme emergencies, to save the life of an Assassin. He fought the override but it was useless, as futile as a marionette attempting to escape the threads that gave it life.

His arm moved and the weapons gauntlet clicked out a heater.

Shocked, unbelieving, Varak could do nothing but watch as his legs locked and his arm swung down, pointing at the sleeping woman.

"No! No, Treeva!"

His screams awakened the princess, who opened her eyes just in time to see the heater release its white-hot death. The upper half of her sweet body disappeared in a burst of vapor, leaving the lifeless, cauterized lower torso on the floor of the sleep chamber. It was a grim monument to his actions.

He continued to scream, hoping that it would bring the assistance of other Assassins on board. Varak's mind careened through the horrors and terrors of someone truly possessed.

"Why?" he said once, finally calmed, but now gathering anger about him.

She was an imperfect lover.

Varak had intended to refute her statement, but he was suddenly aware of new movement, new messages overriding his brain.

"Treeva, stop it! They'll kill you for this! It's not worth all this!"

His monitor did not reply, other than directing his motor-coordination center to bend his elbow, aiming the weapons gauntlet at the side of his head. The heater clicked into position.

It was the first recorded case of Assassin suicide in Guild history. An investigation was initiated with Class I Priority to ensure that it never happened again.

ALONE AND PALELY LOITERING

David F. Bischoff

O what can ail thee, Knight at arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has withered from the lake
And no birds sing.

—John Keats

The price for alleviation of boredom is often dear. Sometimes, it costs a sadness.

Like:

I was bored on Oberon.

A waterworld is Oberon, a valuable asset to its owners, the East Galaxy Company; a priceless coin rich in rare minerals on one side, famous for its under-water tourist attractions on the other. Beneath its world-wide briny cloak are magnesium, gold, uranium, plutonium, other metals hard to find, all mined by genetically engineered, finny-footed watermen biologically bred expressly to live in Oberonic water, and able to withstand considerable pressure. And, of course, there are the vast mountain ranges, volcanoes, strange reef formations, stranger native life forms frolicking about in the turquoise Aitch Two Oh for the greedy eyes of the wonder-oglers from every sector of Known Space.

To be specific, I was bored in a bar on Oberon. A bubble bar, drifting down to the sea bed leisurely, then up again to the bottom of the floating city Titania, to relieve itself of stale customers, admit those who waited for the booze

cruise down to the ocean muck. Like this kiddie toy baking soda-fueled submarine I played with in the bathtub when I was a toddler; up and down, down and up, no reason for going anywhere. Save to amuse. Nice scenery on the way, though—waving green sea-fronds, seaweed glistening with the indigenous Sea Jewels, sea creatures of infinite variety staring curiously through the transparent bubble at the humans and non-humans drinking like fish.

The thing is fully automated. Has a gravity supplement on its base, plus a gyro, so the drinkers don't get seasick when it tilts with a rough current. A fascinating piece of technology, and a terrific ride, the first ten trips to the bottom. Then the pleasure palls, and boredom settles in as though it feels at home inside your head.

I was on leave from my command, Her Majesty's Beta Fleet; Captain Wilmington Cathcart at your service. I was supposed to be on holiday, doing the grand tour of the scenic worlds in the left breast of Cassiopeia, but suffering a seisure of ennui instead. These tourist towns are okay for tourist types, mere workaday planet-huggers. But I longed to be with my crew again, sighing through the ether, charting space, feeling the raw starshine through the clear canopy of Observation Deck.

So there I sat in the nice bum-comfy temp-controlled bar slouch, feet hooked in stimustirrups, listening to the sweet chirrupping music of a two-mouthed Centaurus bird creature piping in from the ubiquitous polyphonic speakers, sipping at a cold Texan lager, bored out of my mind.

I tried talking with the robot bartender. Ever try talking to a servo-robot? Don't. It'll drive you up the nearest wall.

"How are you, friend robot? How are the wife and kids?"

"Another drink, sir?" it crooned in its cool monotone purr. "How are you enjoying your stay on our beautiful planet? Have you seen the Orchid Mouth Canyon yet? The Breathing Caverns? Delightful! May I suggest that for your next refreshing drink from Smith's Bathyscafé you select our marvelous Appollonian Ambergris. Ecstasy on

the tastebuds of humans they say; and a mere ten star-creds per ounce!"

"Thank you, no. I'll stick to my cold beer; a mere half cred per bottle."

"A pity."

Its little round head swivelled, and its slightly larger round body slid away on whispering air cushions to service some sappy looking Tree alien who looked as though he wanted to leave.

It was then I noticed the young man, some seats to my right, who was gulping down a huge German stein of bubbling stuff that looked terribly potent. Muttering to himself.

Nosy, I fooled with my chest attachments, augmenting my auditory nerves to amplify his words, and directionalize my hearing, so to shut out most of the other noise.

He was babbling away to no one but himself, and in High English. An Oxfordian. Good humans, then. Fiercely loyal to the Queen. Hard as Hades to understand, but good people.

And I needed someone to talk to sooooo badly.

I detached myself from the bar, walked over to him slowly so as not to startle.

He couldn't have been more than a quarter century old. A mere new-beard, sodden eared. He wore the dress blues of a Spacer, an ensign from his stripes; but the apparel was in a sad state, frayed at the cuffs, shiny on the elbows, unlaundered for several weeks, it seemed. He was a thin fellow; almost emaciated, especially about the face, which was little more than skin over well-formed bone. A wreck of the Dickensian style popular among the younger Navvies of the day, his hair stood off from his skull haphazardly, like the drifting seaweed outside. Despite his sad state, he had the definite air about him peculiar to natives of the planet Oxford; a well-defined English set to his features . . . those civilized overgrown elves I have a soft spot in my heart for. (After all, theirs was the prototype for our Empire.)

I found myself growing fond of him just looking at him without the benefit of personal contact. But then, in my cups I oft grow fond of most things in the area.

Quietly, I settled in the adjacent bar slouch, set my brew on a stained glass coaster. I fiddled with the controls to my body computer (nestled where my appendix used to be) and tried to align it with my brain's speech sectors, to pep up my language. The surgeons who fitted me with it claim it can enable a normal human to speak in twenty alien languages, as well as perform other valuable functions—split-second computation, encyclopedic knowledge of you-name-it, and so forth. But whether or not it would gloss up my back-home, twanged, rough conversational English style, I truly didn't know. As it turned out, it was very good. A little rusty with things like personification and irony, but starsmasher on the all-important similes and metaphors, not to mention assonance and alliteration. I like to think any rhythm was my own; got a little African in me. Very proud of that, I am.

This accomplished, I discreetly re-tied my chest dress and set about making talk with the young ensign drowning himself in drink.

"Greetings. All due salutations to you. Do you mean your sack-slurred words to reach mine near ear?" I asked pleasantly.

The young man gave the very slightest of looks my way, turned back, swallowed the last of his drink.

"I care not, sir. I care not if the universe hearkens to my mumblings, nor if naught by my drinking glass listens."

He lapsed into silence, played with a toothpick-speared hunk of barsnak cheese.

I introduced myself.

He returned the favor: "Ensign Henry Loftus. May your years bring you more than the sum of their days."

His eyelids were at half-mast. From the look of the bloodshot eyes I had the feeling that it was their owner who had died.

"My drinking mates have said I listen well to their hearts," I mentioned encouragingly, hoping to unleash

the talking demon in him.

His head craned my way slowly, his eyes grabbed mine, his words were filled with a strange gratitude: "But what care you for a low-born ensign, Captain Cathcart?"

"Low-born? The planet Oxford is among the most esteemed worlds in the Empire."

"Low-born in mind, Captain. My princely mind-throne has been abdicated, I fear. I have misplaced my heart."

"My brain is open. Enter the gates of my ears with your words."

"A girl . . ."

"I thought as much. Love plagues both king and beggar . . ."

"No—a lady. Better, a beauty. A fair faerie queen. A Grecian goddess from whom Aphrodite was modeled, poorly. Helen of Troy would have wept for envy."

"And tell me, smitten youth, before your waxing poetry melts; who is this fair thing?"

"Who-what-where-when-how?"

"Yes, please!" I was warming to him, ready for a dandy heart-tugging tale.

"Have you time on your hands?" he asked.

"And feet and arms and . . ."

"The planet Vesper; soft as evening prayers, her kiss. Loud as bugles blowing, my heart."

He began to ramble off into Joycean incoherence, beyond even the powers of my B-C.

I interrupted him.

"Details, son; details. Splint your broken similes with facts so they may walk to some end."

"I was apprentice navigation officer on the space flyer *Stardew II* of Her Royal Magesty's Gamma Fleet. I . . ."

"A moment, young one. Your glass is dry, as your tongue shall be some lovelorn hyperboles hence." I saw the robo-servant drifting in our direction, and held up my finger. "Waiter! A Denebian Honeyfrost for the lad, to tone up his tonsils. And renew my Coors. It has been decapitated." Pleased as a thing of metal can be, it produced our drinks and added the costs to my tab with

commendable speed. "Excellent! Bless your batteries."

I fixed my attention on my companion once more.

"Pray, continue, my friend, and take your time. The night is merely middle-aged."

He said (and I paraphrase much for purposes of general reader understanding):

My crew was to have shore leave in the Vegan system. We chose the amusement planet Vesper, to while away our time and money. Are you familiar with that wanton world? A universe of giving female flesh, greased in rivers of wine, wrapped in wonders of nature and science.

Planetfall was a whirlpool of dazzlement, rainbows mixing with the hull's condensation as we feathered down, soft as silk; gauzy, dreamlike through color-clustered clouds, like a brush through a painter's palette, to the sight of Vesper's single continent, Cassanova, mountain-fenced from its fury-thrashed black sea—the circled number on a null-G pool eightball. On down we floated like a hopelessly diminutive cue stick, hoping to game away our time, thrust away our lusts on the flatland below.

Shrugging off the intoxicating view, we flipped over, tailed down on our fire wings to Cincincity, from whose spaceport all twenty-two of our crew scattered, each with a full cred chit in his pocket and two Earthweeks to slide down as he pleased.

I was in the company of Leftenant Bertram Peters, best of friends. Is it not odd that the worst hurts oft begin with someone of fraternal love? Ah Bertie, best of buddies. Bertie; singer of star-sibling songs, patter of backs, principal partisan of mine heart, constant cronie; Bertie, Arm-locked we ventured out into the streets of Cincincity, chanting a booze-ballad, crying out love to life like drunken Siamese twins.

I shall tell you of Cincincity in a few sentences that must suffice: Cincincity, glacier-twinkling city of chiseled ice. Plastic and glass and silver-hammered buildings shooting

for the sky like vapor trails of rockets, just begun to fly. Caterers to pleasures, its citizens: pimps and dimpled damsels; game tenders; mind menders; food makers; mood slakers. A thousand pleasures to a city block, there in Cincincity.

We settled into a modest Bacchanalian meal to sup, and there amidst the squirting wine and flirting waitresses, we charted out our plans.

"They say there are sights in this land to start the orbs of a man's vision from their pockets," Bertie gaily enthused. Much amused, I said I wished to see them all.

'Twas an artificial cavern that held us in its mouth, plastic stalactite, stalagmite teeth, above us, below us, glistening with honey-sugar water dripping down, to be tasted if we pleased. We dined on craftsman-carved capons, gold goblets of nectar-wine, a spread of gourmet delicacies to delight the tongue and mind.

Torches shuddered out their smoky light on the rough walls.

Bertie drew out holocards of Cassanova's attractions, carefully placed them on our table, and we discussed them joy by joy, my spine tingling out the anticipation in me.

"See here," he said, "the Floating Gardens. And there—the Singing Seaside. Could even the bold imagination of humankind conceive of such splendorous beauty set on one world, like various precious stones clustered on a twirling ball of gold!"

We ordered them in the way we wished to see them, carefully selecting the spectrum of moods they would induce. We discussed them minutely, and our words were psychedelics madly rushing in our veins.

The hours fled away. We traveled deep into Vesperian night, refusing Lethe's cup, tongue tossed, wine sparked ebullience for electricity singing through our neurons, glimmering in our eyes.

At last, we ceased our feast, and Bertram leaned back in his chair, a sated Falstaff. "But first, foremost, we must choose companions, lithesome lassies, nubile nymphs to fill our gaps betwixt other pleasures." A satyr grin

saturated his features. "And in return, we shall fill theirs!"

"You mean the ladies of the evening?"

"Ladies of the morning and afternoon, as well, here on Cassanova. Bounteous as dawn flowers are they here, and as fresh."

I did not respond with the fervor he expected. I did not respond at all.

"But what is this, young Hal? Surely such is the principal reason for our shore leave; to cavort among the maidens; enjoy a fortnight of island revelry in our sea of spacing; loose our rebel souls into nights of riot."

I explained my reluctance. "I have vowed disobedience to Eros, apart from the marriage bond, to my Maker, the God of my belief."

His brows beetled. "Ah. We face a difficulty, then."

"Why? I will not chain your desired actions, surely."

"But, Hal, my boon companion. Castor to my Pollox. Jonathan to my David. My greatest pleasure was to be in your pleasure."

"Then you shall have much, for it is my intention to enjoy myself—but without a hired whore to wench away at my darker self; no purring prostitute, no pile of female flesh abandoned to the slavery of male lusts."

He brooded more than Rodin's sculpture, though not as long.

Of a sudden, his drink-flushed face glowed as though a light had been lit behind it, and he caught up my hand in his, and he smiled a friend's smile of understanding.

"Very well. As your religion dictates, so it shall be, though you would be sinning very little. However, have you objection to a more Platonic female companion; surely such would be better company than I."

Wary, I remained noncommittal. I let him continue.

"I have an aquaintance of old living in this city; he owes me a large favor. My last communication from the man told of his beautiful daughter's conversion to your beliefs. Would you care to meet her on the morrow's morn? And, if you take a like to her, she well may be able to accompany us on our varied tours."

Not wishing to totally displease my friend, fool me, I agreed. He chortled his approval, and suggested we make our way to our night's lodgings.

Morning came upon Cincincity, scintillation of its yellow-eye primary, dazzling diamond sparkles onto the gleaming spires of the skyshafters, invading my hungover eyes from the window of our room. I dialed for relief, and in a moment a nozzle shot out a milky substance into a glass, and I drank it.

Bertie had already departed, where I knew not, so I spent some time poring over poetry supplied by the room screen at a flick of its subject selector. For some reason, I could not get past Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"; I read it over and over. Had I but known it was my Delphic oracle, warning, warning.

I dabble in poetry myself. I hesitate to call myself a poet; I am not that good. But I am moved by the power of words enough to experiment with them, search out the classical use of them. Never before had I been so peculiarly affected by a piece of verse as I was affected by those haunting stanzas.

Eventually, Bertie returned. Mirthful, jubilant was he.

"We are to take luncheon with my friend this afternoon, and afterward meet his daughter. Before we do so, however, whatsay to a brief, brisk walk through the morning air to set the blood to humming?"

Most glad to take leave of the troublesome poem, I readily agreed, and donned my dress gear in preparation for the later social niceties.

'Twas a magnificent day in Halcyon Park. We dallied amongst the blossoming flowers both Earthseeded and alien, delicately manicured, formed into delightful designs. We sat on real wood benches by the green oaks shuddering with the slight zephers playing in their branches, lingered by the lake listening to swan songs, duck quacks. We tossed pebbles in, and watched their circular waves quiver the magnified images of the spectrum-

fish darting to and fro beneath the water's skin. We did not talk, for speech is not always necessary among friends.

A sense of peace settled down over me, blanketing my nerves in soft, cool velvet.

The calm before the storm.

On the edge of the park, we hailed a robocab, dialed coordinates, settled back in its conditioned environment to enjoy the air ride through the city canyons.

Bertie put a hand on my knee.

"Tell me if this girl is not the distilled essence of beauty."

I put a smile on my lips, though my thoughts were not on feminine charms, but rather were floating free in a sea of peace.

With soft air-bursts, the cab settled down in an older section of the city, slightly shabby, but genteel. Bertie waved away my cred-chit, inserted his own into the mechanism which debited the conveyance fee and wished us a good day in its metal voice.

"Come," beckoned Bertie, playful light in his eye, gentle mystery in his voice, "just down the road a stretch."

"But why didn't you have us let off at our destination?"

Silence was his answer.

We were in a suburb of the city; the houses were single, separated by yards of Earthgrass; beautiful/ugly mock Victorian min-mansions. I sighed with homesickness; they reminded me of Oxford's green and pleasant land.

After a spell of walking, we went up a hedged path to the door of a more Edwardian house, and knocked. A butler answered.

We deposited our names with him, he nodded and left us to check with his master. Within a minute he returned, congenially showed us to the drawing room, announced us to our host.

A graying middle-aged man looked up from a leather-bound volume he was reading.

"Ah! Bertram!"

He sprang lightly to his feet and feverishly welcome-hugged Bertie, real joy in his voice.

"How many years, my friend? How many years has it been?"

He glanced my way, thrust out a hand for me to shake.

"And this must be the ensign you spoke of over the video-phone this morning. A pleasure to meet you, Henry Loftus."

"Hal to any friend of Bertie's, sir."

"Hal it is then!" he smiled. "Lunch will be served oneish or so. I do not demand extreme punctuality of my servants, as I do not exercise it myself. But, Bertram, you asked a favor of me, and a favor I shall give before we sit down to any conversational pleasures. This way, gentlemen." He beckoned with a finger and began walking out of the room.

We followed, me whispering toward Bertie's ear. "What does he mean, favor? Is he showing us his daughter or somesuch?"

"The fellow has a wealth of medical equipment of the most advanced sort in his basement. I thought it might be a good idea for us both to take a short health examination."

'Twas not a bad idea, but I could see no cause; the Navy supplies its men with regular checkups and physical overhauls to compensate for any of the tolls of space radiation, or alien organisms eating away our lives. But I shrugged and followed.

We entered a metal elevator which lowered us into a set of laboratories, surprisingly complex and modern to be housed in such an old-style place.

"These are the rooms I perform my experiments in, gentlemen," he said proudly, alluding to our surroundings.

"Are you a doctor, then?" I asked.

"But, of course! Hasn't Bertie told you so?"

"Truth to tell, Dudley, I haven't even told Hal your name yet." admitted Bertie.

The doctor arched his thick set of eyebrows.

"Well, then. Formal introductions are in order." He preened his neat white beard. "I, Ensign Lofus, am Doctor

Dudley Victor Praetorius, late of Her Magesty's Medical League."

He executed a quick, graceful bow, and immediately continued where he had left off.

"This examination should take only a small portion of a minute for each of you. So, Bertram—if you please . . ."

His finger was pointed at a coffin-like box lying at a forty-five-degree angle with the floor. Without word or hesitation, Bertie stepped in and the doctor busily played with the buttons and toggle switches on its side. On the wall, a screen graph brightened, and measurements quivered.

Doctor Praetorius oomphed and aahed, and then motioned Bertie out.

"You're quite top shop, old boy. A regular war-horse, you are, Bertram!"

He waved in my direction. Shrugging off the uneasy sense of wariness that seemed to be sitting on my shoulders, I lay down in the box, and for twenty-odd seconds the doctor's ministrations were repeated.

Deemed quite healthy, I ascended to the cozier quarters of the first floor with them, to lunch.

I shall not bore you with the details of the luncheon conversation. If the truth be known, I remember little of what we discussed. However, the sense of uneasiness still pervaded in me throughout the several exquisitely prepared courses of the repast.

Finally, I brought up the subject of the doctor's daughter, who had not yet made her appearance.

"Ah!" he smiled with a strange shading to his voice. "Genevieve should be here at three o'clock . . ."

"Previous appointment, you know," interjected Bertie, a bit too quickly.

The sense of uneasiness grew in my head and descended to my stomach like cancer rapidly devouring my insides. I felt the need to leave, and told them so.

"Just a few more minutes, surely," quavered Bertie.

"By all means. You must meet my . . . my daughter," said the doctor.

"No!" I jumped up, and a dizziness swarmed into my head like buzzing bees into a hive.

Just then, the butler entered.

"Miss Genevieve, sir."

A three-word preface, in retrospect, more eloquent than any other could possibly be. The name itself—Genevieve—soft violins on a gypsy hillside as moonbeams pave the roads in silver.

She walked in.

To the room. To my life. To my heart.

