

Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction

Summer 1998

Issue #10

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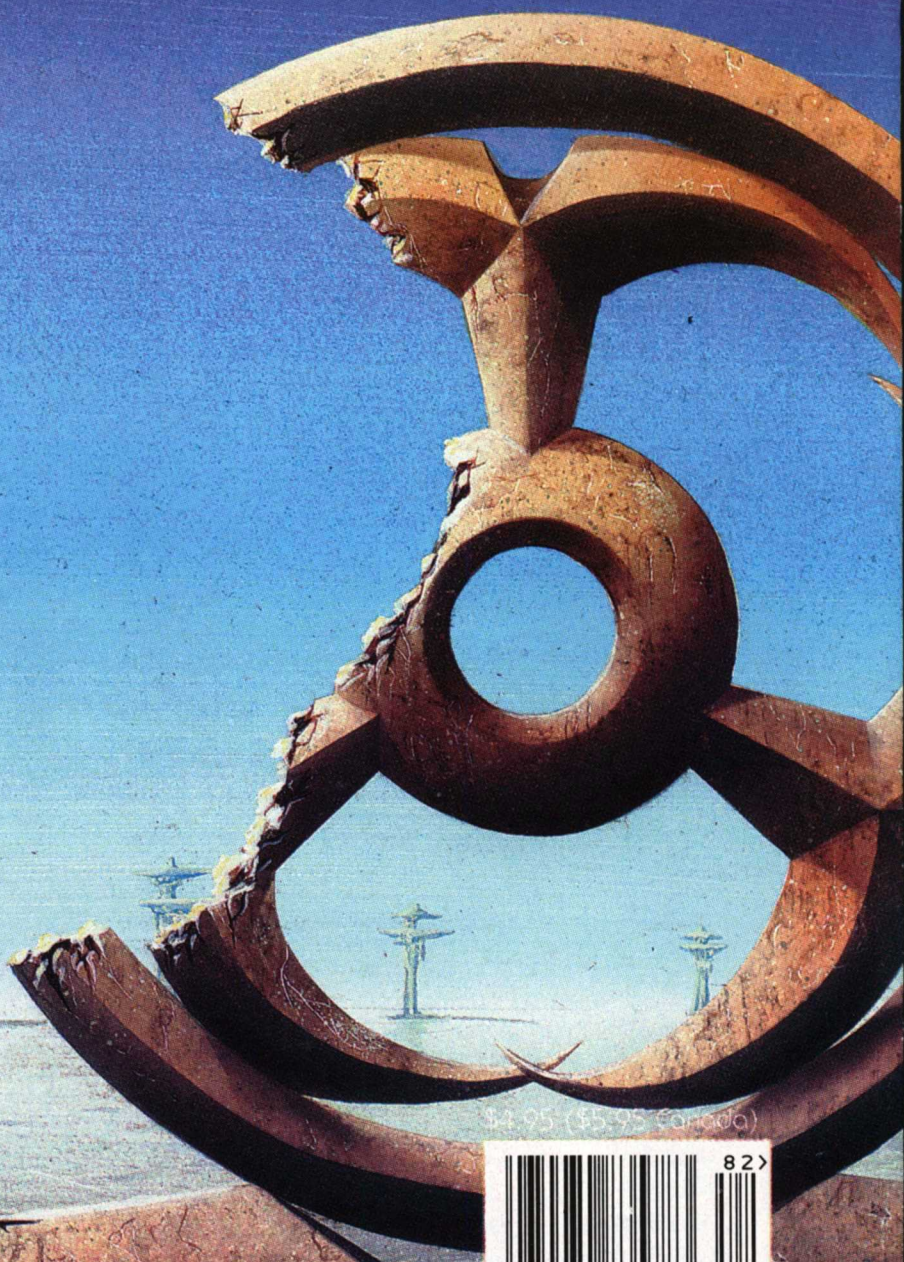
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Austin**

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Editorial Notes by Warren Lapine

$M = m + 5 + 5 \log p$

Since last issue a lot has happened here. I've received more letters than I could possible print in support of my last editorial. Of course, all of the letters have been from readers and not from other publishers. I guess they're just not ready to stand up and be counted. I'm not surprised, though I wish I were. Still, the gauntlet has been thrown down, perhaps someone will pick it up.

Two weeks after I sent issue #9 off to the printer, I received a call from George Scithers asking me if I would be interested in taking over *Worlds Of Fantasy and Horror* formerly *Weird Tales*®. I was momentarily taken aback: you see George was the editor of the first magazine that I ever subscribed to: *Asimov's*. In fact, George sent me my very first rejection letter back when I was seventeen. I still remember the cover letter that I sent along with the story (I wish I didn't remember the story, it was dreadful). I boldly told him that whether or not he purchased the story he'd be hearing from me again. The world is an ironic place.

WoFH is a worthy magazine and I didn't want to see it go the way of so many other magazines, and yet, I already had a full plate. If I took over the magazine where would I find time to fit in the extra work load? And then I remembered the editorial that was only a week away from hitting the newsstands. I'd challenged the entire damn field to do whatever they could to improve the state of the genre. When I'd written the editorial I'd felt as if I'd put my money where my mouth was. But on some deep level I knew that if I walked away from this opportunity I'd feel as if I'd betrayed my position and the field. I just couldn't do that. So I told George that DNA Publications would be happy to take over *WoFH*. The field would have been lessened by its passing. George Scithers and Darrell Schweitzer will be continuing on in their editorial capacities and DNA Publications will be honoring all existing subscriptions.

Once I was done making all of the necessary arrangements, I began to think about the magazine's history. It had started out life as *Weird Tales*®, the oldest and arguably the most important magazine the genre has ever had. It launched the careers of writers such as H. P. Lovecraft, Robert E Howard, and Ray Bradbury. And then I thought, wouldn't it be great to be the publisher of *Weird Tales*®. Of course, I knew that Hollywood had the title tied up... at least they had had it tied up. I hadn't heard anything about what had come of the Hollywood deal and Hollywood deals being what they are, I decided to look into the availability of the name. So I called up *Weird Tales, Limited* and to my surprise I found that the name was available. I managed to get a deal fairly quickly and now *Weird Tales*® is back.

I can't begin to tell you how pleased and proud I am to be the new Publisher of *Weird Tales*®. Last issue I declared that we were on the verge of a new Golden Age and within two weeks *Weird Tales*® fell into my lap. Do you believe in omens? I do!



Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction Adventures

PUBLISHER
Warren Lapine

EDITOR IN CHIEF/ART DIRECTOR
Warren Lapine

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
Allen Steele
Ian Randal Strock

ASSOCIATE EDITORS
Kevin Rogers
Tim Ballou
Lucas Morton
Drew Hutchison
John Perreault

ADAPTIVE TECHNOLOGIES
Joe Lazzaro

LAYOUT & DESIGN
Angela Kessler/Wilder Publications

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Absolute Magnitude

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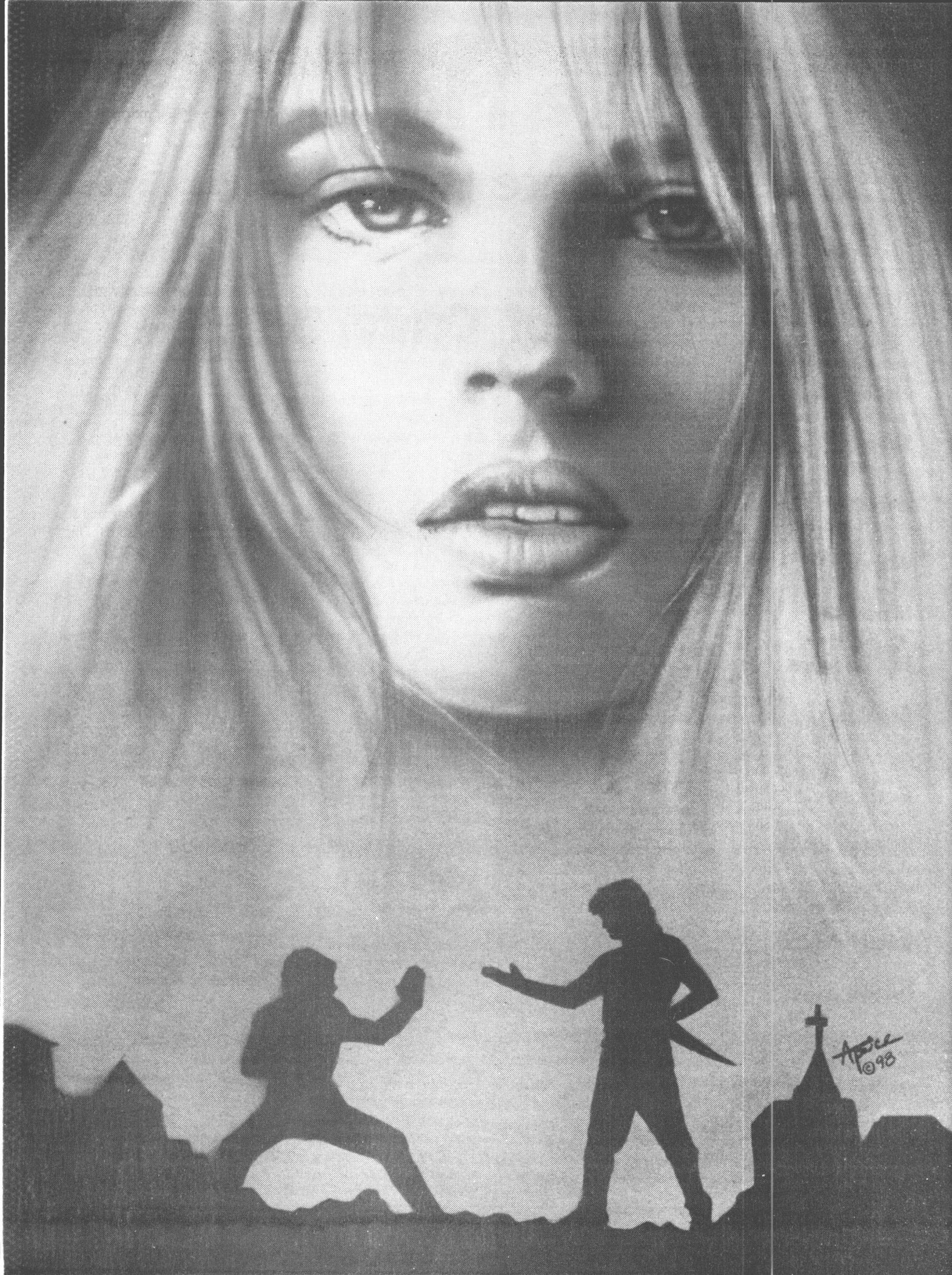
Issue #10

Table of Contents

Plaudit Cives by Sarah A. Hoyt	5
Siren by A.J. Austin Originally Published <i>Analog</i> , July '88	11
Building an Accessible Future by Joe Lazzaro Nonfiction	17
Veritas by Daniel Abraham	25
Mercenary by Bud Sparhawk	31
The Question by Alan Dean Foster	40
Backblast by Chris Bunch Cover story	49
Features:	
Primary Ignition by Allen Steele	21
Far Haze and Distant Thunder by Steven Sawicki	35
Book Reviews:	43
Letters Page	63

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APOLL
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Sarah A. Hoyt has been published in a number of small press magazines. Readers of *Absolute Magnitude's* sister magazine *Dreams of Decadence*, may remember her story "Thirst" from the Summer '97 issue.

Plaudit Cives

by Sarah A. Hoyt

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What? No songs of victory? No wine in my glass? Come, don't you recognize me? My scarred face, my missing left ear, my sleeveless cotton tunic, my old stained leather pants, my red cloak of rank, sixteen years old today? Don't you recognize your favorite Player, Syrac Kayert, Syrac the Beheader?

Is this a joke, my friends? You point fingers at me and call me *killer*?

Be it, then. I will join in your mirth. You, pretty thing, fill my glass from that jar of red wine. What is it? Why do you back away from me so? Haven't you so many times before kissed my bloodstained hands and told me how great, how glorious I was?

Oh, she was one of you, was she?

I did not search her out. I did not tear her from the safety of her Newcity home, nor did I drag her to Oldcity against her will.

Don't shout me down, yet. Wait. I'll tell you how it went. Give a man a chance to talk, who, in sixteen years, never had it. A chance to tell his side of the story. His story.

She approached me near the old fish-market, where the cobblestone paving has long since been worn and polished by an ancient stream of bare feet.

I followed her with my gaze as she crossed the bridge from Newcity to Oldcity, over the gray fast-flowing river. She walked down the street, towards me. I stopped, for a moment, hypnotized by the rhythmic undulation of her body. The purple silk cloak that covered her from her small, rounded face to her gold-sandalled toes shimmered by the scant light of the moon like something out of a dream. Even in that shapeless garment, you could tell she was a beauty.

It was late at night, when no respectable woman would be out. I thought I knew what she wanted.

Should I have been alarmed? Why? She didn't look like a prowler. Players learned early that most prowlers were teenage boys, in search of the quick, easy glory that comes from killing a young and inexperienced Player. I was not an inexperienced Player and I'd never before come across a citizen I couldn't disarm without hurting...

Besides, it was not the first time a lady citizen sought me out, you must know that. In my sixteen years as a Player, more fine ladies had graced my bed than I could count. Ladies who would never have looked at me before my condemnation...

You, yes, you with the bright green eyes, standing in the darkened corner, fill my glass. Yes, you, the redhead.