May my private muse aid me in giving her to you in unfleshed, unbreathing language; for only the highest art may bear even a glimmer of her, a spark of a sun to represent that sun.

To paraphrase Marvell, had I but universe enough and time to translate her into words, an age to each part would be too short, an eternity to the whole too little.

She perched at the doorway, a nightingale in day, hair a corona of burnished auburn sloping slowly low, long, lovely down to her shoulders and a shade past where the ends curled up ever so slightly into white, like upside-down seabreakers. She wore a lovely Regency dress of soft-edged pink, of bows and frills, and silky hills a man might become lost in . . . But the apparel was to her like a mere underline might be to a verse of Shakespeare, a slight nudge of the volume switch to a Bach fugue. Symmetry, delighter in the roundness of round, the perfection of cold Geometry; turn olive with envy, for no perfect angles or cubes or spheres have had the warm blood of life as my perfect Genevieve did. Nor her smile.

Her smile . . . She smiled on me then in that freeze frame of time when I looked on her first. Captain Cathcart. Have you seen a shaft of sunlight break through a fleecy cumulus cloud on a golden rainless day? The sun smiling.

My sun beamed her red lips and white teeth, bent them up into a shy, inquisitive arc . . .

"There you are, my dear!" echoed a distant voice. "My love, these are the friends I spoke of. Leftenant Bertram

Peters. And Ensign Hal Loftus, who, I am told is a poet as well as a Spacer."

. . . And the nightingale sang her pearly song:

"Oh! 'Tis indeed a pleasure to finally come nose to noses with members of the much heralded Queen's Navy! When I was a little girl I loved to read Navy adventure tapes, watch the Navy trivid shows . . . and such handsome ones to honor our home! I do believe I shall enjoy their visit, Father. I am truly sorry to have missed luncheon with them."

She cocked her head slightly, a playful nightingale, strode to within a yard of me, looked into my eyes, past my eyes.

"Tell me, Ensign. Is it true that you sailors have the most uncouth eating habits of any intelligent creature dwelling in Known Space?"

"Not quite," I managed to say above the sound of my beating heart. "We come in a close second behind the Mouth-bellies of Sigma II."

"Ah ha! A dubious distinction." And she flowed off to a chair trailing a tinkling laugh not unlike the sound of Chinese bells.

"Please sit," she said. "I certainly do not intend to stand about all day. An unnatural position for humans, I say."

And she sat, motioning to the butler.

"Hudson. Would you bring up several gallons of tea? My day had been quite thirst inspiring."

The butler bowed and quietly departed.

"Well, then," she chirped, "don't just stand about. Be clever, dashing—tell a few bawdy Navy jokes. My day has been such a bore I do not wish to speak of it, let alone think further of it. Come, gentlemen; entertain the pretty lady."

Doctor Praetorius chuckled slightly. "My dear. The Leftenant and I have a few private matters to discuss in my study. Would you see that our young ensign is not left at loose ends?"

"But, of course" Her eyes sparkled mischievously. "I abhor loose ends!"

. . . Her face. Is there, has there ever been, a finer place?

Her eyes were twin glass marbles, imbedded with green fire . . .

"Well, sit down, Ensign," she said as the others departed. I barely noticed them leaving. "I've already asked you once. I shan't ask you again, and then you'll be in a fine pickle, standing up all afternoon 'til your muscles ache."

Her eyebrows were downy brown, her eyelashes fluttered like butterfly wings when she wished them to, or stayed as still as could be when she looked at me, when she stared into my heart.

I finally sat down, which gave her much pleasure.

"Excellent! Now that my father's gone, you can tell me a truly hair-raising adventure of the Navy . . . and don't leave out the fiery, voluptuous women for my sake!"

Her facial bone structure would have made Michelangelo gasp and grasp for his chisel and a hunk of marble. Her nose was turned up ever so slightly, perhaps God's signature on His living work of art, I thought.

"Well," I said, for the first time in my wordy life at a loss for words, "I've heard many stories, but have no interesting ones of my own to tell, I fear."

"Goodness, then." Her eyes opened wide, shining out a merry gleam. "You have all your stories in the future, yet to be experienced, yet to be enjoyed. Those are the best sort of tales, are they not? We can do what we like with them, until they happen, that is. Tell me, Hal . . . if I may call you that . . . "

"Of course!"

"What sort of stories from your past would you like to tell your grandchildren?"

The butler entered with a tray of cups, saucers, and a teapot, and placed it between us on a coffee table.

"Thank you, Hudson. You may go." She smiled at me. "I hate to ask you this, me being the hostess, but could you pour? I'm ever so clumsy with China, and if I break another teapot or cup this week, Father will have my hide!"

"Of course." I picked up the pot. And my hand was shaking very slightly as the black steaming tea flowed into the small, bone China cup.

She noticed.

"Is it the adventure you're dreaming up for my ears that's scaring you so?" she asked coyly. Then suddenly: "Or is it me?"

I dropped the teapot, smashing the cup, chipping the saucer.

"So much for my illusions of male dexterity!" she giggled, hand to mouth to muffle her mirth.

"I'm *so* sorry," I mumbled, quite embarrassed, quite flustered.

She waved me to silence with a quick, easy motion of her delicate hand. "Think nothing of it. I'm sorry I upset you so."

"I assure you, it was my fault."

"No, no. I have that effect on men." She gave a moment of silence for that to sink in. "How old are you, Hal?"

"Twenty-two."

"I am of nineteen summers, as a bad poet or novelist might say. When I was seventeen, I came out into society. A debutante. A butterfly out of its coccoon. Dear me. There's that bad poet again! I have lost count of the number of men who have fallen in love with me, Hal. I sometimes think I should install a robo-operator on my video-phone to handle my calls 'Oh dear!—insert name—you've caught me at such a bad time. I'm sorry, but I already have a date for that night. I'm so sorry. Must run. Ta!'"

I laughed, and she giggled.

"Hal. I've had three hundred twenty-nine proposals of marriage. Some of them from the sons of the richest men in the galaxy. Most of them from the rich men themselves!" She picked up the cup of tea which I had finally poured successfully, added a spot of milk, stirred it with a silver spoon, added two lumps of sugar, stirred it again. She sipped it, and then peered over the tea cup at me. "Are *you* in love with me, Hal?"

Love? There's a word for you. We bandy it about like a shuttlecock in a badminton game, play with it in our sentences: "I love this. I love that. Don't you just love . . . "

Poets have written reams—novelists much more—throwing about catchy love phrases like "love at first sight."

Love at first sight. Did I love her at first sight, the first moment she actually swept into my vision?

No.

I loved her from the day I was born. My first mewling baby cries were not for food, nor for mother . . . but for her. Throughout my life, she had lived in my heart, and I did not know it. Only occasionally would I catch brief, wraithlike images of her from the corner of my mind's eye that would cause me to catch my breath with awe. Or see short glimpses of her in the sights I love . . . hear her voice in the music I love . . . feel her presence in the literature, the art, the beauty I love.

No. Not love at first sight. Love at first life.

"But we've only just met . . . " I stammered, like some frightened, adolescent schoolboy.

She set her cup and saucer down gently onto the mahogany table, shook her lustrous fall of hair slightly, and put a long pink fingernail into the air alongside her head.

"'Love is not bound by time. It floats free, like a cloud, above the centuries, always there for us stooped humans to stand up into, and so rise above our petty selves into benevolent, unselfish regard for our fellows'" she recited, staring at some imaginary audience to my rear. Then she fixed her focus on me. "Do you like that, Hal? I wrote it when I was seventeen, and very idealistic."

"Yes. Very good . . . well written . . . " I faltered, trying to regain a measure of composure, trying to make the words fit together, make sense again. "I suppose that is true. And in that sense I may safely say, I love you."

She frowned a frown. A playful, meaningful, sexy, smiling frown; a simple motion of her mouth speaking volumes.

"Oh Love is never safe," she sighed, so sincerely. "And if it is, it is not Love." Mouth corners up into a smile, Mona Lisa style. "Besides you have not answered my question—it was not, 'Do you love me?' but, 'Are you *in* love *with* me?'"

I bit my lip, looked down at the floor, studied the Indian pattern of the rug, running my eyes along the zigzag electric red muting into shocking yellow, into coin gold . . .

"Yes . . ." I whispered, unable to hold back the word.

"Splendid! How splendid, dear Hal." The soft rush of smooth silk on smoother skin: She stood, came to me, softly slid her right hand onto my shoulder, put her left to my cheek, pulling my eyes to hers . . . "For I do like you, rather awfully."

"But you hardly know me."

"Know?" Her laugh again, starlight on snow. "I know, Ensign Henry Loftus, what I see. What I feel." She turned, drifted over to the French windows, stroked the velvet curtains as she stared out into the backyard spring-flowered English garden. "I see a young, attractive Navyman, with the tan of a thousand suns burnishing his skin. I see a strong set to his mouth. I can see down the corridors of his eyes, down the halls of his psyche, where soft lights seep from half-closed rooms, from which I can hear barely audible musics, voices of his past, his future—his present. And they are in harmony with mine; my musics, my voices, my lights that suddenly spring from soft fuzzy focus to crystalline clarity with the simple presence of this Navyman . . . you, Hal. You."

She bent her head down and was silent, swanlike.

"I. . ." The single syllable lingered on my lips, permutating from I to *Aye* to *Aieee* . . .; a whispered scream-echo from deep within me. I felt I should burst from the emotions welling up out of some unfathomable source in my soul.

Rising from a tremulous, breathy whisper, she spoke:

"Am I not a gay, frothy creature, Hal—full of fun and innocent promise, flirting unabashedly with a man I've only just met and, whom, after these hours, may never

meet again?"

Twirling around to face me, her hair was a brilliant carousel, sparkling in the dust-moted sun-stream from the window, her face so sad, questioning me.

"No . . . no . . . of course not," I emphatically said, standing, walking to her, taking her in my arms. She leaned her head against my chest and shivered, reminding me of a stone-dazed dove I once held in my cupped hands, quivering through its warm, white feathers. "You are you. A rose is a rose . . . "

"Peeping up from my powder-blue chest, she nuzzled my neck with her nose, looked into my eyes.

"You are a brick, Hal. And I, just a wisp of pretty vapor twirling about your head, confounding you a bit. You'll forget me."

"Never," I said, past the lump in my throat.

She giggled, gently broke from my grasp, playfully paced to the couch, where she sat. She patted the space beside her where I should sit.

"But aren't we playing the star-crossed lovers, Hal? And isn't it just grand? Perhaps a touch too cube-tube romantic, though, don't you think?"

Sitting. "I hadn't noticed."

"You're right; it's new every time, isn't it? How many millions of love-tossed minds have vowed eternal devotion to one another . . . and every time it is new and different and wonderful and . . . "

Without warning she flung her arms around my neck and kissed me. Before I could think of returning the kiss, she was back in her former position. Hair slightly mussed.

And her eyes were wild.

She bent sidelong again, whispered in my ear. "I love you."

. . . and whisked up and away on her light, light feet to the wine cabinet.

"Would you care for a sip?" she inquired in a mock polite dining room voice.

"Only of the Olympian nectar of Venus, which only you can provide. The taste of your luscious gaze

upon my eyes."

"Oh ho!" she piped, delightedly. "The Oxfordian poet has found his bag of words again. Where was it?"

"I had lost them in you. You gave them back to me with your kiss."

"Did I now! However shall I get them back?"

"Word by word, all in praise of your beauty."

She poured out two snifters of brandy.

"And I shall return those as well, kiss by kiss."

She walked over, handed me a glass.

"One Nectar, Sir Poet."

I set it down on the table, pulled her down to my side, kissed her.

She mumbled something against my lips, and then slowly circled me with her arms, dispensing her own private stock of wet inebriation.

How long we sat in one another's arms, I do not know. Can years be compressed into minutes? It seemed so then.

We were interrupted by an embarrassed "A hum!"

Dr. Praetorius and Bertie had returned.

Genevieve broke from my embrace and looked up at her father.

"Oh, Father," she smiled up at him, then bounced up, placing a dutiful daughter's kiss on his rough cheek. "I was just instructing the Ensign in Vesperian Lip Language!"

"Quite so, my dear," he grinned strangely. "And I trust our young guest is a good student."

"Oh, the very best!" A wide-eyed innocent expression played on her face as she accepted his arm around her. "In fact, he seems to have much to teach the teacher!" She tilted her head so only I could see the devil-spark in her eyes.

"Ah! Then you youngsters are getting on well! Very good. It leads into a question I mean to put to you, Genevieve—What plans have you for the next fortnight?"

"Oh, Father—the usual girlish trifles. Ten or so dates . . . shopping . . . and I *did* want to see the opening of that exhibition of Voxian air paintings in the

city. Why?"

"Well, my love. I owe much to my friend Bertram here, and in a letter I promised him—and his friend—a personal tour of our land. But something has come up and I find myself without the time . . . "

"Say no more! All plans cancelled!" she swept my way, a burning, smiling excitement in her eyes, and hugged my arm. "I should be more than happy to show our guests Casanova . . . I do like them so."

"Excellent. And you shall be in the very best of company."

"Oh," she giggled, "the *very* best!"

"The matter is settled, then, Bertram. My daughter shall be your guide."

Bertie nodded and winked at me.

I was stunned wordless with my good fortune.

If I had senses to call my own, then, I would have wondered that all was falling in place so marvelously. But all my senses were tingling with my love for Genevieve.

How can feeble words express it? They are but the residue of maelstrom emotions, storm-driven feelings boiling in me. To say I had fallen in love is insufficient, for it was much more. I was Galahad with the Holy Grail within his grasp, Odysseus first seeing Penelope after twenty years of wandering and yearning, wandering and yearning . . . All the soul-dizzying beauty, all the mind-straining perfection I had caught intimations of during my brief life had suddenly vortexed into a single smile, a pair of soft eyes, a kiss . . . a single soul of such breath-stealing depth I could wander in her for eternity . . . strolling by the pristine streams of Paradise.

Why is it that God is referred to in masculine terms? I met a part of God that day, and she was a lady . . .

Genevieve . . .

It took some hours for her to gather the necessary belongings she wanted to take along on the trip, so I sat in the parlor in hazy bemusement, waiting in a sort of mind/time stasis, apart from reality.

Meanwhile, Bertie hastened out into Cincincity to

obtain a female companion for himself.

Some time later, he returned, wearing a lovely young girl on his arm, all lace and laughter, shy eyes and sulky mouth. I would have taken notice more, but she was a moon glimmer to my sun stream, my Genevieve.

"I give you Felicity, Hal," bristled Bertie with pride in his choice of ladies. "Felicity, behold my boon buddy, Hal Loftus. He and the young lady of this house shall be our traveling friends these two weeks.

"I hope our scenery here on Casanova is acceptable to such wonder-veterans as you Navy Spacers," she said breathily, with a tone of forced sexiness no doubt learned in Harlot School.

"I believe that Hal has experienced a piece of Vesperian scenery quite diminishing anything he's ever seen before. Am I wrong, Hal?"

I nodded vaguely. Bertie laughed. The girl tittered.

And suddenly, she was back: Genevieve, changed to Victorian traveling clothes, a gaily colored parasol in her hand, a placid demeanor on her face as she coolly greeted Felicity and Hal, warming to the firelight of her eyes as she looked on me . . . And my heart melted in that glow.

We air-carred to the hop-port and took a null-G sphere a short jump to the first stop of our itinerary, the Floating Gardens of Euridyce, where we checked into the Dragon Fire Hotel. Bertie and Felicity shared a room. Genevieve and I had separate rooms, much to the amusement of our companions.

"Why do they laugh at us, Hal?" wondered Genevieve as we strolled along the suspended walkways transecting the viny, nightlit mass of vegetation floating free in the huge no-gravity field.

I reached out over the railing and plucked a Hadean Snow Blossom for her hair.

"They live in a world of flesh and desire, and do not understand the essential need of a moral code to anchor the soul in this stormy universe. They mock those who do." I looked at her. She had a somber set to her face, barely

discernible in the smoky glow of a passing lightning bird. "Do they bother you? We can always take a separate tour."

"No. No, dear Hal. Of course not. And I do rather like your friend. He's such a jolly sort. It's just . . . the way they look at us sometimes . . . with a sort of ugly, knowing look in their faces . . . "

"As though to say, 'Look at those hypocrites, pretending, when they know that tonight one of them will sneak to the other's room!' "

"Yes."

There was a doubtful tone to her voice, a little quiver of savored fright.

"You may trust me, Genevieve."

She sighed, looked up, and took my hand in hers, squeezing it.

"That's good Hal. For I truly do not trust myself."

She broke away and gaily skipped up a flight of steps, her laughter teasing me to give chase.

We found ourselves in a reg-G atmosphere room, several hundred meters wide and long. It was an Old Earth duck pond, with a weeping willow sobbing over an arched, fairy-tale bridge.

"Oh, Hal!" She stopped short, and then sped up again to a drifting walk. "Isn't it beautiful?"

She ran up the wood-plank bridge, bent over the edge to look at the varieties of swimming birds in the water below. There were Aylsburys, Gray Calls, Cayugas. There were several Eider ducks, Canvasbacks, and a single regal swan sailing about in the midst of them all.

"I wish I had some bread to feed them," she said.

I was inspecting the base of the tree, having never seen one of its kind before; only in pictures. I noticed something strange about a nearby boulder—it had a credchit slot.

"I think I've your bread for you, Genevieve."

And, indeed, 'twas a bread vending machine disguised as a rock.

As we tore off hunks of the white stuff and threw them to the always-hungry ducks, we talked.

She spun her past history for me in a pattern of just-right words. Briefly, I told her of myself, of my two years with the Queen's Navy, of my homesickness for Oxford.

"You must love your home-world very much," she commented, tossing the last crust to a smaller duck who had trouble darting in fast enough to snatch the pieces before his fellows got to them. It hastily gobbled it down while the other ducks quacked disapprovingly.

"Indeed, I feel I belong there. When I am through with the service I shall no doubt return, find a cottage by a park, among friendly people, perhaps teach at university. And most certainly write."

"And will you write of me, Hal?"

"When I write of beauty, can you be far from mind?"

We talked on, long into night, as the huge Vesper moon billowed up through the transparent top of the pond room. I was swept up in a flood of words, unable to prevent the unleashing of my most private thoughts, and fears, for her ear. And she listened, intently, supplying nods of understanding, and her own private thoughts. Finally, I could say no more. We sat there, under that tree, in each other's arms, and we had our own private existence, together.

Later, as I walked her back to her room, through the ghostly moonlight, through the quiet night, I knew that to be apart from her would be separating a part of me from myself.

I sat her down by a holly hedge berried with blobs of red, on a lattice-swing, and she swayed there slightly in the seat, silent. Her mermaid hair entangling my eyes, her siren soft breathing in rhythm with my heart.

"Will you marry me, Genevieve?" I asked in less than a whisper.

And I walked away onto the light-dewed lawn, realizing what I had said.

Soon I heard the swish of her skirts behind me. Felt the touch of her hand on my shoulder.

I turned, and she stared up at me.

"What is wrong, Hal?"

"Proposal Number Three Hundred Thirty."

"Yes, Henry Loftus. I'll marry you."

"It was foolish of me to ask . . . you've heard those words before, no doubt better said from men more worthy of your hand . . ."

The last word caught in my throat. I took her by the shoulders, trembling with fear that her words were the work of my fevered imagination.

"What did you say, Genevieve?"

"Silly boy." Her smile was suddenly the only thing that mattered in the universe. "I said, yes, I'll marry you, Hal. If you had not asked me, I fear I might have foregone all tradition and proposed to you myself." She put a hand up, stroked my cheek. "I've loved you since I first walked through the door of my father's dining room, and in the hours since, that love has grown beyond my comprehension . . . beyond any hope for love I've ever held in my heart." She slid her arms around me, nestled her head on my chest. "Yes. I'll marry you, Hal. Whenever, wherever you say. My place is at your side, in your heart. I want to live in a homey village cottage on Oxford, grow old with a poet-scholar. I want to make his meals, have his children . . . light his nights."

I thought I should cease my breathing, for joy.

We were married the next morning in the garden chapel at the very apex of the complex, the Floating Gardens below us, the bright flowery plants visible through the glass floor we stood on, the landscape of Vesper stretching out around us. But for me there was only Genevieve.