No redhead there, you say? It must be the wine and my eyes and memories of Leetahr, Leetahr Torrenze, my friend who—

You don't care about Leetahr, you say. Leetahr is dead, you say, long dead. He was but a very minor Player, a coward, who did not survive his first fight. Why talk about him?

True. We should not stain a night of victory with talk of dead, other than the most recent one.

So let's talk about the girl who came to me on my way home; let's drink to her. She was perfect as a girl can be, shimmering purple cloth clinging to a body to make the gods dizzy... Finer than anything this sorry Earth has seen since the collapse.

I couldn't help staring at her. Young, she was, and looked innocent. Her heart-shaped mouth held a soft appeal. A few wisps of curly black hair escaped from under the hood of her cloak, giving her an unstudied look.

Still, will you believe I resisted? Even my appetite isn't insatiable. I had too much wine, too much applause, too much pleasure for the night. The celebration of my victory over Zerfol, the Strangler. My hundredth kill.

I was tired. I bowed my head, politely, and said, "M'lady."

"Syrac?" she asked, her pleasant musical voice broken by something like a sigh. "Syrac the Beheader?"

I nodded, again, and said, "I am he."

She smiled then, and reached a hesitant hand to touch my scarred arm. Her hand was small, warm and moist like a child's.

I shook it off. "I am tired, M'lady," I said. "I am drunk. Some other time, perhaps."

She opened her little heart-shaped mouth, as though to speak, but made no sound. Her face reminded me of a person whose name evaded my recollection.

I turned around, slipped on the fish heads and entrails that littered the ground in front of the market, recovered my balance with the ill-grace of my thirty years and walked away as fast as I could.

I strained my ears for footsteps but heard nothing.

I took the long way home, down along the river and the facade of old houses, left from when the city was re-built after the collapse, to the place where fishermen keep their boats in dry-dock, then sharp left into the Oldcity labyrinth.

The streets there were so narrow that one could not stretch his arms without hitting crumbling stucco on either side, and so old that the third or fourth story of each building seems to lean over the passerby in maternal concern. Those streets were cradle and nursery to me. In that labyrinth, Leetahr and I were boys together. Leetahr was small boned, limber, naturally graceful. When some charitable ladies from Newcity opened a school in Oldcity to teach children of fishermen and whores poems and stories about gods and heroes and proper social graces, Leetahr was the best student. I was the second best. It was always Leetahr and Syrac, always, in reward and disgrace. When Leetahr won a scholarship to a Newcity school I won the other one.

At first my parents disapproved of Leetahr. His mother was a whore and my parents, like most poor people, prided themselves on their immaculate honor. But, little by little, Leetahr won them over, till he became a member of my family. He sat with my ten siblings and

Absolute Magnitude

me at the kitchen table for any meals he chose, and shared in the food and the warmth.

We were happy then. So poor and outcast we were unaware of any other way of life. Or I was unaware of any other way of life. Leetahr carted books home from every street corner and wove hopes around the slightest stroke of luck, his head always full of dreams of elsewhere and elsewhere, that threatened to jump out through his eyes.

Leetahr was a whore, you say? The stories spun in court sixteen years ago are still around. Even though anyone who knew Leetahr could have told you differently. His affections had no price. None I ever heard of. Leetahr... Leetahr was my friend, my brother. And sometimes, in the dark streets, it seemed the only hope for the future, the only hope for breaking out of the mire of despair was pinned to his dreams, the dreams I could only glimpse through his green eyes.

Leetahr convinced me we would qualify for High training. We would be apprenticed to the learned men in the city. Perhaps, he used to say, we could even become priests, priests of the three nameless gods and the virgin goddess. We would learn the ancient lore and one day we'd recover the wisdom of the ancients and build ships to sail through the stars.

Sometimes his dreams grew too heavy on my heart, the chasm between our rags and his gold-plated fantasies too wide, and I would cajole him, tell him that, if all else failed, he could always be Vitar's priest. Priest of the rogue god.

The girl? I'm sorry, the wine grows heavy on my mind. What? I've had no wine? But there is red wine on my arms, wine on my hands. Wine covering me. Blood, you say? My blood or hers?

You see, I thought I'd seen the last of her when I went into the labyrinth of Oldcity and let my feet find their way through the winding streets. I ambled along, weaving from one side of the road to the other, reveling in the familiarity of the crumbling walls, the calls of prostitutes from darkened portals.

It wasn't until I reached my house, in the very heart of the labyrinth, not until I stopped at my door, my right hand on the large iron ring knocker for balance, while my other hand held the key and searched blindly for the keyhole, that I heard the footfall behind me.

I turned around, and there she was, shimmering purple cloak and all, her eyes hopefully turned up to meet mine.

"M'lady!" I said, softly. "I thought I told you that I was tired."

She silenced me with a stare full of fire. She reached under her cloak and pulled out a handful of gold coins. She stretched her hand towards me, palm open, golden disks shining.

"I don't want your money," I protested. "I don't need it. I get paid for my victories."

"Please," she said. "Just a night. I might not be able to slip away again so soon."

Her beauty, her youth, the haunting mystery of her familiar yet unknown features, lured me. I nodded.

She smiled, a bright, happy smile, put the money away, took the key from my shaking hand and opened the door.

I flicked the light switch to reveal the front hall: stark marble, dark furniture and red velvet draperies. Leetahr's idea of splendor when he'd decorated this house. I regained enough of my senses to tell her, "Show me what's under that cloak."

Still young enough, my guest took this for a calling of desire, and smiled enticingly at me, as she parted the cloak at her neck and held it to one side, displaying herself to me. There was nothing underneath but more golden skin, a short, semi-transparent tunic and a golden triangle covering her pubic area. She untied her cloak and held it folded, over her arm, smiling at me.

Well, I thought, if she were a prowler, she sure hid her weapons well. Still, I felt uncomfortable. Like most Players, I prefer to meet my companions in anonymous rented rooms. My house was for me and Leetahr's ghost... Have I told you about Leetahr's ghost? It hovers at the edge of my vision and it smiles at me, the way Leetahr smiled on his last day, just before the end.

The girl looked inoffensive enough. I invited her up to my room, and I followed her up the stairs. I remember the way her muscles worked under her golden skin, the perfect coordination of her legs. Live human beings fascinated me. It was so easy to turn them into so many pounds of carrion, and yet, to do the reverse was impossible. Life couldn't be brought back, once it escapes, fast and red. I know. I would have given Leetahr his life back, if I could.

Upstairs, I led the girl into my room.

For the first time, I wondered how it would look to another person.

I'd been its only occupant for so long, I'd gotten used to the large, unmade bed; the books strewn all around over furniture and floor; the half-empty liquor bottles cast amid them.

I made for one of the bottles, the one filled with the red liquor Kallerians call Gods' Blood. I uncorked it and drank, not bothering with a glass. Its sweetness soothed me. Leetahr's mother swore his father was from Kaller, and from him came Leetahr's red hair, his green eyes. Maybe his overpowering sweetness too.

"What is your name, Milady?" I asked, between sips.

She'd moved, so that she was standing behind me, and I heard a rustle that told me she was removing her tunic.

"Dira," she said.

Something to her voice, a vague menace, made me turn around. Dira had just folded her tunic, and put it down on the foot of the bed. She looked vaguely disgusted with my housekeeping. Disgusted and amused. An expression half-sneer half-smile hovered on her features. "What is Rome?" she asked me, turning a book over with her foot, as though it might give her the plague on contact.

I shrugged. "According to the experts, a land that existed before the collapse. More likely than not made up, like all the fantasies the priests tell us."

She looked at a couple of other books. "You read a lot about it."

"They were very much like us," I said. "They had a taste for blood, for killing as a show."

She shrugged. "Everyone enjoys blood and killing. It's part of our survival instincts. If we can satisfy them vicariously, then we cut down on violence in society in general. That was part of the reason for the collapse of civilization before us. They didn't satisfy those instincts."

I chuckled. "That's right, straight from the school book. Or is it the school film? They don't use books nowadays, do they?" I winked at Dira and she shrugged again. I shrugged in my turn and added, in my



Plaudit Cives

most ironic tone, "They don't say we also enjoy the cruelty of it all." I took another sip.

Oddly enough, I didn't want to touch her. I wanted to look at Dira and think where I might have seen those large dark eyes, those perfectly curved lips, the pensive expression behind her front of innocence. I wanted to savor the contrast between her smoothly groomed perfection and the disorder of my room.

Tired of my silence or my gaze, Dira asked me which of my eyes had been replaced with the camera that broadcasted my kills. I told her the left, because it was the right. I was in that sort of mood.

She got up, stood very close to me, looked at it and said it looked just like the other.

I told her of course, in fact because of the way they put it together, the way they connected it, I retained some of the vision in it. It was the eye I used to see ghosts.

Dira thought this amusing, smiled, swept aside a mound of soiled shirts and sat on the chest by the window, then asked me to tell her about my first kill. I sighed. It's always hard to accept that it is because I'm a killer that ladies seek me out. They want to be reminded of it.

And yet, I'd never before told the story or, at least, never told the truth.

But this was the night of my hundredth kill, a night of madness, a night of saturnalia. I sat on the edge of my bed, holding the bottle and, looking up at her dark-dark eyes, told Dira of Leetahr, Leetahr of the green-eyes, Leetahr of the many dreams. Leetahr, dead by my hand sixteen years ago today.

Dira told me that wasn't what she meant at all. She meant my first, first kill. The one before the condemnation. The one that got me condemned. A rare request, a strange one. Not many citizens like to be reminded that a Player was once one of them, that a Player, every Player, once killed one of them.

I'd never told anyone. No one ever asked me my side of the story. Leetahr and I had sat mute in court, listening, listening to people telling lies. We were threatened with worse than condemnation if we protested. His mother, my parents, my brothers, all of them, we were told, would suffer worse than death if we spoke.

But now, sixteen years later, it didn't mater. My mother, Leetahr's mother, my father, my siblings, all of them were dead, many years dead, anyway. Dead in the pox plague that swept through the city. The plague that, incongruously, spared Syrac, Syrac the Beheader, who had nothing left to live for.

So I told Dira that despite the tales told in court, Leetahr had never been a whore. The gods be my witness that it wouldn't be strange if he'd chosen such craft. White skinned and green-eyed, Leetahr had features that put most women to shame. Newcity men coming down for an evening's pleasure often accosted him, if he chanced to be out of doors late at night. He could have made good money, he could even have moved to Newcity and eventually bought himself a respectable past, a respectable wife, and left all of us behind in our misery and darkness. But Leetahr had his head full of dreams and his heart full of hope, and he would not listen to the voice of reason. He smiled away his mother's shrewd suggestions and my occasional joking remarks about Vitar's protection of whores and short cuts to the priesthood. If I said it too loudly, he would give me a rehash of one of my mother's sermons and explain that it would break my mother's heart.

He would be a fisherman, he said. At least until we were old enough to be apprenticed for the priesthood. He went out on the boat

with my father and me. And he tried his best to learn the craft in the time school left free.

My parents were proud of him. He was a hard worker, despite his small frame, and they bragged about him as though he were their own, conceived and born.

My brothers were too young to go to sea. Through gale and good weather it was the three of us, and if the boat were late coming back and the sky stormy, my mother would light three candles before the virgin goddess, on the small household altar, and pray for all three of us to be brought back to her, well and whole.

On the boat, the nets in the water, Leetahr would lie back, close his eyes and look dreamy and distant. I knew in his mind he was sailing through the stars.

Then one day, it all shattered. It was a warm Summer evening, and Leetahr went out. He didn't come for dinner at my house. I looked for him in his mother's room, but she was busy with a customer and gave me short shrift. I looked for him in all the normal places: the school room, where he often went to read or talk to the teachers, the bridge, where he often sat, unnoticed, sketching passerby.

Not finding him, I returned home to my parents. I thought he must be at the used book dealers in Newcity. But, as hours stretched and darkness fell, I grew restless and, giving my mother an excuse, left to wander the street by the bridge. I knew Leetahr was wont to go there late at night. I knew that many times he took the boat out on one of his lone sailing trips. I'd seen him do it before, from a distance. You wouldn't think that someone like Leetahr could push such a heavy boat out, by himself. But I'd seen him do it, and then row out to where he could unfurl the sails, and sail under the stars for forgotten hours, no doubt dreaming his dreams of distance and glory.

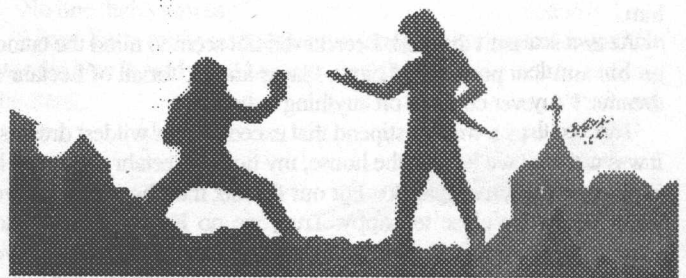
I never told Father of this. I knew he wouldn't have approved. He said sailing at night offended Mrat, the sun god who protected our city, and gave us his light to sail and fish by.

I found Leetahr, of course. Sometimes I wish I hadn't. Leetahr would have lived, he would have recovered and, even if he'd ever chosen to tell me what had happened, I would not have been there, the man would be untraceable. Thirst for revenge would not have blinded me.

Leetahr had been on his way home. He later told me he had gone to check on the boat.

What I did wasn't any good, anyway. It did not save Leetahr. What had been done had been done, and Leetahr, small and powerless, lay on the ground, his clothes torn, his eyes vacant. As vacant as they'd always been filled with dreams and mirth.