Bertie was an exuberant best man. Felicity insisted on serving as flower maiden.

We held hands as we exchanged the ancient vows to God and to one another.

At the end of the ceremony, we tubed down to the Dragon Fire, where we packed our bags for the honeymoon.

Bertie thought it best to go our separate ways during the remainder of the shore leave. We agreed to meet at the

spaceport on the evening of the last day . . .

And the dream commenced. A dream of more scope than I could understand. A wish-dream I never knew I held in my deepest reservoir of being, brought to flesh and life, enmeshed in joy past joy, love beyond love. My feeble crutch of words fails me. . . . How can I make you understand . . . for you *must* understand . . . you *must*!

Genevieve and I, once two, now one, hopped to the Mist Geysers in the Hills of the Sun. We chose a small hostel of rooms run by an elderly couple, perched on the very top of the middlemost rise of ground in that mount-cluster. It was a quaint old place; ivy crawled up the wooden outer walls; a scent of hominess hovered over it, an atmosphere of languid, slow-time comfort. We had the balcony room of the second floor.

The old woman served us dinner on that balcony; a simple dinner of roast lamb, potatoes, warm oven-fresh batter rolls, carrots, whole milk . . . all sprigged with a parsley-like local vegetable that made the simple fare taste superb. We quietly took supper there, watching the sun descend, whipping up color through the intermittent thousand-foot streams of mist which blew up from the valleys.

A warm, misty breeze wafted past, fluttering Genevieve's night dress as she stood on the lip of the balcony, watching as the last ember of the sunset died, as the last of the light ebbed away in the ever flowing tides of night and day. Stars began to wink on, signposts for the wandering night clouds silvered with the cool light of the rising moon.

From where I sat, I could see the moonlight streaming through the translucent night dress, limning her unclothed form beneath in a platinum glow. The light made a halo of her hair, bathed her face in softness, shimmered in her eyes as she looked at me.

"The moonlight seems to love you as much as I do," I said. "It touches you all over, makes an angel of you, worships you with its beams."

She laughed.

"Are you not jealous, then?"

"Quite," I leaped up from my chair, startling her, and swept her up with a single fluid motion. "I shall steal you away from it, to where you are mine alone."

"Steal away, my husband," she purred in my ear as I carried her back to the dark bedroom. "You have stolen my heart already. Why not have the rest of me?"

And her eyes were wild.

From the Geysers we leaped about the Continent, a day here, a day there; the Streams of Dreams; the Clock Rocks; Morgenstern Valley where the dinosaurs of Old Earth have been resurrected, and one may stalk brontasaurii with a shot gun.

And on we tourist-hopped, the order I do not recall: Song River, where the waterfalls churn up strange, haunting melodies as they flow; the Plain of Games, a completely automated amusement park; the Starless Mountains, where the sky is black as night and it is said that the ghosts of an extinct Vesperian race wander, croaking their grief.

But I hardly noticed them. They were background music to the point of all my attentions: Genevieve. I loved her with all of me; I gave her all of my soul.

I kissed poetry into her ear. I spun tales of our future for her pleasure; I made a garland of flowers illegally plucked from the Imperishable Gardens for her hair.

And she moved to my whims as a perfectly trained dancer to the choreographer's lead. She intuitively knew the right words to soothe me, amuse me, arouse me. In her I had my portable Paradise, my movable Heaven.

And she said she loved me true . . .

The soft, liquid days were draining away. Only two remained when we made our last stop, at the the Plateau of Plato. We had come by motor carriage from the nearby Sighing Seashore. We had to be hoisted by hand in a basket up the steep sides of the cliff; no mechanism would work in the area. Two footmen bid us welcome at the top, and guided us to the sheltered bower where we were to stay.

And 'twas just that; a bower in the forest glade, Nature made, save for a glass screen above us to stop the rain. But it seldom rained, they assured us.

"Oh, Hal. It's marvelous!" she said, awe in voice. And 'twas, indeed. The arched trees over the dip of ground that was the bower turned the sunlight green, made soft shafts of it, like tongues of light licking the silk smooth grass. Birds sang in the distance. A squirrel was perched on a tree stump, chewing a nut. A fawn wandered past, taking no notice of our presence.

Genevieve settled down on the grassy bank, cooed over its softness. She wore, that day, a simple country dress, hemmed at the knee. As she lay back, her hair spread out over the ground like auburn wings. An errant strand was stretched across her face. I knelt and gently smoothed it back, kissed her forehead, her neck.

"Why do they call this the Plateau of Plato, Hal?"

"The shadows, my love."

Her ear, her hair . . .

"I don't understand."

My lips brushed along her cheek . . .

"The ghosts of the mind. Reflections of the heart. Perhaps ours shall visit us, enchanting our eyes with splendor. Yours must be glorious."

"Still, I do not follow."

Between kisses, I whispered, "Old Earth owned a philosopher named Plato who, from the rough teaching stock of his Grecian master Socrates, formed the concept of this universe being but the flittering shadows of an Ideal Reality. When this plateau was discovered, it was found to be somewhat magical. A person walking here may well come upon apparitions of his past, of his imagination; all flickering shadows of the True Reality of his mind."

"How amusing," she sighed sleepily.

I lay down beside her, and she closed my eyes with kisses four.

I awoke to darkness.

Stars burned through the breeze-rustled leaves.

I shivered; and yet the air still held warmth. Phantom fingers played along my spine.

All was black beyond the bower, a numinous, dreadful darkness.

All was as still as the grave . . .

And then I heard a voice. From beyond the bower. In the wood.

I stood, and walked past the bower boundaries into the darksome night. I walked a ways, and came to an opening of the forest.

A glade.

At the far end there stood a man, facing away from me. The moon was riding in the heavens . . . the moonbeams slid through his form.

An apparition . . .

. . . My shadow.

I moved closer, and saw that he wore leather boots, breeches, a Regency top coat with tails. His hair was stylishly long, well-groomed. He wore no hat.

As I neared, he turned to face me. He was barely older than I—and I had seen his face somewhere before.

He looked at me, and there were tear streams on his face . . .

Ice.

I saw his hair was white with frost. His mouth began to open, slowly.

Keats . . .

John Keats . . .

Pale as death.

His mouth opened wide, wide, incredibly wide—and I felt a chill draft of air from it. Wide, wide, and I could see nothing between the lips. No tongue, no teeth.

Only nothingness.

A ghost wind pounced upon him blowing his hair about, whipping his coat tails.

And he began to groan out words.

"La belle dame . . ."

John Keats, English Romantic Poet, born 1795 . . .

"Sans merci . . ."

Out stretched an icicle that was his right forefinger,

pointing at me.

. . . Died in 1821 of tuberculosus . . .

"Hath thee in thrall!"

. . . of love.

The wind was roaring louder.

"What mean you?" I screamed above the sound.

He was suddenly still. Stiff as a statue.

A crack . . . the sound of the jagged fissure running across his chest. Another suddenly split his face. The keening wind shrieked and the cracks spread out over him, forked ice lightning, and he slowly crumbled to the ground with a shrill crash. A mist of ice crystals fumed up . . . and then it all winked out of existence.

I ran back to the bower . . . ran till my breaths turned to lava in my lungs, ran till my legs seemed faulty prosthetics.

She was gone. Gone . . .

The men at the edge of the plateau shook their heads sadly and said she had been lowered to the level plain and there taken the last motor carriage of the evening to Cincincity. The next one would not leave until morning.

Gone.

I caught the next carriage.

I went to her father's house. I arrived in the afternoon.

I knocked insistently at the door, for a long while.

Finally, the butler answered.

"Yes?"

And I pushed past him, ran down the corridor to the study.

Praetorius was there at his desk.

"Where is she?" I demanded, more a cry than a sentence.

He looked up, surprised.

"Ah, Ensign! What a pleasure!"

"Where is she?"

"Dear boy! Calm yourself! What *ever* is the matter?"

"They said she came back to this city. She must be here. With you. I must see her.

"Who, may I ask?" He put his pencil to his temple, and

cocked his head inquisitively.

"Genevieve! Genevieve! Who else? She's your daughter!"

"Ah . . . you mean Margaret!" A slight smile wavered on his lips.

"No. I mean Genevive . . . your daughter . . . my wife!"

"Good Lord!" He stood up straight, knocking the chair to the ground. "You don't mean to tell me that you married her!"

"She said she wired you a message about the wedding . . ."

But his laughter was drowning out my words.

He moved over to a naugahyde chair, holding his sides, laughing.

He sat in it.

"What the devil is so funny?" I raged.

"Poor, deluded Ensign! Please, come and have a drink."

He leaned over one of the arms of the chair to a miniature bar, and poured out a neat gin in a large tumbler. He offered it to me.

I knocked it away, splashing the liquor across his pants leg and on the rug. I caught his collar up with my hands.

"Why are you laughing? Why are you calling Genevieve Margaret?"

His laughter whimpered away. A *harumph* came from the door. Hudson asking if the rowdy gentlemen should be thrown on his ear outside the doorstep.

"No, Hudson. I'll deal with him."

He looked down at my hands clutching the top of his stiffly starched shirt.

"Please. If you would . . ."

"An explanation!"

"You'll get one."

"And you'll tell me where she is?"

He frowned. "Better. I'll show you where she is."

My heart leaped.

"You mean she's here in this house?"

"Yes. Most certainly. Where else at the moment?"

"Why can't she come down?"

"Up, dear boy. She's in the cellar."

"Cellar?!"

"Yes. Come. I'll show you, and give you the explanation you seem to need."

I let him go, and followed. He talked as we walked.

"I am most surprised that Bertram permitted a marriage . . . but, of course, it was no *real* marriage. Margaret . . ."

"Genevieve."

"Genevieve. Margaret. Hazel. Charity. Phyllis. All her names . . . it depends entirely on the man."

We descended into the laboratory basement. Doctor Praetorius flipped a switch, and a wall panel slid open, revealing a large room he had not shown us two weeks before.

"Behold your Genevieve!"

His arm swept out and my eyes followed to where it pointed, to a large, glass-panelled vat of liquid . . .

. . . Containing the pieces of my Genevieve, floating, wired, quiet. My legs walked me forward, seemingly of their own volition, and shock was turning my insides to lead. Her head was separate from the torso, her hair streaming out, suspended in the nutrient bath.

Her eyes were open, but they were glassy. Empty.

"An android, dear Ensign Loftus. Merely an android. But a very special one. Of my own creation. Quite unique in the universe! Also quite illegal. But the money I make with her quite justifies the risk.

I could not speak.

I could not move.

I could not tear my eyes away from the thing in the vat, floating.

"Oh, dear, you're quite upset, aren't you. Didn't Bertram tell you? I thought he might, eventually. You see, she is but a toy of flesh and blood, formed to the specifications of the renter, with various electro-neuronic attachments psychically keyed to the thought waves of the person she is with. A perfect female companion. A perfect slave."

"You created her?"

"No, dear boy. Your imagination did."

And in a black, overwhelming wave, the total realization hit me. Her words had been my words. Her actions were but the ones I commanded subconsciously. She—no, it—had no separate existence. It was but a flesh-clothed robot. An automaton controlled by my inner mind. It had no love . . . all the love was mine. It but reflected something very deep in me.

"As a favor to Bertram, I agreed to let you use her two weeks, and go along with the game that she was my daughter. But, then, I suppose she is, isn't she?" He struck a match, brought the flame to the end of a cigar he had inserted in his mouth, puffed. "I assume you enjoyed yourself. I'll even let you rent her some other time for half price. Hell, if you can come up with the star-creds, I'll see if I can't make an identical one, just for you. But then that would be close to half a million for the parts alone, not to mention the intense labor."

"How?" I croaked.

"Just a matter of biophysics and a lot of computer surgery."

I shook my head weakly.

"Oh! How did I tune her to you? Simple. Got you down here on the pretext of checking your health. What the machines really did was to take a detailed survey-scan of your biochemical makeup, your bioelectrical schematic you've been working on since your birth—your psyche, if you will. With that information, Hudson made the proper plastic surgery modifications to the physical aspects of the android, according to your tastes—and made the fine tuning necessary to make her actions synchronous with your desires, your inner wants and needs. Marvelously successful, don't you think?"

I suppose I might have done something dramatic, like grab a nearby crowbar and destroy the lab. Crashing of glass . . . spilling nutrient fluid . . . hum of snapping computer gut sparks as the righteous hero lays waste about him, foiling the evildoings of the mad scientist . . .

But instead, I took one last look at Genevieve's decapitated head in that sterile casket-vat—and threw the mental dirt in her grave.

I staggered from that basement, out into the street . . . and something snapped inside me.

They found me in an alley, so they tell me. They took me back to my ship. They fiddled with the broken parts inside my head—reconnected a few, gave up on others. And they gave me a long leave of absence—told me to take a nice holiday to mend myself.

O, sweet God . . . she was more than just me . . . I swear she was. She seemed the answer to my inexpressible want beyond mere physical yearning, beyond mere mental desire. She seemed the answer to my *sehnsucht*, my ecstatic melancholic joy. She was incarnate joy I could hold in my arms. And yet . . .

And yet . . .

O, God, and yet I can see . . . I can see now that the fulfillment of that desire that short fortnight was but a hopeless desire in itself . . .

I caught a hint of Beauty beyond beauty those weeks . . . something that is not in this life . . . too bright for human eyes, yet for which a soul exists . . .

And it glimmered in my eye . . .

And that is why I sojourn here, alone and palely loitering . . .

His words gasped away like a dying man's last breath.

We sat in silence.

We were the last of the bar's customers; I noticed the robot bartender hovering attentively a few feet away, ready to leap to our whims.

A glance behind me told me the bathyscafé was rising quickly.

The atmosphere of the place had changed from lighted cozy warmth to a wan metallic chill; the boozy scents to doctor's office smells.

The beer in my belly had gone sour.

I shivered and felt more than slightly sick.

I had detached my body computer, and could not think of anything to say to him. I gave a try with, "I'm sorry," but the words stuck in my throat.

With a jarring, clattering clang, the bar docked to the underside of the city.

"Time, gentlemen," came the psuedo-cheerful voice of the robot. "We open again at three of the clock, post meridean. Please come again."

Silently, we stumbled out of the slouches. Hal tripped, fell. I picked him up, and put an arm around his shoulders to steady him.

We took an antiseptically clean elevator topside, for fresh air.

There, we walked some dark distance, wordlessly, and soon found ourselves at the edge of the floating metropolis.

We leaned against the steel railing, listening to the waves slap at the monstrous pontoons below us. A briny breeze assailed us, damp, icy, blowing our hair about. Phosphorescent jelly fish winked at us from the oil-dark ocean. Stars stared down, indifferent, ice crystal eyes in the sky.

Behind us the great city murmured mechanically.

We stood for a time like that.

We stood like that, and I swallowed a pill to cancel out the effects of the alcohol, and I made Hal take one as well. But the effect of his story lingered, hanging hauntingly in my mind like the ectoplasmic remains of a nightmare more real than any waking reality. I had always loved that Keats poem. But to actually have the innocence to play it out so intensely . . . Suddenly, all the sophistication and cyniscism of my years seemed so brittle and foolish. I felt like a little kid dressed in floppy grown-up clothes, abruptly discovered in the attic by his parents.

We sit so smugly in our little defensive facades, chuckling at the imagined ignorance of dreamers. Derisively shunning emotions we dare not try to understand, content to wallow in the muck of our little lives. So frightened of the ambiguity of what happens when a soul

dares to reach out into pure imagination, standing merely upon the fragile footing of inner needs.

The creamy, pocked ball of the planet's moon set, and false dawn gradually flowed up like a fountain of light.

"I'm a fool," he said bitterly, recovering his sobriety, appearing slightly embarrassed at opening himself up to a stranger. "Or you think me one, I'm sure," he whispered.

Awkwardly, I put an arm over his shoulders, and said, "No. Don't say that. Don't even think it."

I wanted to comfort him, to reassure him.

Staring off at the coming dawn, he whispered softly, "Is there hope for such as I?"

The crimson sun rose from its watery grave, covering the foam-flecked sea, and us, with its warming light, and I was ashamed and saddened, because I had no answer.

Not for him, nor for myself.

VERNALFEST MORNING

Michael Bishop

Priesman calls the place us kids live Little Camp Fuji. Fuji is short for refugee, and Priesman is—was—a lieutenant with the guerrillas on the rampart side of City. Since most of our mothers and daddies were sympathizers, one of Priesman's jobs is seeing after the kids in our camp. Already he's shown us how to keep the fujiniles from Deeland, Viperhole, Poohburgh, and the other nearby kiddie camps out of our gardens and barracks, and twice in the last month he's been through Fuji with a side of wild greyhound.

I like Priesman. I like the way he takes care of us, and I like the way he looks. He always wears dappled fatigues, creased combat boots, an automatic carbine slung over his shoulder, and a pair of bristly 'rilla burns that sweep down from his ears and out across his cheeks like wings. My father (I have a photograph of him with his last bullet wound showing on his left temple) had 'rilla burns just like Priesman's.

A little over a week ago, four days before Vernalfest, Priesman came into Little Camp Fuji's central barracks, no. 3, and dropped a bloody side of greyhound on the floor. I was sitting on Little Mick's winter thermals playing a game of bodycount with Lajosipha Joiner, our twelve-year-old, self-appointed witchwoman. Lajosipha had made the bodycount markers out of spent machine-gun shells and several old rampart-side safe-passage tokens. A bunch of kids got up to look at the meat

Priesman had just dropped, but the lieutenant turned my way.

"You're the oldest one here, aren't you, Neddie?"

"I'm fifteen."

Hands on hips, Priesman twisted at the waist to stare all the other kids right in the eye. "Anyone older than Neddie?" When no one fessed to being older, the lieutenant swaggered toward me, hooked a finger inside my shirt, and led me out onto the porch. While his big hands were squeezing my shoulders together, all I could see was the broken button just below the X of his cartridge belts.

"Fifteen, huh? If you weren't so damn puny, Neddie, you'd've probably been promoted out of Fuji by now."

I didn't say anything; I didn't look into Priesman's face. He already knew that in the last six months his own unit had run me back to camp half a dozen times. Finally, Priesman's beetle-browed colonel, Simpson, had said, "Don't come back before you're asked, little boy, or I'll have your scrotum for a dice bag . . . "

"Listen, Neddie," Priesman was saying, "do you know who Maud Turska is? Ever heard her name?"

"She's in your unit. She's the Poohburger proctor."

"That's right. Well, Simpson thinks she's passing holdfast locations and potential bomb targets to the airport-siders. He thinks she's using some of her kids as runners."

I looked up, wrinkling my forehead.

"Listen, now. We can't give you any metal, Neddie—no hard ammo, you understand—but on Vernalfest morning we want you to hit 'em. Hit Poohburgh, I mean. Do it right, and you'll have your promotion out of Fuji, I can tell you that."

When I went back inside to tell the others, most of the kids had rumbled down the rear steps to spit Priesman's gift and build a fire under it. Lajosipha was still there, though, hunched over the shells and tokens, and when I told her about racking through Poohburgh she jumped up and paced all over the barracks like a stork on stilts. Her

legs were so long I sometimes used to think her head sat right on top of them.

"It don't matter, them not giving us any metal. Other ways will do; beautiful ways. We need cardboard, Neddie. We need cardboard. And lumber. And rags. And eight or ten old automobile tires. I think Lieutenant Priesman's asked the right folks to get this done, Neddie, I really do."

The next day, three days before Vernalfest, I led Little Mick, Awkward Alice Gomez, and a couple of other Fujiniles from barracks no. 4 through the rampart-side ruins to the old trucking warehouses under the expressway. Little Mick had a wagon, a noisy one with wheels that we'd wrapped with torn bedding, and it bumped along, going clink-clank-clatter, and slowing us up.

Over the drooping expressway bridges, drifting up from City's burnt-out heart, oily plumes of smoke wriggled on the sky, and I could imagine Lajosipha trying to conjure with them, voodooing the airport-siders but blessing us rampart 'rillas with magical gobbledygook. She wasn't worth a poot on a scavenger hunt, though, and I was glad we hadn't brought her.

As it was, Little Mick nearly did us in while we were flattening pasteboard crates near the warehouse incinerator and laying them out in our wagon. He got punchy with success, I guess, and started jigging around the parking lot each time we flattened and stacked a box. Just as a huge, gray-green copter with rocket launchers under its carriage was tilting over the expressway toward the ack-ack emplacements on the mountain, Alice tripped Little Mick and hauled him up against the dumpster. That probably saved our bums. Priesman says the airport-siders like to go frog-gigging.

But we got back to Little Camp Fuji okay, and the next day while two other dog-parties were out for paint and lumber, Brian Rabbek took the wagon and a couple of thirteen-year-olds over toward the Pits. They were going to dig inner tubes and tires out of the sand. They ended up being gone 'till way past dark. Lajosipha, in fact, started muttering about death and weaving her arms around in

front of her face like two black geese trying to knot a double hitch with their necks. The littler kids got spooked, and I told her to go do her witchwomaning in a closet somewhere. She ignored me and kept it up. Brian and the others eventually got back okay, though, and that pretty well undid the spookiness of her mumbling and jerking about. Damn good thing.

The day before Vernalfest broke clean and clear. Awkward Alice, just as if she was old enough to know, said that the smoke hanging over the airport across town and among the trees on the mountainside looked laundered. It *was* white, white and fluffy.

That was the day everyone in Little Camp Fuji really worked. We sat crosslegged out in the yard between barracks and worked at cutting the tires and inner tubes into long pieces. We made breastplates, helmets, and shields out of cardboard. We painted designs on the shields and cuirasses we'd finished. The plans for all this get-up and for the coats-of-arms and mottoes we painted on it were all Lajosipha Joiner's; she told us what everything was supposed to be called, showed us how to use strips of rubber as flexings on our shin- and arm-guards, and insisted that every flimsy lance have a banner tied to it somewhere along its length. A few of us made broad swords out of scrap lumber, and Little Mick found a number of odd-sized tins which he cobbled together on a board for a set of marching drums. Lajosipha supervised everything. Her hands were streaked with three different colors of paint right up to her elbows. We were really busy.

Priesman came by in the afternoon. He was sweaty and crotchety, he had gray circles under his eyes. "What the hell is this, Neddie? You think you're going on a goddamn *crusade?*"

"No metal, you said. We've made our own stuff."

"Listen, the first Children's Crusade was a fiasco. If I know anything at all about first-strike advantage, Neddie, this one isn't going to go a bit better. They'll hear you coming. They'll *see* you coming. It'll all turn out a botch, and Simpson'll have my neck."

"He'll have your scrotum for a dice bag," I corrected Priesman.

"That's all right," Lajosipha said, answering the lieutenant instead of me. "We don't sneak." She was wearing a cardboard breastplate with a drippy red eagle outlined a little off-center against it. A white hand print lay on her left cheek like Indian war paint.

Priesman turned to me. "Neddie—"

"It'll be okay," I assured him. "We don't have to sneak to hit 'em right. We really don't."

Not looking at anybody, the lieutenant said, "Shit!" Then he unslung his carbine, fired three quick, pinging shots at the weather vane on the no. 4 barracks, and stalked to the entrance of Little Camp Fuji. Here he turned around and spoke only to me: "*Our* scrotums, Neddie. Yours and mine. Simpson wants Turska taken down and out, but her daddy was a field commander with the original rampart force, fifteen years ago, and it's got to be done obliquely." He let his eyes rove disgustedly over our medieval get-ups. "Obliquely doesn't mean backasswardly, Neddie, I swear, you just don't seem to understand."

He wiped his forehead with his sleeve, sent a blob of spittle into the dust, and disappeared up the hillside between an ashy-black automobile and a row of trashed phone booths.

On Vernalfest morning Lajosipha was the first one off the floor. And the first one to get down on it again in order to pray. Keening, moaning low, coughing from the spring cold, she woke the rest of us up. The barracks were dark, and when some of the kids in no. 3 started slamming doors to the dormitories next to us, it was hard not to think of gun shots.

With Little Mick's thermals under me for a mattress I lay staring at the ribbed ceiling and remembering how until I was four I had lived in the lobby of the International Hotel. Then the airport-siders had collapsed the building with mortars, and it was almost two years—I got real good at looting and grubbing, even as a

little kid—before the first kiddie camps were "bilaterally organized." Priesman says there's a six-year-old treaty outlawing military activity in or around the camps, but Fuji's been strafed before and so have Viperhole and Mouse Town. Maybe the kids on airport side have caught it, too, I don't know. But if you just look up, you can see the colander holes above the rafters . . .

"Come on, Neddie," Brian Rabbek said. "If we don't get started, it'll be light soon."

Everyone dressed. Everyone pulled on their cuirasses, casques, and greaves, old Lajosipha right there to say which was which and to help lace you in if you couldn't do it yourself. Outside, as the aspens on the mountain ridge began to twinkle, we grabbed our lances and formed up in two columns. Little Mick started bongoing his peppermint and tobacco tins, but someone knocked him on his ass, and the stillness got thick and nerve-tweaking again. Pretty soon, we were all shuffling out of Little Camp Fuji like the pallbearers at a propaganda funeral. It was eerie, marching in front of them before first light.

I wasn't really in front, though. Lajosipha Joiner marched ahead of even me, wearing a long white dress that had once been her mother's and not an ounce of cardboard armoring. Her goose-neck arms weaved back and forth as she walked, as if she was spelling the sun to come up. I didn't mind her going ahead of me, because I kept waiting for a 'rilla unit—ours or theirs—to spring out of the rubble into our path and mow everybody down with words or rifle fire. In the cool, spooky morning rifle fire didn't seem much worse than words. Also, it was okay by me if Lajosipha wanted to lead us to Poohburgh, because it sits about two miles off the perimeter expressway in an area of rocks called Sand Spire and I felt like she knew where we were going maybe even better than I did. She had a sense for that kind of thing. So all I had to do that morning was wonder why, except for the flapping of our banners, it was so still and quiet.

"Truce today," Brian Rabbek whispered. "Vernalfest truce. We're breaking it, Neddie."

I guess we were, going against a rampart-side camp on the first Sunday after the spring's first full moon—but what mattered to me was doing what Priesman had asked and getting promoted into an adult unit bivouacked on the mountain face overlooking City. I was too old for Little Camp Fuji. Only a couple of the kids had ever really seemed like family to me, which was how Priesman said I ought to think of *all* of them. Anyhow, I've heard Simpson say truces are made to be broken, that's what they're for . . .

"Play, Little Mick," Lajosipha commanded loudly as we straggled into Band Spire toward the quonsets of Poohburgh. "Give us a tat-and-a-too to march to."

So Little Mick, with permission this time, began bongoing his tins, and all us Fujiniles flapped and fluttered along, holding our lances high and squinting against the pale light seeping across the eastern plains and through the ruins of City to the rock garden surrounding Poohburgh.

A sentry heard or saw us coming. He raised a piping, echoing shout to rouse his barracksmates. They got up in a hurry, too. They got up a lot faster than we had, in fact, so that whatever "first-strike advantage" Priesman had wished for us was lost by our fluttering and drumming. That didn't seem to matter, though. Our get-ups—our visors, our shields, our other cardboard whatnots—put even the older Poohburghers in a panic, and Lajosipha led us right up their main avenue before any of them thought of picking up a rock and flinging it at our funny-looking heads.

By this time our lances had come down and we were spreading out across the camp like iodine seeping through a bucket of water, scuffling along beside each other with our broad swords and lances pricking at whoever not from Fuji got in our way. I don't remember a whole lot of what happened, except that it didn't seem cool after we'd tramped into the Sand Spire area. I remember that a lot of the younger kids on the other side came out of their quonsets without many clothes on, and a couple of little boys were stiff from the dawn shock. When we chased

them up against a porch railing or a boulder of sandstone, their bellies gave way as easily as a wet sponge would. What I remember mostly, I guess, is scuffling and screaming and myself feeling sick because everything seemed to take so long. It all just went on and on, and in the midst of it all I remember Lajosipha Joiner weaving spells with her arms and charming us invincible.

Finally, someone thought of picking up a rock. The first one thrown struck Lajosipha in the eye, and she crumpled down into her tattered white dress like a wilting flower. Then more rocks came, and while I was trying to pull Lajosipha out of camp I could hear the rocks bouncing off shields and breastplates with sickening *thwumps*. On one side of me I saw Brian Rabbek retrieving stones from the ground and chunking them back at the kids who had thrown them. Awkward Alice Gomez was doing the same thing on the other side. Pulling Lajosipha along, I noticed that the dust was clotted and sticky, but didn't really think about anything but getting her home. Throwing rocks and jabbing with our lances, we retreated. We backed out of the Poohburgh kiddie camp, tore our armor off, and tossed aside our weapons, and, after regrouping on the far side of the Sand Spire overpass, helped each other get home to Fuji.

Lajosipha was dead. We buried her in her mother's dress in the trough of dirt where we used to spit and roast the greyhounds Priesman brought us. Little Mick and a couple of kids from the no. 2 barracks never came back at all. Not counting one kid's mild concussion and some really-nothing scrapes and bruises, though, these were the only casualties we suffered. Brian Rabbek says we were gone only an hour and twenty minutes, and most of that time was used getting down to Sand Spire for the attack and then returning home. Three days later, in spite of how bad my memory is concerning what we did down there, I feel like we spent the whole day in Poohburgh. The rest of Vernalfest is just a shadow thrown by the morning, even poor Lajosipha's burial. We just dug her down and covered her up. I don't think a single one of us thought

about carrying her in a prop-procession through the main streets here on rampart side, and that's too bad.

That's why I say that the rest of Vernalfest was just a shadow thrown by the morning.

It wasn't until yesterday that Priesman got by to see us again. I had myself so worked up waiting for him, that two or three times I nearly went out looking for his unit's bivouac, just to ask him how us Fujiniles had done. When he finally came strolling in, though, Priesman was wearing *two* carbines and a smile that made his 'rilla burns stand out.

"Turska broke, tough old Maud herself. Her daughter by an airport-sider was in Poohburgh Vernalfest morning, and that just wiped her out. She fessed the whole schmeer under sedation, and Simpson's higher than a migrating goose." Priesman tossed a rifle at me. "Here's your carbine, Theodore. Let's get the hell out of Little Camp Fuji."

"I've been promoted?"

"Sure." He bent his fatigue collar down so that I could see the new insignia on it. "And so have I, Theodore, so have I."

THE MAN WHO WALKED THROUGH CRACKS

R. A. Lafferty

I

There came a crooked man, untimely born,
Who blew down walls with soundless, cromie horn.
He sought, beyond the realm of cul-de-sacs,
Infinity that hides itself in cracks.
—The Original Horn Book

Hamelin College had no claim to fame except that it was the titular see for a group of numinous guards. They guarded well most of the time, but every few centuries some group slipped through them. There were, in fact, recent events pointing to the case that someone might have slipped through in the present decade.

"The events weren't real," Professor Dorothy Mandel insisted. "They were working postulates used in my experimental psychology class, and that's all they were."

"The events weren't real," Professor Rosemary Thumbsdown insisted. "They were recurring myth-person events in my analytical mythology class, and that's all they were."

"Our position is that the events weren't real," said Dean John Michael Anwalt. "But we have to crom our necks a bit to hold that position. It gives you a funny outlook when, one half of the time, you are looking out at the

world from the inside of a spherical bottle."

Aw, what kind of talk is that?

All right, *you* review the events then. And the events (why? What's the matter with grown people crying? It shows that they have sound emotions and frustrations), and the events were, or seemed to be, these:

"Could someone tell me the name of this course?" the lecturer, Professor Thomas Cromwell, asked the unfamiliar looking students. (Cromwell was a pleasant man with a crooked grin and . . .)

"It is History of Musical Notation," a ruddy fellow said (. . . and a whole crooked face)—(Cromwell, not the ruddy young fellow).

"By the hexed hemispheres themselves, what am I doing teaching such a course?" Cromwell asked with a touch of insincerity (he had a crooked tongue too).

"We don't know, either, Professor," a pretty girl answered.

"I suppose that History of Musical Notation is as good a take-off pad as any," Cromwell said. "Well, you see, students, there are the approved musical notes that are quite narrow. And then there are the spaces between the notes that are a thousand times as wide."

"In what respect do you mean the notes are *narrow*?" asked a gopher-faced young man. "Do you mean that they are narrow in respect to pitch or tone color or rhythm or melody or harmony or polyphony or mode or measure or signature or score or tablature or what?"

"I mean they are narrow in respect to width," Professor Cromwell said. "A person could erect more than a thousand unapproved musical notes between any two approved notes. But the unapproved notes would sound discordant, unpleasant, unnatural, and plain repugnant if they were anywhere near to the approved notes in frequency. They would sound to me, they would sound so to you, they would sound so to a Hottentot. They would sound discordant and painful to a dog or sheep or a

starling or a fish or an earthworm. And if the unapproved notes are not near in frequency to the approved notes, then we will seldom hear them at all. And that's odd, for they are there, available to the ear."

"The textbook by Duggle doesn't say anything about unapproved musical notes," a freckled girl said. Several of the students were looking at Cromwell doubtfully. The ruddy young man whistled a few bars of Rat-catcher Ramble soundlessly. How could he whistle soundlessly?

"Duggle doesn't mention that a person could fall through the space between two musical notes and be killed?" Professor Cromwell asked. "Well, I will mention it then. We are like people walking on stepping stones with bottomless chasms below for anyone who should miss his step. You step exactly on one of the approved notes, and that is all right. You step a little off-center of one of them, and you receive a slippery warning. But if you miss a note entirely, and the odds should be a thousand to one that you *will* miss entirely, then the result is your disappearance, and perhaps your destruction and death. So you can see that accepted tone, in the present order of things, is important."

Professor Sanger came into the lecture room. He gave a sort of smirk. He arched the brows almost off his head and he cocked his eyes in a way that was supposed to be comic. The he sat down in the back of the room.

"Now, young people," Professor Cromwell continued, "let us consider sounds that are not usually accounted as musical notes. Let us consider the whine of a buzz-saw. John Wellborn, will you put the variable-speed motor on that buzz-saw in the back of the room and then rev the thing up?"

"John Wellborn isn't in this class," a pretty girl said, "and there isn't any buzz-saw in this room. Maybe you are mixed up."

"By the scrubby Rat-catcher himself, I am never mixed up!" Cromwell argued. "Well, when the buzz-saw is accelerated, it mumbles, and then it sings. It mumbles again, and it sings again. And it does that again and again.

It sings when it comes to one of the approved musical notes, and it mumbles when it is going over the thousands of unapproved notes between. When asked to guess, most persons will say that the singing is from ten to fifteen times as loud as the mumbling. But instrumentation proves that they are of the same intensity. And scanning instruments prove one other thing: the constant-acceleration motor with its attached buzz-saw blade does not accelerate constantly. It lingers an unseemly time at the frequency-speed of the approved notes, and it leaps over the unapproved notes as though they were a wasteland."

"Really, you go too far, Cromwell," Professor Sanger said from the back of the room.

"Be quiet, Sanger," Cromwell ordered. "If you have come to heckle, then I will have to ask you to leave." That said, he returned to his lecture. "Let us consider a simple, synchronous A.C. motor. It should turn, on sixty-cycle current, and according to theory, at thirty-six hundred revolutions a minute or at eighteen hundred or at nine hundred, depending on the number of pairs of poles that it has. But it doesn't do this. The real speed will differ from the synchronous speed. Even a name-plate may give it at seventeen hundred eighty instead of eighteen hundred. And the usual explanation is that the motor is slowed by drag or slippage. Oh, by the green meadows on the other side, that's nonsense! There cannot be a slippage of synchronicity unless there is a slippage of time itself. How is this possible electrically? It isn't. Well then, how is it possible behavioristically? It is the corrupting effect of animate, and especially human, influence on inanimate equipment that forces the motor to break synchronous speed to match the frequency of the nearest approved note."

"Cromwell—may the Rat-catcher get you! — I *must* get started with my class," Sanger said.

"Go ahead," said Cromwell. "Now then, young people, we have a cosmic mystery. Why do people all over the world hear only very narrow and widely separated sounds, noises, notes? Why do they fail to hear the thousand times

more numerous notes and sounds that stand between them? Why do Africans, American Indians, Australian Aborigines, Chinese, Polynesians all hold the same notes to be approved and hearable? Why do they consider the edges of those notes to be dissonances and unpleasantnesses? And why do they not hear the great numbers of notes in between at all? How could such collusion have come about, and why?"

"Why do birds and animals accept the same small number of notes and reject the same large number? Why, why, why?"

"Aw, hemophilic bleeding hemispheres, come along now, Cromwell!" Professor Sanger barked. "It's time I was teaching my class, and time you were teaching yours."

Professor Cromwell looked puzzled for a moment. Then he brightened.

"Oh, I understand now," he said. "I'm in the wrong lecture room and talking to the wrong bunch of students. This is your class, Sanger. That's why you're here."

"It's because of you, Cromwell, and a very few like you, that the absentminded-professor image has been fastened unjustly on so many of us," Sanger complained.

"True," said Cromwell, "but I can hear sounds, I can smell smells, I can see sights, perhaps I can walk into lands that are forever closed to all you present-minded professors." And Cromwell walked out of the room.

"A crackie, that one," Professor Sanger said. "He says that the cracks in our world are a thousand times as wide as our world itself." But Sanger did not take over his class immediately. Instead, he called Catherine Cromwell on the room phone.

"This looks like the day, Catherine," he said sorrowfully. "We've all been watching his antics and hoping that the worst wouldn't happen. But it is. You should come and get him. It looks as if he is going over the edge."

"The phrase we use in this household is 'through the crack,'" Catherine said. "Yes, I hope we can go through the crack today. Oh, there's so much to look forward to!" And she hung up on him with a soundless clatter.

And Catherine in her own place was taken with both hope and apprehension.

"Wide meadows of my heart's desire, how I pray that it will work!" she said. "It will all be so much more spacious when we have gone through, and then I may get the things that I have always wanted. Really, I've never wanted much. A castle in the country with lake and beach and yacht basin, a mountain of our own with a superior slope for the winter season, a roomy townhouse (oh, fifty or a hundred rooms, we might have company), clothes enough to cover me modestly and elegantly, satellite apartments further downtown and uptown and on the park. Oh yes, and in Washington and New York and New Orleans and San Francisco and Paris and London and Dublin and Rome and Nice. A small number of planes of my own. And dependable servants and aides, and my personal publisher and producer and senator and cardinal. And let us have game-parks as wide as realms. Oh, the stag-hunt days! Oh, the lobster nights! Let me have the respect of all (oh hell, let it be the adulation of all). Let me have a hand in every glove, a thumb in every bowl and a toe in every vat. Yes, and an island in every ocean. Most of all, let me have the kind of money that only money can buy. All this will be easy if you defend us from the Powers and Principalities. Oh, by the Prized Hemispheres, defend us from them! Be good to the Rat-catcher: so many are bad to him. These things I pray for." Catherine Cromwell and God had an easy way of talking to each other, and they reciprocated favors.

Ah, let us step into this crack here for a moment (it's roomy enough, once you're in it, and the time passed there doesn't count) and be informed about the Hemispheres. The two Hemispheres were very old and of disputed origin, and they were prized possessions of the college. In form, each was a perfect sphere, and yet they were called hemispheres: It was said they had originally existed in the same spherical space and that they had then been

separated. They were of heavy glass, each at least a meter in diameter. One of them was crammed with creatures, rats, rat-faced people, proper people; but their faces were bigger than their bodies and the eyes were bigger than the faces. They seemed alive and avid to burst out. Most of the bodies and faces and eyes were cracked and shattered (you know that it was done by an eye-cracking sound), broken like glass and the pieces falling out of them. Yet they seemed alive and flexible, not rigid. They didn't seem at all miniaturized, but there were hundreds of them in that hemisphere.

The other spherical hemisphere was all green meadows and game-parks and cities and oceans, unoccupied, but waiting for visitation.

Ah, out of the crack again. But be careful: Don't mention that stuff.

Nah, Professor Cromwell didn't go to his own lecture room after the fiasco with the class of Professor Sanger. He went to still another room full of bright-faced students, and he found Professor J.F.E. (Killer) Diller already lecturing there. Cromwell held up his hand to halt that prattle, and he stepped into the breach.

"That's enough, Killer," he said briskly. "I'll take over now. Will somebody please tell me the name of this course?"