The man composed himself, threw on a green velvet cloak, shaking it free of sand. A big man, he was, big and strong, one of these men who love their food and their drink, and their other pleasures as well. It couldn't have been hard for him to overpower Leetahr.



Absolute Magnitude

I'd my large scaling knife with me. He never knew what killed him, and I never knew what I was doing. My mind was in a red fever of rage, my hands instruments of Vitar.

I came to myself when Leetahr held my hand and said, "Enough, Syrac."

His eyes didn't look vacant anymore. Full of horror, they looked hard and dead like pieces of jade. I believe that he knew it then. He knew what would happen. All of it.

I looked at what my hands had done, the bloody corpse on the sand, head almost severed. A wave of sickness washed over me, and I wretched onto the fish-gut littered sand.

Leetahr held me by the shoulders, like a mother, like my mother never had, and tried to comfort me... he tried to comfort me, in hesitant words, "It's all right, Syrac. It will be all right. We will throw him in the river. The sea is so near, he will be carried out, far away. No one will ever know."

I'd never intended on killing. I have read time and time again how poor children are full of hatred and desire to kill. How, inflamed by the TV shows of kills, they think only of becoming Players as soon as they are old enough for it. Maybe there are such children. Leetahr and I weren't that way. We didn't have a TV. The one time we had watched a kill, on a set on display in a pawnshop window, Leetahr had flinched and turned his head away, and I'd got sick and neither of us had ever mentioned it again. We did not want to be Players. He wanted to be a priest.

I managed to help Leetahr drag the body to the river and I allowed him to help me clean my clothes. Then I helped him clean his.

That was the last time either of us spoke of that night's events to each other.

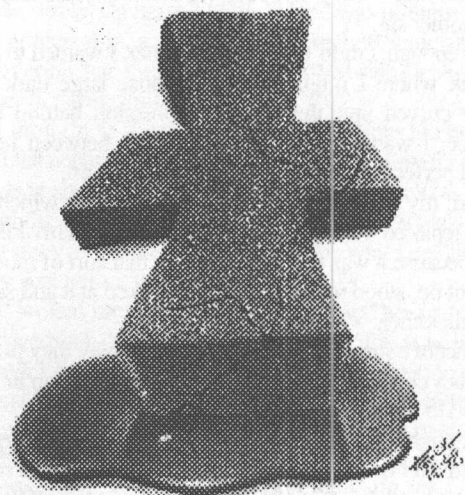
The police came for us a day later. We had not hidden the results of our crime as well as we thought. The body had beached where the river met the sea. The sand by our boat still showed signs of scuffle and struggle and was soaked with unmistakably human blood. More, we had been watched, watched by a whore in a second story room facing the fishing dock. She talked.

You and Dira too, I am sure, must have heard all about the trial. It turned out the man was a High Priest of the three nameless gods, the virgin goddess. Our story could not be told. High Priests didn't go to Oldcity and force themselves on small, defenseless boys. High Priests didn't. So the story told in court was that we were prostitutes, and that the Priest had been moved by our youth to stop and talk and try to save our souls, save us from the clutches of Vitar. We had killed him for the gold in his belt.

They condemned us to become Players. I'd expected it, since that awful night. I had become, after all, a killer. It was but fitting that I should live and die as one. But that they condemned Leetahr too, that hurt, that was unjust. Leetahr had done nothing but help me hide my crime... Of course, Leetahr knew too much and, if he kept his citizenship privileges, someone, somewhere, might have listened to him.

At first it wasn't that bad. Leetahr did not seem to mind the tattoo on his arm that proclaimed him a Player and I... for all of Leetahr's dreams, I'd never counted on anything better.

They gave us a weekly stipend that exceeded our wildest dreams. It was with that we bought the house, my house. Leetahr decorated it in his naive version of splendor. For our first six months as Players we were happy. Or close to happy. True, we no longer could go to school, but then we had more time for ourselves. In the morning we went through the mandatory training and indoctrinating of Players,



then came home in the afternoon to our own house, to long talks, to books, to our own world.

And then they matched me against Leetahr, whom I would have died to protect.

They always do that to accomplices, but Leetahr and I were naive enough not to know it.

He was the one instructed to initiate the attack. The one who carried the burden of foreknowledge. According to custom, he was told a day ahead of time, so he would prepare. I don't know what went through his mind that day.

We went to the booksellers and to the tailor to pick up Leetahr's new, dark-blue velvet suit. When we got home, he handed me my scaling knife and said, "Be ready, Syrac. Our six months of grace are over. Another Player, any Player, can attack you anywhere, at any time."

Then he smiled, at my surprised and worried look, and spoke, in a scared whisper, "Syrac, they have matched us against each other."

My heart stopped. I wanted to believe it was Leetahr's idea of a joke, but I knew him too well for that.

And then each of us felt the brief electrical shock that told us the camera, that replaced one of our eyes, had been turned on. The next thing I knew Leetahr attacked me like a maniac. He fought as though he intended to take my life in sacrifice to his lost dreams.

I defended myself, as best I could. My bare hands stopped the bouts of the small, silver handled knife I'd helped him choose at a silversmith in Newcity. I refused to use my own knife. I wanted to talk, to ask him if we couldn't just let the wardens kill us for refusing to fight. Why shouldn't we refuse to give the Newcity crowds their bloody entertainment? But the thought of the sound receivers in the eye-cameras, picking up our every word, kept me mute.

Unfortunately it did not keep Leetahr silent. I wish to the gods that it had.

After three or four attacks that I refused to return, Leetahr started talking, even as he attacked me more malevolently than ever. He used a low, vicious tone and language he had surely drunk with his mother's milk but that I'd never heard from him, in thirteen years of friendship.

He blamed me for our condemnation, which was fair and I could not protest, but then his accusations deepened, his language grew worse, his imagery more detailed. And he accused me of having killed

Plaudit Cives

that Priest out of jealousy. He accused me of—of wanting to—And I swear by the three gods, the divine virgin, that I never...

I loved Leetahr as my brother. But this was not the Leetahr I knew. It was an insane demon, a mad blood-thirsty Player. And everyone, anyone in both cities, who owned a TV could hear his vicious lies and I wanted to stop it, to deny it, wanted more than anything to silence Leetahr's voice, to stop Leetahr's mind.

I don't know when I drew my knife. My memory has muddled the details of our fight. I remember nothing between Leetahr's accusations and leaning over Leetahr, my knife raised, ready to give him the coup-de-grace. He lay on the white rug in the dining room, bleeding from too many wounds, his small knife fallen near his right hand.

It was then Leetahr smiled at me, with a self-satisfied smile I knew all too well. It was the way he'd smiled after outsmarting me in childhood games.

That smile brought me to sanity. I realized that, somehow, Leetahr must have dulled his knife to such a point that my hands didn't have a single cut, even though I'd parried his knife thrusts with them. I wasn't wounded at all.