"It is Middle Mayan Archeology, Professor Cromwell." a gentle-voiced, pop-eyed young lady said. "We didn't know that you were interested in it."

"By the Square Hills of Quintana Roo, I'm interested in everything!" Cromwell declared. "Sure, a Middle Mayan pyramid will make a fine take-off base for my expansive views. Surely you have already noticed that the Mayan world is mostly hidden and that only a bit of it sticks above the surface. And you surely have wondered about the reason for this. Well, you might notice that our own world is also mostly hidden and that only a very small bit of it sticks above the surface. Have any of you young

people noticed that there are often ghosts in photographs of Middle Mayan sites? These are best seen on films that are developed immediately and examined immediately. Later, the ghosts blur: It's really a subjective blurring, though it happens to an objective film. Ghosts, or educated blurs, appear on photographs of all sites whatsoever, and why should Middle Mayan sites be an exception? There is a conspiracy, carried on by humans and associates-of-humans and directed by principalities and powers, to reject vast areas of the world and to paint them over with little black brushes to make them look like no more than cracks. Well, I know ways to oppose that conspiracy and to lead many people out of the narrow and mundane desert and into the interdicted green meadows."

"Professor Cromwell, everybody has been saying that you have gone crackie," Professor Diller protested, "and it certainly does seem—"

"Certainly, I've gone crackie," Cromwell cried joyously. "I believe that there are whole universes concealed in every crack. Some time back you were calling me the Mad Moth, and it's true that I have an obsessive attraction-repulsion for light. I believe that if one gets out of rhythm with approved light then one will become invisible. Yea, I'm going to lead a bunch into a really rewarding disappearance."

"How will you do it?" a girl asked.

"Gray magic," Cromwell said. "I'm afraid of the black, and I'm too compromised a fellow to attain the white. We will answer the question, 'Where are the Principalities and the Powers hidden?' and we will steer clear of the shoals of them. We will answer the question, 'Who are the rats and who is the Rat-catcher?' And we will take a hand in their battle also."

"Tom-Crom, get out of here!" Professor Diller snapped in total exasperation. "This is my assigned lecture room. It isn't yours. It is my job to knock knowledge into this particular bunch of nascent noggins. It isn't yours. Get out of here right now. There's the door."

"Nah, I don't think so," Cromwell laughed. "In the

wrong room again, am I? Somehow I'd rather go out one of the unapproved doors, though."

It isn't certain how Professor Cromwell left that room, and it isn't certain what he meant by an unapproved door. But, with a hazy sort of suddenness, he was gone. It was as if all the folks there had dust blown in their eyes for a moment. Professor Cromwell always had thrown a lot of dust in a lot of eyes.

"This is really the morning of the magicians, of the most amateur of them all, the Great Cromwell," the pretty girl said as Professor Diller set himself to take over the class. "It would be fun to go with him, wherever he goes. Well, *is* he falling out of rhythm around here, Professor Diller? And will he become invisible?"

"Yes, he is. He's in trouble, and he probably won't be renewed. I like him, but he dances to the notes of a different flute."

This referred to one of Cromwell's antics. He had an alto flute which he would blow with a happy puffing of cheeks and mugging of mug. And not a sound would come out of that flute, but an uneasy sensation would come across anyone nearby.

Professor Cromwell did finally stick his head into his own lecture room that morning.

"Carry on," he told the Crom-bombs who were his regular students. He had known where they were all the time.

"Will we ever!" those students cried. "Is there anything we should get ready to take on the journey?"

"Nothing, nothing, only yourselves," Cromwell said. "It's like an eye-dropper asking what it should take to an ocean. Where we are going there is always plenty of water. And plenty of salt. But be wary of the Principalities and the Powers! And try to learn which are the rats and which is the Rat-catcher."

(But one of the Principalities was very near, in his own den or ward-room or office. He was the Dean of Special

Studies of Hamelin College. He was John Michael Anwalt.)

II

"You live in scratches on the world," he said.
"Be-hark the crooked horn and raise your head!"
They did what Garden Guards will always do.
They held a court whose name is Kangaroo.
—The Original Horn Book

So they held a fully-toothed hearing on Professor Cromwell that night. It was held by the artificial, flickering, electric torches in the faculty lounge of the Special Studies School. The board of inquiry discussed matters in broad terms before the accused and his wife were brought in. The board was made up of Dean Anwalt, Professors Diller and Sanger (who both swore they liked Tom Cromwell), Professors Dorothy Mandel, Dolph Lustlife, and Rosemary Thumbsdown, and Underprofessor Peter Quickshanks.

"We will be brief," said Dean Anwalt, and his face was working as if he were churning small butter. "We are voting the non-renewal of the person Cromwell as professor of this college because of his wan-wittedness and mild insanity. We are voting the disbanding of his scheduling, classes, and positions; and the immediate removal of his person. His position will be obliterated, and his prerequisites and prerogatives will be impounded. His entailments will be divided among the seven of us. We *can* get away with that part of it, be assured. Has anyone any background statements or questions?"

"Yes," said Professor Sanger. "Do we really hear only one note of frequency out of every thousand in our range? Do we really see only one frequency out of a thousand? Do we really taste only one taste out of a thousand? Do we smell only one smell out of a thousand?"

"Of course, we do," said Professor Rosemary Thumbs-

down in that soft voice of hers. ("She speaks soft as thumbsdown," someone had said of her, "but she carries a sharp hatchet.") "We cover the wide spectra in everything, but we pick out samples at approximately every thousandth interval. We do *not* live in the world itself. We live in shallow scratches, in a refined and judicious sampling of the world. I thought everybody in the top one-thousandth of one percent knew that."

"Then Cromwell is right?" asked Professor Diller. "The cracks that we ignore are a thousand times as wide as the world that we inhabit? And the ghosts that are just off of the approved frequencies, they are real? Well, why wouldn't it be better to venture into those cracks and enjoy the real spaciousness of the world itself?"

"Because our nature tells us to be wary of that," Dean Anwalt said. "Our fallen nature tells us that we don't want the wideness, that the narrowness is a superior thing. And our exult-in-its-fallenness nature tells us that the wide ways are the extreme danger: It tells us to ban or interdict them when we cannot imprison them."

"For every one of us are there a thousand superior genii imprisoned in our sub-mental bottles and stored on the cobwebby shelves of our inattention?" asked Diller. "But, really those genii are free and easy in their spacious green meadows and space-multiplied, gold-flecked cities. Cromwell is right."

"No, dolt, that rank Rat-catcher of a Cromwell is wrong," Professor Dolph Lustlife contradicted. "They are not free and easy. We'll not permit it. We have them imprisoned in their thousand-fold prisons—well, not all of them, but we have a lot of them bottled and stoppered—and we'll not release them. Cromwell's wrongness is a sticky pitch that catches the weak-winged and weak-limbed ones. Has it caught you, little Killer Diller? Perhaps we can have your own entailment confiscated and divided among the remaining *six* of us. That's a penalty for your being wrong."

The Prized Hemispheres were displayed on a nut-wood table there in the torch-lit lounge.

"Ah, maybe you will confiscate my entailment too," Professor Sanger spoke in half anger. "Maybe you'll cancel me. I have been feeling a bit cancelled lately. It's as though an amnesia were snapping at my heels like a long-toothed fog."

"Those are the unapproved notes, little Banger Sanger," Professor Dorothy Mandel jibed. "Be careful. They'll eat the heels clear off you."

"The amnesia is connected in part with Cromwell," Sanger said. "How long has Professor Cromwell and his mild insanity been among us? I can't remember."

"He arrived just this year, I think," said Under-professor Peter Quickshanks.

"Just this month, I think," said Professor Diller.

"Just this week, I think," said Professor Dorothy Mandel, "but it's been long enough."

"What does the record show, Dean Anwalt?" asked Professor Dolph Lustlife.

"The record is a little stubborn in Cromwell's case," said Dean Anwalt, that baby-faced, aging man. "A dozen times I've looked in the record for the date of Cromwell's entry into our midst. I've had my finger and my eye right on that date a dozen times. But I've never been able to read it off."

"Why not?" asked Professor Mandel.

"An inhibition, in the form of a mist, is always introduced. The mist gets in my eyes, and it puts me to sleep every time. It's a clever device, really too clever for Cromwell to have thought up by himself. I wonder about it."

"We'll fix that fink!" Professor Lustlife bayed. "We'll fix his *termination* date for today or tomorrow, and we'll make it stick. Then let that Rat-catcher throw mist in our eyes!"

"Who are the Rat-catchers?" Professor Diller asked. "And who are the rats? Who are the Principalities and the Powers? Those are Cromwell's questions. This one is my own: Are we, all of us, b.y.o.b.—bring your own bottle—genii?"

"The more intelligent genii have always used the mental evasion that the inside of the bottle is the outside, and the outside is the inside," Professor Rosemary Thumbsdown said in her soft voice. "They make themselves believe that they are on the outsides of the bottles and that they have the world caught inside. By believing it they make it to be so. And, really, there's not very much difference in the two sides of a piece of glass."

The faces of the people in the first of the Hemispheres looked very familiar in the torchy light. Who were those people who had been imprisoned in there for so long? If those crowded and tormented people were only artifacts, why was it so shocking a thing to meet the eyes of one of them?

"The things we are talking about are mottles on the face of the world. There cannot be a prosaic and everyday world if we even have such thoughts. That would mean that the nature and essence and direction of the world are still up for grabs," said Sanger.

"The face of the whole world has always been made up of just such mottles as these,"Professor Lustlife said. "But it is part of our job—we of the upper one-thousandth of one percent—to give a better seeming to the world's complexion. There have always been experts working on this. We construct and maintain the fiction that there is a rational world, that there is a consensus world, that there is a humdrum world—ah, the unapproved notes of that illicit musical instrument, the hum-drum, are no longer heard by conforming ears—that there is a work-a-day world. And we know there isn't, but the fiction has proved a useful one."

"Bring in the accused," said Dean John Anwalt. The doors were thrown open. But an underling entered first and handed Dean Anwalt a piece of writing. After this, Tom and Catherine Cromwell came in. Then the doors were closed and locked. The Cromwells were put in the dock (they had an antique dock-stall there, of fine, old, polished wood). The Kangaroo Plaque was unveiled on the wall to show what sort of hearing this would be: A

kangaroo with a lot of kick.

"I have just received notice of disturbances," Dean Anwalt said. "A group of young and not-so-young students, known as the Crom-bombs, has been knocking down walls and blowing off roofs. They are doing this by shock waves that are somehow in between audio frequencies. Are you responsible, Professor Cromwell?"

"Oh, I guess so, a little bit. I encourge these people to improvise. And some of the walls and roofs did seem a little bit confining." And Professor Tom Cromwell began to blow soundlessly on his alto flute.

"This probably crowns a series of illicit acts," Dean Anwalt said. "If there should be one more illicitness, that would be certainty. Please stay in the dock-stall, Mrs. Cromwell. It is securely locked, and there is no way you can get out of it, in any case. But you are out of it. Get back in it."

"I can't. It's securely locked," Catherine said. She was standing before the Prized Hemispheres and waving at some of the people inside the first of them.

"Stop blowing on that damned flute, Cromwell!" Anwalt ordered. "The sound of it, no, not the sound, the something of it is driving us all crazy."

"Can you hear my flute?" Cromwell asked.

"No, of course we can't," Anwalt said. "But whatever is coming out of it is driving us crazy. Stop it, I say! Who will deliver the jeremiad?"

"Let me!" shouted Professor Dolph Lustlife. "Oh, let me!"

"This man Cromwell is a trouble-stirrer, a sour note, a glutton at the trough, and he is a nobody from nowhere. Let us vote his extinction at once!"

"I say get that Rat-catcher of a Cromwell!" Underprofessor Quickshanks swore angrily.

"We intend to, Peter," said Lustlife. "There is something totally wrong about this man. We don't remember how it happened, or when it was that Cromwell came to our college. We barely begin to remember that each of us was assessed one seventh of his pay to go to this Rat-

catcher. Yes, he is the Rat-catcher. He blows the Rat-catcher flute. But his flute lies about the wide meadows it will take people to. They are all narrow meadows, in a bottle, in a hemisphere. Where did he go? He can't get out of the locked dock-stall. He can't get out of the locked room. But he's gone. Where?"

"I believe he has gone up the chimney," Dean Anwalt guessed in a jerky voice. "His flute playing seems to be coming from up the chimney."

"There isn't any chimney," Lustlife said. "Oh, there he is back in the room again. Cromwell, please stay in one place 'til we are finished with you. And if you detect a sinister note in the phrase 'finished with you,' it *is* there."

"Let me simplify this," said Cromwell. "You want to be rid of myself and my wife. Well, we are ready to go. We are leaving this college this very night for wider and livelier places."

"Do you not understand, Cromwell?" Dean Anwalt asked. "Certainly, we want to be rid of you. Certainly, we want you to leave. But we do not want you to leave here for some other place. We want you to leave every place forever. We will insist upon your extinction. Guard the four corners, Quickshanks, Lustlife, Thumbsdown, Mandel!"

"They are guarded," said Lustlife (but it didn't seem to be a physical guarding of the four corners of the room). "We have him bottled up, no matter what he tries. Now, for the regularity and seemliness of the world, let us remove these Cromwell irregularities. It is not enough to extinguish irregular persons. The condition must be achieved that they have never been. And that the creatures writhing in bottles have never been."

"Is it possible that extinctions and obliterations and such can go on so unquestioningly and unnoticed in our world?" Professor Diller asked. "Is it really so woolly a world we live in that it has to be saved from such? After all, Cromwell is no more than a clown."

"This clown Cromwell can affect the whole world," Dean Anwalt insisted, "and the world gets very nervous

when it is disrupted. Every clown can affect the whole world at any time. That's the four-billion-headed hazard that the world always has to live with. Most of the clowns don't understand the way it really is with the world. The clown Cromwell understands certain parts of it dangerously well."

"But there is no cause for his removal except incompetence, arrogance, obnoxicity, suborning the young, and cracking windows with his flute-playing," Diller protested. "I like Tom-Crom. He is harmless, and his wife—"

'And his wife is *not* harmless," said Professor Dorothy Mandel. "Could we not terminate Catherine and keep Thomas?"

"Dorothy, your eyebrows are burned off and your nose is melted, and your head is cracked wide open!" Catherine Cromwell cried, but she seemed to be talking to somebody in the first Hemisphere rather than to Professor Dorothy Mandel where she sat in the room. And yet, that candid comment clipped Dorothy Mandel a staggering blow. "You sure do look funny, with your head-hair burned off, too," Catherine said to the person in the Hemisphere.

"Are we *sure* that Cromwell's entailments can be divided among the seven of us?" Sanger asked.

"I am sure," said Anwalt. "There won't have been any Cromwells when we have finished. There will be only the seven of us in the special department; and what is available will be available for the seven of us. And, to get rid of any wax-heartedness that may be lingering among us—" Dean Anwalt finished the words with a rapid two-handed action. He opened two vials and let their fragrance reek into every corner of the flickering torch-lit room. (Anwalt had been professor of Instigational Chemistry.)

"Ah, I don't like Tom-Crom as well as I did," Professor Diller said as he snuffled the rank aroma.

"I say let's get rid of the spacious devil and his green meadows. We mustn't let the world be upset. We mustn't let ourselves be upset. Damn, where did he go this time? The doors are still locked. What is that stuff from the vials, Dean?"

"Essence of Hyena Scruff from one of the vials," said Dean Anwalt with his baby-face working into a twisted passion. "And Fortified Distillation of Entrail Gore from the other. Evocative stuff, what? It does get one into the mood. Muzzle deep into that gore, everyone! We'll have Cromwell and all the blood in him. We'll split him seven ways, and then we'll arrange it that there never was a Cromwell. Ah, maintaining a conventional facade for the world isn't easy, but it's a big part of our job. Holy Hyenas! There is a shattering un-noise somewhere near, and it's worse even than Cromwell's flute. What is it? It's the final offence." Anwalt had a very old sword-hilt in his hand, and there was a sort of rusty-airy outline still to be seen of a very old sword-blade.

The un-noise rose tall and rugged then, and it stuttered in and out of licit sounds. It was outside on the college brown-grass green, and it was inside in the lounge. It was a marrow-curdling siren, rising and leaping between infuriating sound and people-cracking unsound. It was a full-sweep, ascending siren, rumbling and screaming, and calling the un-approved notes and nations back into a narrow world.

"I'm glad the young ones thought of that," said Professor Cromwell making a casual reappearance. "It illustrates my points even better than a buzz-saw."

"Rat-fink Cromwell, where have you been?" Professor Diller snarled at Cromwell, and the hairs were high and excited on his scruff. "Gore of your bowels we'll have! How do you go and come?"

"Oh, out one crack and back by another," Cromwell said. "It's the only way to travel."

III

Is Peter Piper Peter Poper now
To change the rules and banished things allow?
Look out! The cracky thing has jumped a groove!
They blow that lawless horn, you'd better move.
—The Original Horn Book

Then Cromwell began to blow on that pipe, that horn, that alto flute. It was a brain-bursting assault on every sense. It was the exponent of the siren in its howling power. It was soundless, but it was shattering.

"This is war!" cried John Michael Anwalt the dean. "Seize him! Kill him!" But Cromwell blinked on and off, he disappeared and reappeared. He walked into cracks in the air. And he walked out of other cracks from other directions. There was no weapon at hand that would touch him.

"It must not be known that Hamelin College is the seat of unearthly battles!" Anwalt cried as if he were ordering the elementals to desist. "Were we not given the duty of denying admittance to those places to everybody forever? Are we not the same persons who received those orders? Or is it true that every particle of a person is altered every nine thousand years, so we are now no longer the same persons? Oh that horn! That Rat-catcher horn! There has to be some way to stop the blasts of that horn!" But Cromwell was riding that horn in battle array.

"Oh, what horn is that?" Professor Dolph Lustlife cried in agony. "Can't somebody kill that horn!"

"I'll try!" Professor Dorothy Mandel shouted. "The horn and the siren and the crack-traveling people and even ourselves are all postulates and suppositions in my experimental psychology class. But I can't turn off the siren, I can't make the crack-travelers stay in their cracks, I can't kill the horn. Oh horn, you kill me!"

How Cromwell was blowing that horn-flute!

"The horn is a recurring myth-person in my analytical mythology class," Professor Rosemary Thumbsdown

keened. "But it kills me, too. It forgets that I'm the mistress of the class."

"It's Josue's horn!" Professor Diller moaned, "and all the walls are going down."

"It's the Rat-catcher's horn!" Professor Sanger railed. "But we *paid* the Rat-catcher. I know we did. We paid him one seventh of our pay."

"It's Roland's horn calling Great Carl and his wagon down from the sky," Professor Dorothy Mandel groaned. "But Roland's horn is an archetype and we cannot see it nor hear it consciously. Oh my unconscious ears! Oh my unconscious head!"

"It's Gabriel's horn!" John Michael Anwalt shrieked. "But how has he become prince before me? If he is here, then this is the end of things."

"It's Triton's horn," Lustlife warned, "and it roils the deepest waters. If it wakes up some of those things, then we are dead."

"It's Peter Piper's horn-pipe," Under-professor Quickshanks jittered. "Are Gabriel and Duke Josue and Cromwell and Peter Piper all the same? Is Peter Piper Peter?"

"It's the Horn of Plenty," said Catherine Cromwell simply. "Even smart people should be able to see that. Better raise the sky! Look at the stuff coming out of that horn!"

The unhorned people in the lounge couldn't see the stuff coming out of the horn (it was almost all in the unapproved frequencies), but Catherine Cromwell enumerated.

"Look at the boats and floats, at the steamboats, sailboats, electric boats, punt-boats, slave-boats with the whips and oars and haul-ropes. Oh, there is nothing so opulent as the banging of whips! Cabin cruisers and floating townhouses! How they all flow out of the plenty-horn, the cornucopia! And you all thought that it was just a cromie alto flute!"

The walls of all the buildings seemed ready to go down from the expansive and exponential vibrations of horn-

flute and siren.

"It is *not* the cornucopia, *not* the Horn of Plenty," Professor Rosemary Thumbsdown was calling in her soft voice against the silent noise. "It is the cornucalamitatis, the horn of calamity or trouble. It is the crooked horn that is broken off the crooked cow. All the riches that Catherine believes she sees coming from the horn are but the green cud-chewings and flowing manure from the crooked cow. These are false riches from the false box. The box or coffer or chest was called the 'cow' by our fathers. It is the unholy cow with the crooked or crumbled horn. Many have forgotten that the Maiden All Forlorn was named Pandora, and that the Box of Pandora was really a kerakibotion or horn-box."

"Who *is* Cromwell?" asked Professor Diller as he wiped the blood from his eyes and nose and mouth and ears from the vibrations that made unusual assault on every sense.

"Automobiles coming out of the horn and climbing the airy hills!" Catherine was shouting in glee. "Old hand-crafted automobiles from the High Middle Ages. The Almagest, The Argonaut, the Red-throat Racer, the Dragon, oh the beauty of these old cars! They run by alchemical transmutation and planetary congruence."

"Oh, Cromwell is the crooked man," Dean Anwalt said. "Be ready for the containment maneuver when it is time for it, wardens! 'Crom' means crooked in all the old tongues, so Cromwell is the well-crooked man. He blows the crooked horn, the cromie horn, the crumbled horn of child-scripture. He is the crooked man, and his journey into the infinite is no more than a crooked mile. He is not Gabriel. Still less is he Jack Horner. But he sports murderously with us and with the world. He may be the mysterious and fearsome person known in proto-legend as The Tin-horn Sport. There is much philological work to be done on this aspect of him."

"Barbecued whole hippopotami, ton-tuns of wine, young whales shiskabobbed on slag-mountain spits, we will have a going-away-from-this-place feast, and then we will have a coming-home-to-home feast!" Catherine

Cromwell regaled the air as Tom-Crom the Piper's Glom tootled those riches out of the curved-around hoot-flute.

And there was an elemental roaring that even transgressed on the narrow area of accepted sound itself.

"I'm very uncomfortable about the whole business of the cracks," Under-professor Peter Quickshanks jabbered. "Why is there a childhood taboo against stepping on cracks? Oh, because it's always possible for a person to fall through a crack and be lost. When I was a boy, a young friend did fall through a crack in the pavement. We could hear him falling all day long. Then, at dark, he hit a ledge or something very far down, and he was killed. We could hear him crying down there all one night. And the crack was only a slight one. Not an open crack at all."

A howling, flaming train, a locomotive and one hundred cars, erupted into the lounge where the night hearing was being held. It was the Crack-jack Express itself! It breached every wall of that lounge room and it was crowded with Crom-bomb young people, with demiurges, and with all the more intrepid people of Hamelin College and Hamelin Town.

"His family said he hadn't fallen down a crack at all." Under-professor Peter Quickshanks was still jabbering. "They said he had died of diphtheria."

Cromwell and other pipers were piping amplitudes of every sort into the cars of the Crack-jack Express, and it was ready to go on the most spacious journey yet.

"Wardens, be ready for the containment," Dean Anwalt shouted. "We have our orders that *nobody* gets into the green meadows. Ah, we'll trap them in the bottle and put the cork in it all."

"After all, a few of them get by every century or so." Professor Lustlife gave the ritual disclaimer.

"Yes, and we get a reprimand for it every century or so." Dean Anwalt gave the ritual reply. "All guards, be ready as myself am ready," and he flourished his sword-hilt and its rusty outline of a blade.

"Oh, let's some of us go by boat," Catherine Cromwell cried. There was a boat then, quickly filled with intrepid

people, and there was a waterway for it to run on.

"River warden, river warden, who will be the river warden?" Dean Anwalt gave the call.

"I will," Professor Diller offered in the most heroic moment of his life.

And they broke out of it, the Crom-bombs, the demiurges, the intrepid people, the crackies, they broke out of it in the train named the Crack-jack Express, in the boat named Return to Paradise, in Argosy and Almagest automobiles, and on their own fleet feet. They went through the wide cracks of the world, leaving the pinched residue behind them, and they arrived at the green meadows where everything is made from the extra-ordinary and spacious notes and substances.

No they didn't. They didn't arrive at any such place.

They arrived in the middle of the second Hemisphere, the multitude of brave people with their flamboyant vehicles and riches, and trains and automobiles and boats, they all arrived in the inside of that sphere that was no more than a meter in diameter. It was crowded in there for the several hundred of them. And seven black-hearted persons, Dean Anwalt, Professors Diller, Sanger, Mandel, Lustlife, Thumbsdown, and Under-professor Quick-shanks, gathered around the second Hemisphere and looked in at the trapped adventurers and jeered at them. Essence of high-hackled hyenas, essence of bristling hatred and entrail gore, how they did jeer!

Genii have been trapped in bottles for as long a time as a hundred thousand years, and then been no closer to getting out.

"That's too long to wait," said Tom Cromwell, and he blew that horn.

And other great hornpipers joined in the un-melody:

Honker-Conker, Blow-Joe, Josue, Piper Tom and his son Triton (no, none of these were the same, they were all different fellows), Jack Horner, Pied Piper (windows were cracking all over the countryside from the horn-blowing), Gabriel, Roland (streets and houses were cracking from the sound and the anti-sound), Peter Piper, Tin-horn Sport (bottles in particular were cracking everywhere), Tom-Crom and his crumbled horn! Then they all joined together in the strenuous strains of the Rat-catcher Ramble. (People were cracking open from the blast.)

Seven people in particular cracked in their very gullets and entrails, and they tasted their own entrail blood of defeat. They were those learned people: Anwalt, Diller, Sanger, Mandel, Lustlife, Thumbsdown, Quickshanks. They looked at the crowded and cracked people in the first Hemisphere and they saw themselves. They looked into the second Hemisphere and they saw that all the intrepid people had broken their bottle-trap and gone over the hills to the meadows themselves.

The foregoing, having happened in the interstices of both time and space, did not leave any record in acceptable places. And yet it all did happen. There are seven persons and their families who know that it happened. These are seven persons who instruct in the Special Studies School of Hamelin College. They instruct all day, and they try to do it well, they have so much to make up for (they proved to be inept guards on one assignment).

But when the day is over, they do not go to their proper homes and families. Instead, they must shrink themselves and go into the narrow glass prison of the first Hemisphere, and they must stay there 'til morning light.

They do not have happy home lives.

IN TIME, EVERYTHING

Mildred Downey Broxon

She sat a long time in the quiet house, watching the last rays of sunlight glint on the polished yellow pills. They shone like daffodils, oddly beautiful. Everything wore a veil, like the world seen through cataracts; even the tired paper-clutter of the house was softened in the dying light. She's always hated this, the sad time of day, when she'd been young. But now the dust and the slanted golden light made everything unreal. She was at peace, ready to move from a great numbness to a lesser one.

She was beginning to feel the pain lately, especially at night, and she had lost a great deal of weight. Six months, they'd said. She had accepted it, and now it was time to leave, with no fuss or bother, and only a few regrets.

She sat quietly a few moments, looking at the shelf of her books, Jim's books, and the many books they had written together; she thought briefly of their students, the expeditions, the tireless search for knowledge—it was all over now, over and done.

She rose quickly, though her stiffened joints protested, and walked to the kitchen. She stood looking at the dirty plate, cup, and fork still in the sink from—how long ago? She was no longer hungry these days. It was a shame to leave the house like that. She reached for her apron, and stopped. Someone else could do the dishes. She took a clean glass from the cupboard.

She turned on the tap, ran the water cold, and filled the glass. One by one, slowly, she swallowed the pills. She

always had trouble with pills, and these took a long time. They were small, but there were so many of them. It had taken her months to save them against this time of need. She set the empty glass down carefully in the sink.

Her cat stood crying at the kitchen door. "You heard me in here and thought I was fixing you something to eat, didn't you?" she said. She opened a can of food and put it and the cat out onto the front porch. "You'll do all right on your own," she told it. "They like you next door."

On her way into the bedroom she stopped to glance in a mirror, suprised at how old she'd become. When had it happened? Before or after Jim's death? She made a move to smooth her gray-white hair, then smiled and let her hand fall limply to her side. She straightened the covers on the big double bed and lay, carefully and with a judicious fairness, on *her* side, then shifted over to the center. She often forgot; it was all "her side" now. She folded her hands on her chest, looked at the age-spots, at the sliver-thin gold wedding band, and closed her eyes. Memories flooded past her . . .

She lay on her belly in mud, trying to crawl. The air burned her skin and lungs, and her eyes, water-adapted, did not focus. She gasped, and tried to crawl to the next puddle. It was a very long way, and she did not know the direction.

She crept out of the underbrush near the riverbank, her fur ruffled and her paws leaving tiny prints in the mud. A clutch of eggs lay there, unprotected. She looked around warily, then seized one of them in her teeth and scurried back to the underbrush.

She bit through the leathery shell and devoured the lizard embryo, licked the shell clean and fled deeper into the forest. She sat, nervously grooming herself. Tomorrow, perhaps she could steal another. The great lizards never watched their eggs.

She crouched in the grasslands, holding a club in her hand. If the antelope came through here . . . She heard the shouts, and saw the herd stampede in another direction, leaping high and gracefully over the waist-high grass. She trotted after them, waiting for a chance. If the hunt was successful they would all eat tonight. She grinned in anticipation and tightened her grip on the club.

She was very young, and so small she could hide in a corner of the cave and watch her mother argue with the wise man. Another man—her father?—lay quietly on a pile of furs.

"The moon is the wrong shape," the wise man said. "The evil spirit will not come out."

"He will die before the moon is right," her mother insisted. There was a silence, then, "I will give you our furs, and the baskets I wove," she said. "And on me be the curse."

"It is the wrong time," the wise man said, but as he spoke he fumbled in a skin pouch for his tools. "I am not to blame if he dies," he said, as he began to drill.

She listened to the steady rasping sound and watched, fascinated, as dark wet blood spilled out into the firelight. The patient moaned.

"I am not at fault," the wise man said, and leaned back against the wall to watch.

For the first time in her life she heard her mother weeping.

There was still the sound of weeping about her, but she was older, no longer a child, and in another time. She huddled on the riverbank with the other women and children and watched the village burn. The village—and her house, her own house. The storage shed was empty—the raiders had broken in to the dried fish, carrying some away and leaving the rest to soak and spoil in the rain; her loom was burning, and on it, the thick warm cloth she'd

woven for Hamund's winter garment. The sheep were driven off or butchered, and Hamund—Hamund—lay inside the doorway of their burning house, his head split by a battleaxe.

She could hear screams, and the crackling roar of flames, and once the dull, sick sound of a shield breaking. The smoke, drifting heavily along the ground, smelled of burning flesh and wet thatch.

Hamund was dead—he had died protecting her—and what would become of her? They would kill the older women, and take the younger ones back as slaves, this she knew; but what use would they have for a woman so near her time? She would be a hindrance to them. Would they kill her and her unborn child—Hamund's child? She looked up as a raider dragged yet another captive to the riverbank, but he did not look at her, and she could not read his expression. They had pulled her from the burning house, though she had screamed and pleaded to be killed with her husband; what would happen now?

The dragon-ships bobbed on the river, half hidden by the rain and mist. The faces of the raiders, fire-lit, were dirty, sweaty, and cruel. Suddenly she doubled over with her first pain. *No, not now,* she thought, *please, god, not now . . .*

The pain was different, somehow, changed, and she was a very young child lying in bed. Mother had tightened the bandages on her feet again, and the crushed, distorted bones sent chills through her body. The very weight of the silken sheets was a special torture.

She wanted to cry, to scream, but she dared not complain. *If I do,* she thought, *my feet will be big and ugly like a peasant's, and no man will marry me, and I will be a disgrace to my ancestors.*

She shifted, trying to find a comfortable position. "Goddess of Mercy, help me," she whispered. The servants had brought sweet tea, and sliced melon in a dragon-painted bowl; the tray stood by her bedside, untouched.

Last year she'd had such an appetite . . .

Last year I could run with my brothers and play, she thought. *But I am seven now, and it was time for Mother to bind my feet. They will be tiny, like hers, and I will wear little silk shoes. I will be beautiful; servants will carry me everywhere, and a rich man will marry me. I am fortunate; I will never have big, ugly feet.*

But it hurts. Oh, how it hurts. I can no longer eat or sleep. The pain is everywhere, all the time. Was I rebellious? Is it my fault? They did not tell me about the pain.

She buried her face in the crook of her arm and sobbed quietly, afraid her parents would hear.

She dared not cry in front of her son; he would waken. She was neither young nor old, but tired. She sat in a ditch by the roadside, in the crude shelter Kevin had made, and watched the gray rain fall on the fields. This summer was a judgment. It had to be. But for what? What had she done? Nothing more wicked last year than any other. She had worked, prayed, dug in the fields, cooked, mended the few clothes, served Kevin, cared for Colin and the baby—but this year it rained, and with the rain the blight came, rotting the potatoes underground. The smell of death was in the air. The potatoes rotted and the people starved, and those who did not starve took fever. And yet it rained.

There was a steady stream of people on the road, walking, staggering—to where? Some were gathered in burial parties, carrying the dead on planks—there were no more coffins, and none left with the strength to build them, and too many dead, far too many. The baby had no coffin. When her milk stopped and she could get no cow's milk he starved, and then took fever. He lay in the bare earth, wrapped only in a shawl.

Their house was gone as well; no potato crop meant no rent money, and the landlord wanted the land for pasture; the walls had been pulled down as they watched. Now they slept in the ditch, in the shelter Kevin had made, and the

rain trickled past and under them.

Kevin had gone looking for food. There was none to find, she knew, but she understood his need to do something, to try—though he, too, could scarcely walk from hunger.

She huddled in her shawl and looked at Colin. His face was flushed, and he slept too heavily. She was afraid for him. For a few pennies she could have bought strange, hard, yellow corn from the gombeen man, the hoarder—*may his bones burn in Hell*—but she had no money, nothing at all.

Colin whimpered and shook. She smoothed his hair and held him close, singing a lullaby to guide him back from his fever-dreams. *But why call him back at all,* she thought, *to this?* She stopped singing and stared out at the road, wondering if Kevin would return. Wearily, she began again to pray.

She was old, kneeling in a dim gray chapel. The ceiling arched high above her head, and the stained-glass windows were dark. It was nighttime, and she and the other sisters were at evening prayer.

She mumbled the words mechanically and slipped the wooden rosary beads through her fingers; finished, she sat for the prescribed period of meditation before bedtime.

The candles on the altar flickered; all around her there was no sound but the whispering of dry lips; the clicking of beads, and the faint rustle of serge. She looked about at the bowed, black-veiled heads, stiffly draped like so many coffins—and reproved herself. Undisciplined! She had lost custody of her eyes, and must so accuse herself at Chapter before her sisters.

She lowered her gaze and looked at the worn wooden seat of the choir stall in front of her, raised now so that the sister who occupied it could kneel. The board on which she herself had knelt was rubbed concave by years of use. *How many nuns have knelt here?* she thought. *Could they pray?*

I'm not praying, she accused herself, *I'm rambling. I wonder if I'll be assigned gardening again this spring? I hope so, I enjoy the earth smell and the warm sun, and the joy of growing things. I should request kitchen duty, for humility's sake.*

She looked down at her chapped, callused hands, and at the plain gold band on her right ring finger. *Wedded to Christ. And not to any man. Dear God, where are You? If You're there, why can't I talk to You? Why can't I hear You anymore? Or did I ever?* She looked toward the altar, at the flickering red light signaling the Presence, and felt nothing.

Please, God, she prayed, *when I was young I gave up the world, and I have grown old in Your service. Please, God, where are you? Let me feel something. Give me back my faith. Was it all for nothing?*

There was no answer. She could hear the saints laughing in the stained-glass windows, and the statues looked down at her with knowing smiles. Her crucifix hung cold and heavy around her neck.

At last, she was nowhere and had no age, and she could see nothing, but she could remember a great many things. Why should she remember? So many things, so very many different things, all jumbled, the great and the tragic, the funny and the trivial. There had been terrible times, and good times, births and deaths and lovers, meetings and partings, hobbling crippled and circle-dancing in the moonlight, weeping and singing and calm, quiet joy.

I must be dead, because I remember it all; isn't it over? Is there never any end?

No, she knew. *Everything will happen in time, everything there is. There is no end.*

I always wanted to learn more. What will I live through now?

She was aware again, and her memories were fading

with the darkness. All was gone now, all but one final, lingering memory of *hands* and *feet* and *eyes*. And what was *human?*

The water that surrounded her was odd, somehow; why had she expected it to taste of salt? It tasted as it should taste, of its own proper minerals. Lightning crackled overhead and made the water tingle. Her body rippled in time with the gentle wave-action. Why did she feel strange, misplaced? Around her teemed others like herself, sleek, bright-colored, and somehow— What was it she had remembered? It was gone now, and this world was young. She and her triad pulsed off into the warm, shallow. no-longer-alien sea.

THE SPOILED WIFE

Robert Bloch

Jerry Clayborn wasn't exactly a prince, but he knew a Sleeping Beauty when he saw one.

"I want her," he said, pointing his finger at the face behind the frost-rimmed glass.

The director frowned. "Are you sure? Remember, you have thousands to choose from."

And so there were. The block-long chamber was bordered by solid walls of glass; behind them, in three tiers of compartments measuring six feet high and two feet wide, the bodies floated.

In spite of the frosting on the glass, Jerry could still see the occupants of each compartment bobbing face-forward in their freezing solutions. They came in all colors, all shapes, all sizes; male and female, young and old, ugly and attractive. The one Jerry pointed at had long red hair, exquisitely fine-boned features, and a voluptuous figure.

"That's for me," Jerry said. "Talk about your frozen assets—"

"Now, now," the director murmured. "Remember the rules. Releasing a cryogenic subject for purely sexual purposes is against regulations. Each and every one has paid handsomely for the privilege of preservation. And if and when we restore them to life, they are entitled to their full rights as citizens. They cannot be physically abused, used as slaves, or treated as mere sex objects."

"I know that," said Jerry. "I read the law."

"Then you also know the reason for these precautions,"

the director told him. "Cryogenic experiments date back to the late twentieth century. The problem of maintaining subjects without physical decay had been solved, but the idea that they could some day be revived, free of disease or ailments, seemed a wild dream. Then medical advances made that dream come true, and the result was a nightmare.

"Thousands of people scrimped and saved to go the cryogenic route. They were expected to be thawed out and released now that it was possible.

"But some had been frozen for sixty or seventy years—their families and friends were dead, they had no homes, no possessions. Once freed from the freezer they simply became charity cases, a burden on the economy."

Jerry Clayborn was still staring at the redhead behind the glass. He licked his lips.

"That's when the government took over," the director said. "Abolished private facilities and laid down the rules. No subject can be restored unless his or her upkeep is guaranteed by a citizen of the state."

"Sure, sure." Jerry nodded, goggling at the glass.

The director followed his gaze. "Might I ask what sort of employment you have in mind for this subject?"

Jerry smiled. "I'm going to marry her."

"Really, Mr. Clayborn—"

"What's the matter? It's legal, isn't it?"

"But not advisable." The director pursed his lips. "Experience has shown that such marriages present many difficulties. Cryogenic restorees return to life with a different value system, the product of past cultures. The longer they've been preserved the harder it is to adjust to today's standards."

The director pressed a button and a tiny spool of microfilm popped out of a slot below the compartment housing the red-haired girl. He pulled a scanner from his jacket, inserted the film, then frowned.

"The young lady's name is Robin Purvis," he said. "A very early subject dating way back to the 1970s—frozen by her family after an accidental overdose of narcotics. Of

course, any physical damage will be fully repaired before release."

"So, what's wrong?" Jerry said.

"I told you. It's a matter of compatibility. Now, if you were to select someone of more recent vintage, so to speak—"

Jerry shook his head. "I want this one."

The director shrugged. "Remember, you were warned."

"No problem." Jerry grinned. "Unless she turns out to be frigid."

She wasn't.

Jerry discovered that during the very first night of their honeymoon on the spacecraft. Robin Purvis was obviously glad to be alive again, grateful to the man responsible for restoring her, and eager to make the most of the situation.

During the flight she quickly adapted herself to gravitational changes and enthusiastically explored all the possibilities of free-floating fulfillment—sex in mid-air, sex upside down, sideways, and on the ceiling.

But after they landed and shuttled to the honeymoon suite Jerry had rented at the Aldebaron Hilton, Robin looked disappointed.

"What kind of a joint is this?" she demanded. "Where's the television?"