Tears blinded me. I did not give him the coup-de-grace that had been chosen as my particular signature by the Players' Supervisor. I did not behead him. I just knelt by him, crying, until he expired, that cursed smile still on his lips.

I dragged him down to the river, as a penance, and laid him on one of the boats, I don't know whose, and pushed the boat onto the water, and rowed it to where river meets sea. Then set sail, jumped off and swam ashore.

That was the last time I saw Leetahr, Leetahr the redheaded, Leetahr the whore's son who wanted to be a Priest of the three nameless gods, the virgin goddess.

Come, give me wine. There are tears in my eyes. No Player should cry in public. Players are not human, our magic is our madness. My crying might give away the fact that there is still a heart beating, in the man who has killed... In the man who has been lulled by your applause and your easy favors into enjoying his life as a Player, a man who has even come to enjoy killing.

The girl? Ah, the girl, Dira. Well, when I was done with my story, I looked back at her. Dira asked me if I was ever sorry. And I said, yes, very often, but then Leetahr had wanted me to live, so I made the best of—

Dira interrupted me, said she wanted to know if I was sorry for the first murder, the murder of the High Priest.

I said yes. Yes, because it had got us condemned, and it had got Leetahr killed. It had put an end to all our dreams, in a way an end to my life.

Dira made a sound of disgust and cursed Leetahr's name to the gods. To the horned gods, keepers of lost souls.

I choked on a mouthful of liqueur, and looked back at her dark-dark eyes, shocked by her outburst I couldn't understand. Then my memory fluttered and the vague familiarity of her face found a niche. It was the face of the Priest on the beach, just smaller, and feminine and darker. And her lips had opened in a sneer. She called me a liar. She told me of a father who was gentle and kind; a father who had

been her dearest companion; a father who could never, ever, have done anything to harm a living being.

Dira took the bottle from my bewildered hand and broke it against the frame of the bed. Red liqueur ran down her hand; liqueur red as blood tinted my dirty sheets. She came at me.

She was much harder to kill than Leetahr had been. She'd trained well; she fought like the goddess of vengeance herself.

Her broken bottle met my knife, in perfect, defensive maneuvers, her muscular arm drove the jagged end home, again and again, to tear my tunic and my chest in gashes as red as Gods' Blood. I ignored the pain and fought her, step by step, inch by inch. She fainted, she twisted, she dove under my arm, she whirled and turned and more than once I found myself pinned to the wall, no way to escape, except through her. As soon as she could, she reached with her left hand, and tore out my camera eye, even as I was busy defending the vicious thrusts of her bottle-wielding right hand.

I remember chuckling then, because she thought she'd blinded me and because here was my best fight and the TV cameras were missing it.

I pushed forward, despite the pain she inflicted on me, despite the blood running from my body, despite the tiredness that grew with my every move. All I could see was her face, so much like her father's, and the sneer of contempt in her eyes, as she repeated all the lies told in court and called Leetahr a whore.

At long last she made a mistake. Her dainty sandals slipped on the blood and liqueur on the floor. She tripped over a pile of books. I was on her before she could recover. Never had beheading been so sweet. Afterwards I knelt, panting, by the corpse. Were it not for my having lied to her about my camera eye, she might have killed me. As it was, all her attacks were directed with the expectation that I would be half-blind on the right and completely blind, after she tore out my right eye.

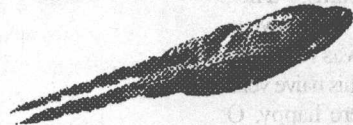
I dragged Dira's body to the river and threw it in and came here for wine, because my throat is parched and my blood is leaving me all too fast. I will soon die.

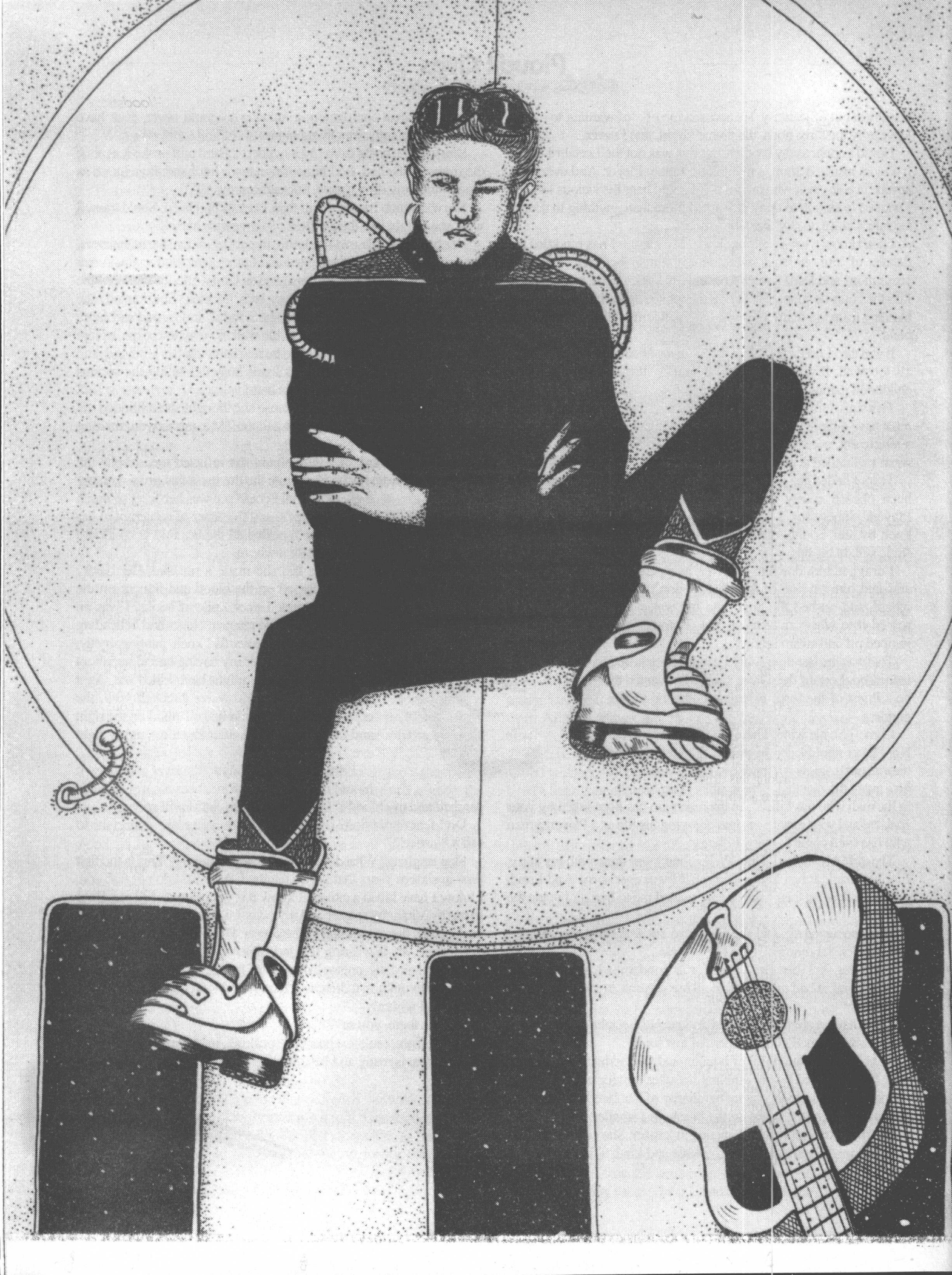
Do I fear retribution? Do I fear your... do you really expect me to call it "justice"?