"Reception isn't possible here," Jerry told her. "This is a hard-rock planet."

"Super," said Robin. "Let's get with it."

So Jerry booked a guided tour, they rented insulators, and off they went. Trouble was, Robin found her outfit bulky and cumbersome; the oxygen intake and artificial gravity unit were difficult to control, and—worst of all—the helmet mussed her hair. But she tried to be a good sport, and it wasn't until the guide conducted them to the caverns that she really blew her cool.

"Let me call your attention to these unusual geological formations," he said, through his speaker grid.

"Never mind that," Robin murmured. "Where's the hard rock you were talking about?"

"This is it," Jerry said. "These outcroppings—"

Robin glared at him through the peepholes in her helmet. "What's with you, man? Rock is to hear, not to see!"

The rest of the honeymoon wasn't much better. Robin didn't like the synthetic meals in the hotel dining room and she didn't care for the other tourists—particularly the ones from Rigel and Betelgeuse. "All those slimy tentacles," she said. "How can you stand looking at them? And eating through tubes stuck in their belly-buttons or whatever—blecch!"

"Sorry, darling," Jerry said. "I thought you might find space travel an interesting experience."

"Going billions of miles just to see a bunch of creepy-looking monsters—who needs it?" Robin shook her head. "If that's your bag, all you've got to do is drop a little acid at home."

So they went home, but Jerry didn't drop any acid. He sat down on the posturpad bed in the center of the room while Robin glanced around curiously.

"No more hard drugs, remember?" he told her. "You're clean now and you're going to stay that way. Besides, there are no hallucogenics nowadays—they've all been outlawed."

"But what about that pill you make me take every night?" Robin said. "What is it, some kind of birth-control thing?"

"The director gave me a supply when we left," Jerry told her. "You must take one every twenty-four hours for your life-support level."

"So what's for kicks?" Robin surveyed the four walls of the apartment. "Living in one room is for the birds. Come to think of it, I haven't seen any birds."

"Extinct," Jerry said. "With food and oxygen rationed, we can't afford to maintain unproductive life-forms."

"How about rich people—don't they have pets?"

"I'm rich enough. That's why I can afford to live on the four-hundredth floor of the best condominium in town." Jerry gestured at the four walls. "We have everything we need here. Look—this wall has your dial-a-meal unit. That wall has an automatic atmosphere-recycler installation. Over there is your complete cleaning-and-disposal mechanism. And the fourth wall houses the communications system. I'll show you how they work in the morning." He patted the bed, smiling. "Right now I want to show you how *this* works."

Robin smiled. "Okay. But I kind of figured things would be, you know, different, when I came out of the fridge."

"You'll find a lot of changes, I promise you," Jerry said. "Here—before I forget—take your pill."

Early next morning Robin shook Jerry until he awakened. "Hey, man—get up!"

Jerry blinked into awareness. "What for?"

"Like, don't you have to go to work?"

"I suppose so."

Jerry yawned, staggered to the wall housing the communications unit, and pressed a button. A green light flickered across its surface, then vanished.

"There." Jerry nodded. "All finished."

Robin stared at him. "You call *that* work?"

"I'm a maintenance-engineer. I'm responsible for seeing that every mechanism in this condominium functions properly. Once a day I press the button. If it flashes green, then everything's in order."

"You mean, it's all done by machinery?"

"Computerized servo-mechanisms," Jerry said. "Programmed from the control-center in Washington AC/DC."

"Then you just stay home here twenty-four hours a day?"

Jerry smiled. "We can be together all the time, darling.

Isn't that great?"

"Dynamite," said Robin. But she didn't smile back. And no smile came to her face as the hours passed.

Jerry showed her how to operate the dial-a-meal and order the instant breakfast which popped out of the wall on two disposable trays. It took just an instant to get rid of the leftovers in the disintegrator tube on the adjoining wall, and the apartment itself was antiseptically cleaned in less than two minutes.

"You see how simple it is," said Jerry. "If you want to, you can order lunch and dinner and set the timer for delivery. Then you're free for the rest of the day."

"But what are we going to *do*?"

Jerry patted the bed. "I was thinking—"

"Not now." Robin frowned. "Can't we go for a walk or something?"

"Where?"

"Outside—down below—"

Jerry shook his head. "Ground-level to floor one hundred is off-limits. Nothing down there but maintenance equipment."

"Couldn't I at least take a look at it?"

"Air pollution's too heavy. Dangerous."

"Don't you ever leave this room?"

"Certainly. I travel, visit friends. Like to meet a few?"

Robin nodded, so Jerry punched buttons on the communications unit until a print-out slid from a slot. "All set," he said. "My thyrox is on the roof."

The two-seater thyrox rose vertically, then sped forward, bouncing like a glass bubble between the towering high-rises below. There were hundreds of similar bubbles whizzing past on all sides and Robin stared at them, gripping Jerry's shoulder.

"Watch how you're driving!" she said. "Look out—you almost hit that one—"

"Don't worry," Jerry told her. "We can't collide. Every thyrox is on a computerized course."

But Robin closed her eyes and kept her head down; all Jerry could see was a mass of copper curls until they

landed on another rooftop.

"Who we visiting?" she asked as they stepped from thyrox to airlock to interior corridor.

"Lee and Varda Thorek," Jerry said. "Nice people—you'll like them."

It proved a poor prediction. Lee and Varda were well-preserved, but there was still the generation gap. As Robin pointed out on the way home, what could she rap about with people who were a hundred and fifty years old?

"I'm sorry," Jerry said.

"If all your friends are like that, we might just as well stay home."

"Suits me," Jerry told her. "Let's go to bed."

Robin hesitated. "Well—if you insist—"

"I do. Here, take your pill."

The next morning Jerry punched the button and Robin dialed their meals. The cleaning apparatus whined for two minutes and then fell silent.

"Now what?" Robin asked.

Jerry pointed at a wall. "You haven't tried the communications system yet. Let me show you how it works."

"Is it like TV?"

"Better. We've got holography."

"What's that?"

"You'll see."

Robin saw. The huge wallscreen lit up and beamed forth life-sized figures in three dimensions, so natural that they seemed to be real presences in the room, Jerry switched from band to band, giving Robin a chance to enjoy each program. There was a lecture on hygronomy, a lecture on hydroponics, a lecture on hydrodynamics, and a lecture on hydraulic engineering.

"Is that all?" Robin murmured. "Where's the car-chases and shoot-outs? That's what I'm into. And what about seeing something exciting—like people jumping up and down and wetting their pants when they win an electric

toaster on a game show? You know, entertainment!"

"I'm afraid our programming is structured more along educational lines," Jerry said, switching off the wall system. "Still, if it's entertainment you want—" He patted the bed.

Robin nodded and undressed. But when she joined him on the bed and he reached out to embrace her, she turned away.

"Please," she whispered. "Not now. I've got a terrible headache."

"All right." Jerry sighed, then reached for the plasticene container on the end table. "But before you go to sleep, take your pill."

The next morning Jerry punched his button and Robin punched hers; in a few moments they'd eaten and cleaned up the apartment.

"See how convenient the walls are?" Jerry said.

"One more day like this and I'll be climbing them," Robin told him. She paced the room. "Don't you ever do *any*thing?"

"What would you like? More space travel? I have other friends you could meet, and there's a choice of new lecture-programs whenever you want. It's a full life."

"I'll tell you what it's full of," Robin said.

"If it seems dull to you, I apologize," Jerry told her. "Now, why don't we just stop arguing and go back to bed?"

Robin pouted. "Is that all you ever think about?"

"But this is why I got married! My psych told me I needed an outlet."

"You tell that turkey I'm not an outlet! I'm a human being, and I'm entitled—"

"Of course you are, darling." Jerry nodded. "Just be patient. I know this is a whole new lifestyle, but you'll get used to it."

"Call this a lifestyle?" A frown furrowed Robin's face. "No uppers, no downers, no rock, no soap-operas on TV,

no place to go shopping or get your nails done—you don't even have any beauty parlors!"

"You don't need one," Jerry said. But now, looking at Robin closely, he realized that the flame was fading from her red hair, leaving drab streaks of mousy brown; her makeup and eyeshadow had worn off to reveal the mass of freckles and splotchy blemishes beneath. And when she scowled like this she was positively ugly.

Robin's voice was ugly too, as it rose to a whining screech. "Don't tell me what I need. You and your lifestyle make me sick!"

"But that's just the point, darling," Jerry said. "Look on the bright side. Thanks to modern hygienic conditioning and a simple, leisurely existence, no one is ever sick. If you'll only make an effort to adjust, you can live to be two hundred."

"Another hundred and seventy-seven years of this drag?" Robin's eyes blazed. "No way!"

Jerry didn't say anything, but he thought it over. When Robin finally stopped screeching at him and flopped down on the bed, he tried to take her in his arms. She pushed him off onto the floor.

"Dirty male-chauvinist pig!" she screamed.

Somehow, in all the excitement, Jerry forgot to remind her about taking a pill.

"Sorry about that," the director murmured. "I did warn you—"

"Not your fault." Jerry shook his head. "But it's quite a shock waking up in the morning with something like that next to you in your bed. Not just the puddle, but the smell—"

"That's what the pills were for," said the director. "Remember, a restoree is basically still a piece of meat that's been thawed out. Only an artificial preservative can halt the process from continuing its natural course. I'm afraid you spoiled your wife."

Jerry sighed. "What's done is done. Better luck

next time."

"You mean, you're going to try again?"

"Why not?"

The director rose, smiling. "Excellent." He led Jerry into the glass-walled chamber, nodding as they moved along the aisle. "I admire your perseverance. Not every man would have the courage and determination to make another such attempt. You do plan on another marriage, I take it?"

"Yes." Jerry nodded and halted at one of the frost-rimmed glass compartments as its occupant caught his eye. "Call me a romantic," he said.

The director glanced at him hesitantly. "A word of caution," he said. "This time I hope you'll benefit from your experience and make a better choice."

"Right," said Jerry, pointing. "I'll take that fellow over there."

THE PEACE THAT PASSES NEVER

Charles L. Grant

whispering

Jordan moved stiffly off the middle car on the train and stood, alone, in the center of the platform. Steam rose warmly about his ankles, gusted and momentarily obscured him. He blinked until his vision cleared, and sighed with an unease that marked a dubious return. A breeze twisted brown hair over his face and he brushed at it impatiently with his free hand, almost knocking his glasses off and forcing him to straighten them. He glanced once at the locomotive already grumbling to a start, shifted his suitcase from left hand to right, and made his way along the wide planking toward the parking lot at the rear of the stationhouse. As he did, he caught a glimpse of a pale face staring at him from a dining car window, a face so blatantly envious that he nearly laughed aloud. He knew what the man was thinking: Here's a guy, and a minister yet, getting off at Oxrun Station, a village so loaded with money it isn't even on the map; and me, I have to keep going to the end of the line and some dingy little town that is on the map and nobody ever heard of. Jordan resisted a wave and the urge to sprint back onto the train, find the man, and explain to him how things really were in the village he coveted so foolishly.

But the train left with a shriek that made him wince, and he was alone again. October in Oxrun. With a silence so marked in contrast to the breath of the city that he was

almost deafened to the sound of his heels as they snapped down wooden steps and onto the tarmac. There were no other cars in the lot, save one a dusty black, to match his coat, his suit, his shoes . . . almost his mood, if it had not been for the quiet.

not leaves and trees not mothers over cradles not creatures over grass not children in the dark only whispering nothing more only whispering

He drove without haste the mile to the rectory, clicking off the radio that persisted in telling him more than he needed to know about MacArthur and Korea and the noises Truman was making about the progress of the fighting. A hand drifted absently to rub at the knee he had smashed while skiing at college. It no longer made him feel guilty, not being in uniform, but there were times, a number of times, when he had to face women in the congregation who could not quite see him without a temptation to turn away. And lately, some of them had been looking at him as though he weren't even there.

He parked the DeSoto in the slant-roofed garage and walked around the dark-shingled house to the back, where he tested the lock on his private entrance to the church. It did not give—he expected nothing else—and he patted the jamb as if it were a faithful steed that braved a storm waiting for his return. In the twilight the white of the building seemed gray, the steeple and louvered belfry lost in a thickening fog born of no cloud or river. The illusion bothered him, yet less than the dark of the house he wished he had the nerve to paint a fire-engine red. He grinned at himself, then, and climbed the porch to let himself into the kitchen. Now this, he thought as he looked around the room, should be every man's definition of what a home should be. Quickly, he opened a few windows to rid the place of its stale air, snapped on every light he passed, then stood by the steps and looked at the front door. His mail was piled on the floor beneath the

brass slot, and he roused himself, gathered it wearily and dumped it on a table in the living room. Poked at it with a finger, and returned to the kitchen where he grinned as he found in the refrigerator a beckoning beer. He church-keyed it open, let the cold liquid wash the taste of the trip from his mouth and wandered back to the living room to see what his flock had sent him while he was away.

Flock.

He sniffed and rubbed a hard palm over his face. He certainly didn't feel like any shepherd he'd ever seen or read about. These days, in fact, he seemed more a silent partner in a prosperous mortuary. During the eight weeks before he finally had fled the village to the city, four of his oldest parishoners had died, were buried, leaving behind the confused accusations of the heirs, and the contemporaries. Nothing verbal and nothing overtly threatening until Mrs. Houseman limped in one afternoon and tried to convince him that he had did not care enough for those closest to the grave. He had tried as diplomatically as possible to calm the old woman, but she would have none of it and had left with a face so wizened and flushed that he thought she would collaspe before she reached the sidewalk. He had shrugged and passed it off as the ethereal infirmities of aging, did it twice more when similar charges were laid to him over the telephone within the next three hours.

"Reverend Garrett, maybe you're too young for this job, you ever think of that?" Peabody had said before he'd rung off. "Maybe you need . . . what do you call it . . . missionary work to get some meat on your bones."

Such a concerted effort could only have been organized, and he had tried desperately to number the enemies he might have made in his congregation, failed, and wondered just how much he was kidding himself. Like most of the young in Oxrun Station, he had drifted away to college with every intention of making his mark someplace else in the world; in his case, where there were traffic lights and automobiles and more than one theatre, more than one park, and thousands upon thousands of

people who would refuse to allow boredom to become part of their lives. Brightness. Clamor. Excitement. The full range of living. And like many of the young, he had drifted back to the village in western Connecticut, ordained and ready—at least in the beginning—to be tolerably successful. He knew he was no Moses, no Joshua, no David, but he was less staid than Paul and that brought in the young, the middle-aged, the elderly to the pews his father had once filled. Enough, in fact, to keep him from starving, not too many that he could not visit them all at least once every other month. For five years, ten, he raised their children and buried their dead.

Then something went wrong, and the first old woman died at the beginning of summer.

"Hell," he muttered, threw the envelopes unopened on the floor, and made his way upstairs to his bedroom. It was too soon to sleep, but he still felt the rocking of the train, heard the shrill voice of the city, and his stomach lurched whenever he reminded himself that he should really make himself dinner. Quickly, before he could change his mind, he undressed, slipped into his pyjamas, and fell across the thick down quilt. He laced his fingers across his chest, closed his eyes, decided he would get up soon and listen to the radio while he had something to drink. Then he frowned. The radio, a great blondwood Emerson, wasn't working properly; the sound faded in and out, much like the problem he was having with the telephone.

"Hell," he said again, and fell asleep before he could move.

Awoke just after midnight and left the bed to draw down the shade. The backyard seemed fuzzy. He rubbed at his eyes, let the moon give him light, and focus returned. He shook his head, touched at one ear, was asleep again immediately his head reached the pillow.

like a crowd that gathered just past vision like the hush before the sermon a just-darkened theatre

The next afternoon, after letting the elders know he was back and telling them how glad he was and how noisy the city was, he sat on the top front porch step and watched the traffic, what there was of it, crawl from right to left toward the center of the community. Opposite him was a dark iron-spike fence that enclosed the park, the back of which was less than a hundred yards to his right. He was wearing jeans and high-topped boots, and his persistent smile was as much for the reception of greetings from horns honked and hands waved as it was for the image he knew he was presenting. Some New England preacher, he thought; Mather and Edwards would die if they knew. He laughed, then, and leaned back on his elbows, watching as a trio of boys walked slowly in his direction, on the other side of the road. He recognized them instantly and wondered why they weren't in school; lank and dark Freddy Holmes, and the red-headed, pudgy Thompson twins. They were dressed as he was, and as unhurried, but when they darted across to reach him, he frowned, the frown deepening as they arranged themselves in a row in front of him, Freddy taking command in the center.

"Fred," he said with a nod and a smile. "Howie, Bret. What can I do for you?"

"You can stop it," Freddy blurted, his face immediately flushing. His hands were fisted awkwardly in his pockets, and when he ducked his head a fall of black hair fell over his eyes. The twins gazed at the house, the porch roof, Howie at his knuckles and Bret at his toes, everywhere but at Jordan.

"All right," he said cautiously,"as long as you tell me what, so I can do it."

"My grandmother died last month," Freddy said, almost in a whisper.

"I know, Fred. I had service, remember."

"I . . . I didn't go."

A sharp-nosed truck filled with produce lumbered past,

and for a moment Jordan thought he could see right through it.

"I didn't go," Freddy repeated.

"That's not a sin," Jordan said quietly, shifting so that his forearms lay across his knees. "I can understand that very well, believe it or not, and if you're worried about anyone blaming you for it . . . don't. No one does. It isn't all that—"

"You said she wouldn't," Howie said, his voice strained with anger. "You said our mother wouldn't, either, but she did."

"Oh, now wait a minute here," he said, frowning and scratching, a thumb behind his ear. "Wait a minute, men, I never said anything like that at all."

"The Lord does not take lightly that which is dear," Freddy whispered as though he were reciting. "You said that a dozen times in there—" a hand wavering toward the church—"and my grandmother still died."

"Freddy, come on!" He straightened and stared at each one of them in turn. "You boys are what, sixteen? You're old enough to understand what I'm saying. You couldn't have taken that literally, not the way you think it is."

"Why not?" Bret answered sullenly. "You stand up there and tell us things and we're supposed to think you're lying?"

Jordan took off his glasses and bit down on an earpiece, thoughtfully, shaking his head in sudden helpless confusion. It would have been somewhat amusing, their childlike acceptance of the word he tried to preach, had it not been for the expression on Freddy's face—rage in the face of imagined betrayal, and furious at himself for the tears that fought at his eyes. He knew they were intelligent boys and definitely not prone to swallowing his sermons without at least one probing question on the steps afterward. But now . . . today . . . he shook his head again and stared at the park.

"We're alone," Howie muttered with a glance toward his brother.

"Nonsense," Jordan said. "You still have your aunt and

uncle, and friends like Fred here."

"How would you like to be alone?" Bret asked.

Jordan couldn't help a smile as he waved a hand toward the woods on either side of the rectory, the park across the street. "I can't get much more alone than this, Howie," he said. "But I'm not lonely, and neither will you be."

"Reverend Garrett," Freddy said, "if you don't stop it, then I will. And I mean it."

"Now, how are you going to stop me?" he said, but the question lay unanswered; the boys had already turned sharply and were hurrying back the way they had come. Jordan half-rose with the intention of following, sighed, and sat back again, his palms to his cheeks while he watched their backs until a low-branched tree cut them from view. Good Lord, he thought, I can't be all that good.

"Time," he said then.

Time to tell Marylyn he was back in town.

They met at the Centre Street Luncheonette, taking the furthest booth back for a semblance of privacy. She had not changed in the three weeks he had been gone, and he laughed at himself for thinking she might have. Her hair was still a white-blonde waterfall, her complexion a matching pale, the red of her lips that would have been stark were it not softened by a moist gleam when she smiled. The dean of the community college, Harry Wainwright, delighted in calling her buxom when she wasn't listening; Jordan only called her, and she came when she was able. Like today. With a smile.

"So how's the book business?" he said when the waitress left with their order.

She shrugged and fished in a bulky handbag for a cigarette. Her eyebrows lifted in invitation and he declined, waiting as she struck a match with one hand, lit tobacco and paper, and let the sulphurous smoke vanish into the fan in the wall above their heads.

"Hey, what's the matter?" he said, "you mad at me or something? Didn't I use my library card enough last

month? You have to remember I was away for a while, you know."