Stop laughing? What do you mean, stop laughing? This is the first time in sixteen years that I have laughed. And no, I do not fear you. I know I have killed a citizen. I know it is your duty to kill me. But I swear by Vitar, my master and my owner, I am already dying. I can see Leetahr, there, standing in the corner. His smile grows clearer by the second. He is wearing the dark-blue velvet suit he wore for his death. His hair falls, untangled, over his left shoulder. His green eyes sparkle with unknown dreams. There is no blood on him, anywhere. No sign of wounds.

No one there, you say?

Listen, listen, can't you hear him speaking, in his ringing voice? He says the boat is ready and he is waiting. Together we will sail among the stars.





Siren

by A. J. Austin

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“Hang in there guy, we’re on our way.”

It was Doc. I’d recognize his voice anywhere.

“Just sit quiet and relax for a while, don’t move around too much. We’ll see you in no time at all.”

Liar. (And oh, such a good liar!) But that was all part of the Doc’s job on these missions, wasn’t it? In fact, it’s probably one of the biggest requirements of the ship psychologist on any of these survey missions. I mean, let’s face it: no one really needs to be analyzed out here. If we did, we’d never have made it on the trip in the first place. So what else was there for the psych to do? Simple. Bring him out of his cabin just to lie like hell to the guy in trouble. And make sure the poor sap believes you’re telling him the truth. Don’t want him going into hysterics and ruining any of that expensive equipment now, do we, for God’s sake? The heck with us, save the hardware.

Got a man in trouble? Put the psych on the line: *Hold on man! You’ll be fine! We’re almost there! You can handle it! Help is on the way! Stay calm!*

Got a survey member stranded on the surface? Ship psychologist to the rescue: *You’ll be all right! We’ll be there in two shakes! Hey, got a pot of hot coffee waiting here on the ship for you with your name on it! Don’t want coffee, huh? Well how about Shirley, from up in navigation? Yeah, you know her...she was asking about you the other day, stud! I’ll bet she’d have a surprise or two waitin’ for you when we get you back up here, so just hang in there!*

Do these clowns get picked for these missions because they have the in-born talent for making this drivel up on their own, or do all ship psychs have to memorize a whole book of it before they qualify for outbound?

“Doctor?” I asked.

“Yes, Terry?” Have you ever noticed how they always use your first name when they know you’re about to lose your butt? I mean, Ten-Star-Commander of an entire fleet with about a million guys under him will call you by your first name when he knows you’re gonna buy it. After he’s asked someone what it is, of course.

“Doctor, do you ever stop lying long enough to realize I’m smart enough to know what you’re trying to pull on me? Fact: That damned rock took out half the equipment on the lander. Fact: The soonest you could get here is in about an hour, maybe forty-five minutes. Fact: The only air I’ve got left is from the emergency tank. Look, I know you think I’m just some dumb farm boy kid who doesn’t belong out here, but I’m not stupid. I know what’s coming.”

“Terry, this is Captain Morraine. Doc’s right; it’s better if you don’t talk. Just be still, we’re on our way. Hang in there, Terry.” First name, from The Captain. Oh, wonderful.

“Captain—may I call you Bob?—Bob, I’ll be dead at least thirty minutes by the time you reach my orbit. The only thing you’ll find alive on this lander will be the siren. They like thin air.”

“Please, son, don’t talk.” Son. That was a nice touch. I had to hand it to ol’ Doc, he’d coached the captain pretty good. Or maybe he just loaned him his drivel book. Maybe captains had their own books.

“Hey, Doc? You still on the line?”

“Right here, Terry.”

“What’s your first name?”

“Uh, it’s Daryll,” he answered.

“Hey, Daryll,” I said. “Daryll, you’re a lying bastard. You do know that, don’t you?”

Of course, he started to protest in that oh-so-kind way that all doctors have, but I didn’t really feel like listening to it right now. I shut off the radio and removed the headset, throwing it at the lander console as hard as I could. It bounced off one of the screens and spun in the air till the cord got all wrapped up, then stopped and began spinning in the other direction.

“Hey, but you’re a really great liar, ya know?” I said, watching the headset slowly unwind itself again as it floated. Nothing like getting in the last word when you’ve had a rotten day.

Swiveling around in the seat, I looked at the siren. It was a gentle looking animal, really, sort of like a yellow koala bear. A yellow koala bear with a couple of extra legs, and fangs. Working fangs, I might add. My leg still hurt where the little jerk had bit me before I could get him stunned and throw him in the cage.

We really didn’t know that much about the sirens. While the planet was crawling (and flying and swimming and slithering) with thousands of different forms of animal life, the sirens were relatively rare. But unlike the other animals, which, as you might imagine, were localized depending on planetary conditions, the little bear-like creatures were scattered virtually everywhere on the planet’s surface. From the highest mountain areas to the lowest valleys, they seemed able to adapt to the most incredible temperature and atmosphere extremes the planet could throw at them. It was because of this adaptability that bringing a couple of them back to the ship was such a high priority. Well, that, and another somewhat more important reason.

The rest of the crew had taken to calling the little animals sirens after the first lander team had been killed. It was their second day on the surface. Gallagher was looking around about a hundred meters ahead when he came upon a small family of them. He’d been hypnotized or something by them, and just lay down on the ground and went to sleep. At least, that’s how Planson found him when he caught up. We could hear them up in the ship over Planson’s suit mike, and it was hypnotic in a way. Then he started mumbling something about how pretty their singing was and he, too, just got real quiet and fell to the ground. We kept listening for several minutes, trying to sort out the various sounds we were hearing—singing, scuffling, singing, fabric tearing, singing. We knew something was

Absolute Magnitude

wrong, but the singing seemed to say that everything was all right. Then, one after the other, both mikes went dead.

There wasn't much left by the time the second team managed to get there. Just torn pieces of bloody suit fabric and hardware, and a couple of dead sirens. Eaten at leisure by a family of six-legged teddy bears.