She smiled, faintly, and stared at the ash tray as though debating whether or not to use it or her saucer. "I'm sorry, Jory," she said as she took a deep breath. "I'm tired. That's all. Just . . . tired."

"It's not easy," he said.

"It isn't," she agreed. "I still don't get much sleep."

He had buried her father the day before he'd left. Her mother had died some years before, and he knew she was wondering how to survive in a house suddenly grown too large with echoes and shadows.

"So, how was the trip? I hear your replacement wasn't all that great. Hardly anyone showed up the third Sunday."

He shrugged off his embarrassment, thinking of Freddy, and toyed with a fork whose tines were bent. "It was good and it was bad. I got a lot of reading done, saw a few shows, walked a lot, and cleared my head. Marylyn, you know I had to get away for a while. I needed some noise, some shouting . . . those old folks sure know how to get to a guy, you know. Some of the young ones, too."

She asked a silent question, but he decided against telling her about his visitation; she didn't need reminders, not now, perhaps not ever.

"Jory, have you talked with Sam yet? Since you got back, I mean."

Sam Windsor, the local chief of police who seldom dealt with more than vandalism and a few drunks thrown out of the Chancellor Inn. His usual response, conditioned by years on the force and in the village, to anything hinting of something more serious was an all-encompassing, "high-school kids and pranks and it won't happen again because they get tired too easy." It was what he told Jory when, on behalf of some of his older and living-alone people, he had complained of dead animals being left on their lawns. When it was obvious they hadn't been thrown there by a car that had struck them, Sam made his pronouncement, even when they started showing up in front of the stores.

He shook his head and she said nothing more. His annoyance grew then at the curious mood she was in; he sensed it was more than just her father's death behind the eyes that would not look directly at him. But he did not press her until their second cup of coffee had been served, late lunch plates taken away, and most of the patrons had drifted back outside. The clatter of a fan, then, and the garbled sound of a radio behind the counter.

"All right, Marylyn," he said, "come on, this is ridiculous. You're moping, I'm hedging, and the way things are going we might as well be at a . . . " He winced and kicked himself under the table.

Marylyn seemed not to notice. She only lit another cigarette and waited until the last moment before blowing out the match. "I found a chipmunk on my porch this morning," she said. "Yesterday it was a squirrel."

"Damn, not you too," he said, suddenly angry.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" she said, trying to make light of a situation that too obviously bothered her. "I thought for a while I would be the only one left in town, besides you, who wouldn't be so blessed."

"That's hardly a blessing, Marylyn."

"Well, if they keep it up there won't be anything left in the woods to kill."

He considered her for a moment, then set his palms to the table and rose. "I think we'd better have a talk with Sam. This isn't one of his school pranks anymore."

"Wait a minute," she said sharply. He hesitated, sat, and reached for her hands. She pulled them away, not abruptly but firmly enough to make him fight against a frown.

"Jordan, Harry asked me to marry him last night."

"Harry? You mean . . . Harry of the caps and gowns and millions in endowment? That Harry? Fat Harry?"

She almost laughed.

"I think," he said, "I'm in trouble."

"Is that all you can say, Jordan Garrett?"

"Did you accept?"

Something right in the manner of his question broke through her mood and her smile was full now, and

genuine. "No," she admitted with an exasperated shake of her head.

"Then what else should I say?"

Her cheeks puffed as she held an indignant breath, and he laughed, touched a finger to her chin, and snatched up the check. "Come on, lady, my treat. Then Sam."

As they walked down toward Chancellor Avenue and turned right toward the police station on the corner, he felt a passing guilt at not springing his own marriage proposal at her. They had met during their senior year in highschool and immediately had seen flowers in the midst of storms, sunsets at noon, and nothing at all wrong with snaring a fast/lasting kiss on the stairwell. The absolute word went out that Marylyn Zeille and Jordan Garrett would be the first to marry when the class of '32 graduated. But the absolute word wasn't, and neither voiced regret when age bleached the rose from their eyes. And when he returned to take his father's church, walls of unspoken differences had been raised between them . . . and that was the time of their regret. Jordan did not yet fully understand. He was the same, or at least thought he was, and Marylyn had only added the beauty of maturity to the lines in her face. Yet, they'd remained friends only; their handholding, their walks, their occasional dinners and drives into the hills . . . only quiet moments each of them needed and were afraid to immortalize.

"Jordan," she said suddenly as he held one of the station's double doors open for her, "I don't want to change my mind. About Harry, I mean."

He could find no answer, and there was no time. When they asked the desk sergeant for Windsor, they were told he was out on a case, a stern-faced pronouncement that nearly made them laugh until Jordan overheard a passing patrolman's remark about the Thompsons running away. He paused on the marble steps and looked up and down the street. "It's not possible," he said. "In the first place, I saw them both just a few hours ago and therefore there's not enough time, legally, for them to be runaways. And in the second, damnit, they're not the type."

"Jory, walk me back to the library."

"It's not possible, Marylyn," he protested as she pulled him to the sidewalk and took his arm. He told her about his conversation, Freddy's anger and the twins' echo.

"Freddy was upset," she said as they turned the corner. "He's . . . well, he's a close boy, if you know what I mean. He takes things very seriously, very strongly. And you know, Jory, you don't hear yourself in the pulpit on Sundays. You only see the notes on your cards. You're . . . you're different now. I don't know how to explain it. When you talk, people listen, and they believe. You'd make a heck of politician, you know. Or a salesman. You know what I mean . . . Eskimos and ice boxes, that sort of thing."

He shook his head and she laughed, hugged his arm, and for an instant lay her cheek to his sweater.

"Quiet today," he muttered as they approached the building where she worked. "Not many people around."

"Nope," she said. "It's the same as always. You're just not looking hard enough."

They said nothing more until they reached the library steps. Several women gathered around the heavy wooden doors, chatting and opening books. He sighed heavily and took Marylyn's hand to squeeze. "I'm not that good, you know," he said.

"Ask me to marry you and you'll find out just how good you are, preacher," she said, her smile brief and fragile, lingering as she pushed through the women and disappeared inside.

Jordan shoved his hands into his pockets and walked slowly around the block to the park, through the gates beside which a patrolman stood surrounded by little children, along the winding tarmac paths that skirted the open field hemmed in by woodland. The redwood benches were filled with mothers and carriages, old men and chess boards, young people oblivious to the slowly turning leaves. Through breaks in the trees and shrubbery he could see that the field itself was clamoring with kids broken into brightly colored fragments of football games and tag,

a kite-flying contest and blurred rolling hoops, and a few lonely holdouts tossing a baseball and praying for the Yankees. Hickory, chestnut, maple, and elm were heavy with October's sting, but he paid little attention to the blurs of soft color, walking instead up the hill at the back of the park, down its forested and untouched southern slope to the black fence on Chancellor. He held onto the cold spikes bracketed top and bottom and stared through them to his house, and the church, and the heavy gray clouds that chased after the sun.

He had been away only a little more than three weeks, but there was something that had changed his home in his absence. Something . . . "For God's sake, Jordan," he said in disgust. But there *was* something odd. Something bothering him, too deep to grasp.

Bret and Howie.

No, he thought; not the twins.

Harry.

No, he thought again after a pause while he scaled the fence and sprinted toward his porch. No, not him either.

Later that evening, as he headed upstairs for bed, the telephone on the wall in the front hall rang. He wavered with one hand on the banister, cocked his head, and prayed it would stop after the third double-ring. When it didn't, he punched at the air and rushed back downstairs, snatched the receiver up and grunted.

"Jory?"

"Marylyn," he said, instantly alert and stiffened, his eyes raking what he could see of the front room for signs of his hat and coat. "Marylyn, what's the matter?"

"I don't know, Jory."

"Marylyn—"

"Jory, something's wrong here. I'm scared, Jory. Something's wrong."

"A prowler? Is it a prowler or something?"

A silence, and he could hear her breath catching in her throat.

"Call Sam right away. No. I'll call Sam. You get upstairs and lock yourself in the bedroom, you understand? Right now, Marylyn."

"Jory? Jory, please, I can't hear you. Speak louder."

Damn this thing, he thought angrily. He shouted his instructions again, hung up, and dialed the police station's number. Taking license with what Marylyn had told him, he complained of a prowler on Northland Avenue, a block south of the hospital. He did not wait for an answer but rang off, yanked his coat from the hall closet, and was outside and driving off in less than a minute. There was no one on the road, no moon, only a few lights from the houses he passed as their concentration increased. Twice, the DeSoto coughed and he punched at the wheel when he realized he was nearly out of gasoline, made his turn so rapidly he bounced over the curbing, and pulled up five minutes later behind a patrol car whose spiraling red light turned the night an odd shade of purple. He ran to the front door of the tiny Cape Cod and pounded on it, found it open when no one answered immediately, and rushed inside. Marylyn was in the living room, sitting on a divan and wrapped in a faded green robe. In her hands, a cup of tea that steamed into her face. She was alone.

And when she saw him she started to cry.

Comfort came in small, hushed words, a touch, a waiting, as the patrolman finished his search of the grounds and spent little time in taking a report and leaving with a puzzled look that made Jordan grin. A shrilling kettle, sandwiches hastily made, more words, another touch, and quiet again until she fell into an exhausted sleep on the divan. Jordan draped a knitted blue blanket over her to her chin, her feet protruding and encased in pink fluff slippers. He wandered through the house, then, until the sun came up, found nothing to indicate a broken latch, a forced lock; the policeman had given him several knowing glances, but he refused to believe Marylyn had been drunk or hysterical—she drank, but only with him, and she had never been afraid of the

shades of Halloween. He called the library just past eight and told the supervisor Marylyn would be taking the day off; the word was already out, however, and no explanations were needed. Then he made breakfast, turned on the radio, and woke her with a grin that brought a grin in return.

They spent the day walking. Dinner at the Chancellor Inn. The nightmare had passed, and Jordan returned home at midnight.

As he pulled into his drive he saw a dark lump settled in the middle of his lawn. He stiffened, braked, walked carefully across the grass, and shook his head when the lump resolved itself into a small pile of wind-gathered leaves. Not blessed yet, he thought to Marylyn. Thank God.

On his first Sunday back he preached to a half-empty church, yet the collection plate was as full as it had ever been. He frowned, scratched his head as the last car drove off, and decided perhaps he needed a change of glasses. His parishoners were not all that generous; he must have missed some along the way. He did not miss the fact, however, that Freddy Holmes was there, sitting alone in a front pew and staring fixedly at him through the entire service. It had made him miss a verse or two in the Gospel, a line of a prayer, but Freddy was gone, the first one out, before Jordan could catch him and ask him why.

That afternoon he called the Holmes residence to talk to the boy's father. No one answered. And he turned up the radio to give him some noise.

On Monday, Sam Windsor dropped by during a lazy patrol and they sat on the porch. Sam was burly but not beefy, his hair cropped close in the manner of a Marine. There were comfortable silences, spurts of words, and once he let slip that several other young people had apparently run away.

"What I think it is," he said as they waited for the twilight, "they got themselves some drugs or something.

You know what I mean? Some of them are so rich they don't need anything else. Went into the hills, maybe, to live in a cave. My little brother Ben wanted to do something like that when he was in college. Never did, though. He's got smart. He's a cop too, you know. Well, not exactly. Going to be, though. One of these days."

"Sam, you're wrong."

Sam glared at him without malice. "You're not talking about Ben. Well, Reverend . . . forget it. I was going to say something stupid."

"Like," Jordan said, grinning, "I should stick to my own and leave the police to the official stuff?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"You going to call in State?"

"What for? Only the twins are under age. The rest can do what they like."

"I wonder," he said.

"What?"

"I wonder," he said again.

Sam cupped a hand to his ear and shook his head vigorously. "Hearing's going, Reverend. Sign of old age."

"Sure, Sam,"

Windsor stretched, rubbed at his belly and sauntered down toward his car. At the door he waved over the roof, Jordan nodded and watched as the chief made a slow U-turn and drifted back into town. God save us from a crime wave, he thought, decided to do some shopping for the week, and hurried to his car before he changed his mind. The silence since the service the day before had been getting on his nerves, and he wondered as he drove how he could have possibly fled the city, finally, because it was too noisy. Maybe, he thought, I need more than a few weeks. Maybe I need Marylyn . . . if Harry doesn't get her first.

He thought too hard. As he passed the highschool, a boy stepped into the road and he nearly ran him down. He swerved as he braked, pulled, shaking, to the curb, and flung open the door. He was angry, and more so when he realized the boy was Freddy Holmes.

Freddy stood on the spot where he had jumped to get out

of the way. None of the other kids waiting on the school steps moved, looked, interrupted their conversations. Jordan stared at them, then at Freddy, whose hands were shoved into a blue-and-gold windbreaker.

"You're after me," the boy said calmly. "Nice try."

"Freddy, damnit, you're being ridiculous!"

The boy only lifted his hands from his pockets to ward off the anger. "It's all right, Reverend Garrett. I understand how it is. That's the way it has to be, I guess."

"Freddy, for God's sake—"

"Maybe, but I come first." He walked away, then, to rejoin his friends.

Jordan stared after him helplessly, turned and retrieved his car. His shopping was desultory, almost languid, and by the time he had put everything away in the cupboard he was trembling so hard he had to get out of the house and sit on the porch, pray for a car, a bird, a grumble of thunder.

But there were no cars, no birds, no clouds to soften the hard eye of a star. Only a breeze that pushed in from the north, nudging the leaves on the lawn and holding the last wail of the train as it left the village behind. His eyes blurred and he snapped off his glasses, rubbed hard at his eyes until spirals of painful color made him stop. He glanced over at the church and the huge black doors made him wince and look away. Think of the people he had preached to, comforted . . . comforted . . .

He laughed.

The bitterness dropping like the leaves of the elm.

Suddenly, he knew what the twins and Freddy meant, what Marylyn had meant when she told him he couldn't hear himself in the pulpit.

He was cursed, and no Biblical curse this, but the condemnation of his beliefs—he believed too much and had been given the gift of expressing that belief. The congregation heard him, loved him, and it was he who opened the doors and ushered them back into the world they had to live in. Where Freddy's grandmother was dead. Mrs. Thompson was dead. Not passed away to a higher reward. Dead. And buried.

He needed Marylyn more than ever now, and wondered why it had taken him so long to understand that. He ran inside to call her, to tell her, and to ask her to join him. But when he tried the phone, there was only the static.

and the whispering voices without words floating in clouds of electrical hate whispering that was not silenced when he replaced the receiver

He stared at the telephone, backed away and darted from the house to the garage, flung open the door, and gaped at the black space where his car should have been. Deep breath, he told himself, and walked as calmly as he could down the drive to the street, to wait for a car he could flag down.

He waited nearly an hour before he could convince himself it was time to start walking.

He whistled. He hummed. He ran so that his feet would slap hard on the pavement.

He reached Centre Street and the village's line of businesses. There were no lights in the store windows, no neon flickering in the dusk long turned to black. The street was empty. He frowned and tried to think of the date, search for a holiday he might have missed. Crossed over the road and pulled at the police station door. It was locked, and no one answered his sudden frantic pounding.

whispering

"Marylyn," he said, "you're not going to believe this."

He broke unto a trot and reached Northland Avenue without meeting anyone, seeing anything, stumbled over a curb, and realized the street lights were not on.

As he passed the hospital, he noticed none of the windows were lighted. There were no ambulances in the parking lot, no visitors' cars, no figures in white.

Marylyn's house was where it should have been.

Marylyn was not.

It was then that he stopped looking at his watch and made his way running from house to house back toward

the main concentration of homes where the less wealthy and middle-class lived, and lived, and were not home. No lights in the banks, the jewelery stores, the luncheonette. Bartlett's Toys had only dolls in the window that gaped dumbly, smiling inanely, patiently waiting.

The library was locked.

whispering

There was no traffic at all.

He slumped to a curb and rested his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands, gulping for a breath, and glad for the noise. The concrete's chill seeped through his trousers and tightened his buttocks until he rose, grabbed for a lamp post and looked down the street to see, directly in front of him, the locked gates of the park. Where Marylyn had loved him, and Marylyn was gone; where Freddy and Howie and Bret played ball with their friends, and made enemies, and made games—but there were no friends, no enemies, no games, and no boys. He looked around at the village bleached white by a stark, staring moon.

He thought he caught a movement at the corner of his eye, turned, and saw that it was his shadow, pale in the street.

people passing tires hissing rain snow wind whispering

"I'm sane," he told himself loudly. "I've missed something somewhere. It's not what I think."

But Freddy had warned him. He said he would stop him.

"No," Jordan said suddenly. "He said . . . it. He said he would stop . . . it."

Death.

Not resurrection. Just . . . stop death. The animals, then, in their own deaths by whatever means Freddy used. The animals to mark the living.

Jordan began walking.

He remembered his own parents' deaths, and his refusal, for months, to accept their passing. Freddy would not accept, and neither would the twins. But unlike the adults who knew better, who were taught better, who were

hardened, Freddy had done something about it. He had led, first, the young, then the believers, then the rest of the village, through to somewhere else. It made no difference at all to Jordan whether they would eventually die there or not. Freddy had done what he had done. And Jordan was alone, in a place called Oxrun Station not on the map where the dead were dead, and the living were . . . gone.

He had to strain to keep from running, to keep his eyes forward not to see the blind eyes of the houses, the stores, the stars that did not move. When he reached the rectory he paused, leapt into the air and came down hard on his heels.

There was no noise.

If this was Oxrun Station, it was not the place where he had been born. That place had been given a nudge, a shove, a twist off the track. Somewhere, he thought as he sat wearily on the porch step, there was an Oxrun Station with cars and people and the sound of school bells changing classes and freeing children to run into the park before the sun went down and meals were served. Somewhere. But not here.

Somewhere there were men and women who were good at what they did, but they were not perfect.

And the nonperfect had judged him too good.

Perhaps, he thought with unreasonable calm, he should pack his bags and catch a train, catch a train back into the voice of the city. And he nearly laughed when he thought of the day he had returned and had greeted the silence of the village with a broad, welcoming grin.

I'm sorry, Freddy, he thought; Lord, but I'm sorry.

But he did not move. He waited. And the sun did not rise, and he wondered if he could survive. He thought probably he would. Lonely, perhaps, and sometimes boring. But he would probably make it to whatever end there was.

But, Lord, he thought, it's so . . . damned . . . *quiet*!

AFTERWORD

By Roy Torgeson

With the appearance of this third volume (and two more already scheduled to appear in 1979), *Chrysalis* is now firmly established as a permanent part of the science fiction publishing scene. All of us—the authors, the publisher, the editor—are glad that it has found such a favorable reception among readers.

Theodore Sturgeon once again has written the introduction, thereby saving you from an additional few thousand words of my rambling prose. (People who have written doctoral dissertations frequently are crippled for life by the experience.) Sturgeon's lucid and candid introduction, if not "unique," is certainly an "original."

I sent Ted seventeen, count them, seventeen stories. He praised fourteen and took issue with three. Because of the variety of stories I selected for *Chrysalis 3* I certainly did not expect Ted to agree with me on each and every one of them. So now you have an opportunity to compare your judgments with both his and mine.

A few words about the manner in which I go about editing the *Chrysalis* series may be in order. My approach is quite simple and straightforward. I ask authors to write good stories and I select the ones I like. The stories may be written by recognized masters, of the art, established professionals or brilliant newcomers. They may be of almost any length. They may be humorous or deadly

earnest. They may contain elements of fantasy, horror, "soft" science fiction or "hard" science fiction. My tastes are catholic and I can appreciate all kinds of stories. I select stories on the basis of excellence rather than on any personal preference in subject matter or on my assessment of popular opinion. This is the way I try to assemble anthologies filled with a rich variety of good stories. The authors and I then await your critical judgment.

"What does the word 'chrysalis' mean and why did you choose it for the title of the anthologies?" I've been asked these questions many times and now I'll answer them. In general, a chrysalis is something in the stage of development. More specifically, it is the third stage in the development of a butterfly. Together these two definitions capture the essence of what I envision for the *Chrysalis* series and each separate volume. A series in a constant stage of development with each volume giving birth to something beautiful: good stories.

I thank all of the authors who let me share in their remarkable creativity and I especially thank Clyde Caldwell, whose cover painting makes the book itself, the *chrysalis*, a thing of beauty.

Roy Torgeson
New York City, November, 1978

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