"Just you and me," I said to the bear, floating over to the stasis cage. "In about another twelve minutes or so, all this will be yours. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" It turned its head slowly, almost drug-like, in the narrow stasis field of the cage; like a dancer in one of those underwater ballets you see at the resorts in Florida. The oversized yellow eyes were blinking out of that innocent face. Could this teddy bear really be a killer? But then, I'd seen the pictures the second team had brought back, seen what was left of Planson and Gallagher.

I couldn't help thinking of a cartoon I'd seen in one of the old magazines my grandfather used to keep up in his attic. It showed a picture of Winnie the Pooh with this huge gut hanging out, and as he was wiping his mouth, he says "Christopher Robin, Christopher Shmober—a bear has got to eat!"

Of course. "Pooh! May I call you Pooh?" (blink-blink) "Pooh it is, then," I said as I pushed off the base of the cage in the direction of the storage locker. I stopped myself against the door, unlatched it and took out the small guitar case I always kept there when I got surface assignment.

"You know Pooh, most people, if they knew they only had a few minutes left to live, would be thinking of their final destinies, with their 'lives-flashing-before-their-eyes.' They'd be thinking of their sins. Guilt. Confession? Forgive me Father, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. Not me, Pooh. I'm taking this all rather well, I think. Doc would be proud of me. Think I oughta call him back and let him know?" (blink-blink) "No, you're right. Let him think the kid's in hysterics over here, screaming up the last of the oxygen a few minutes sooner than if I'd been quiet.

"Hey Pooh," I said, unsnapping the latches on the case. The fuzzy face turned in my direction, watched me as I took the guitar out and began checking the strings. "You seem to like music. Ever hear a guitar in zero gee? It was Collier, I think, who first took a guitar up on *Discovery*. No, wait. No, it wasn't, either. It was Scott, on one of the *Atlantis* flights. She about crapped in her pants when she heard it. Something about the vibration of the strings and sounding board with no gee to affect them, combined with cabin pressure and the way your inner ear gets all screwed up. The sound is somehow different. The vibration just seems to go on and on. Not longer notes, exactly, just different—*more*. If only Segovia could have lived to hear that sound. Listen."

I played for the animal. Just a few notes, tuning the instrument. Then one of my favorites; a beautiful, lilting piece from early in the last century. Softly, at first, then stronger as tired fingers got into the feel of the composition. Each note was clear and clean, reverberating in the confined space of the damaged lander. Each note was *more*.

The siren blinked, tilting its head slowly, first one way, then the other, trying to orient on the alien (to him) music coming from my guitar. The animal just stared for several minutes, listening to me play, then opened its mouth and tried in vain to sing. The stasis field prevented it. I finished, waited for the last note to fade slowly away. The bear was still trying to sing.

"Don't bother trying to put me to sleep, little buddy. I'm already getting light headed in here." The siren wasn't bothered by the rapid decrease in the oxygen levels, of course, being used to the atmospheric

extremes back down on the planet. I, on the other hand, was feeling the early stages of slow suffocation.

"Hey, Pooh," I said, picking out an up-tempo melody. "Listen to this: 'The bear went over the mountain, the bear went over the mountain, the bear went over the mountainiiiiin, to see what he could see!'" I'm beginning to miss some of the notes, now; fingers slipping from the frets more and more frequently. I started gasping, more than singing.

"...and all that he could see...and all that he...could see, and all...and all that he could see...was...the other...other side..."

My head was spinning as I stopped, trying to catch my breath, just floating in the stale air. Floating, trying to clear my head, staring at the animal. It was staring at me, too, probably wondering why the music had stopped.

Leaving the guitar hanging there, I floated over to the cage, unfastened the door, shut off the stasis. "There. No sense now." Reaching behind me, I again took the guitar, held it in my hands. The siren had come out of the cage, was now perched on the door. It was holding onto the mesh with both pairs of its back paws, its front paws floating out in front of it, listening blink-blink as I softly, slowly strummed the instrument.

The siren sang. The eerie, beautiful voice matching in tempo my strumming, matching even the sound of the guitar itself.

When I stopped playing—couldn't play any longer—I released the guitar, allowing it to float freely across the cabin, spinning slowly end-over-end until it came to rest against the wall. The bear was still singing, continuing the simple melody that I had begun, building on it, filling the tiny cabin with its music. And as it sang, the song changed, began shifting to a different melody. Softer. More beautiful, more haunting, just more.

This must be your song, I thought. Gallagher, Planson; they hear this? This what put them to sleep? Killed them? I watched the bear, listened to the song as a feeling of warmth, of peace began flowing over me. My breathing slowed, the gasping for breath began to lessen. As I listened to that beautiful sound, I could see the rows of small, sharp teeth in the animal's mouth as it sang. The same mouth that tore Gallagher and Planson apart.

"Not," sang the bear.

"Not? How not?" I asked. I don't know if I asked aloud. I don't even know if I 'heard' his (yes, his—I knew that now) answer, or could feel it somehow in his singing.

"*We the dream. Only. Not the death. Not the kill. We dream for the dying.*"

My head was reeling now as I watched the bear, listened to The Song. It was so clear in my mind; each note, each sound ringing in the cabin. Looking at the cage, I watched the air around the animal begin to fill with sparkles as I listened to him sing; like a barrage of tracer bullets from an old black and white war film. The whole cabin was in black and white, now. Panel lights blinking black and white. Blink, black. Blink, white. The eyes, blink-blinking at me. The Song. The Dream.

The last thing I remember thinking was how beautiful it was, and how safe I felt.

66 You should be dead, you know," said the biotechnician as he had turned away from the bear; cut, laid open in dissection. "As it was, you were barely alive when we got to you. Your heart and respiration rate had slowed down to almost nothing. Do you always do that when you're in that kind of situation?"

Siren

"No," I said, looking down at what was left of the little animal. "I usually don't get into that kind of situation. What about the bear? There's not that much oxygen in the planet's atmosphere. It shouldn't have died. What killed it?"

"Don't know yet. Wish we had time to get a few live ones before we leave. Hard to make any kind of determination at this point with only dead animals to dissect. Don't let it worry you, though, it's not your fault it died. Leave the study of the local flora and fauna to the bio's. Just get something to eat and head back to your cabin for a few days rest. Take it easy till we get back to station."

Once through the door, I heard the snapping of his rubber gloves as they left the fingers of each of his hands. Looking back, there was just enough time before the bio unit door slid shut, to see him slide the bear into one of the freezer units.

I don't know just how long I sat in the commissary, ignoring the congratulations-you-made-it dinner they'd fixed for me. When they got to the lander and radioed back to the ship that I was still alive, the captain must have requisitioned the steak from his own private stores, but I really didn't care. The rest of the guys who had arranged the party had long since given up on me; the steak had long since gotten cold. I couldn't stop thinking about the little bear I'd just seen sliced up down in bio. It wasn't till I felt the slight shifting in the ship when we left orbit that I finally started back to my personal quarters.

Arriving at my cabin, I tore down the crudely hand lettered "Welcome Home" banner that someone had stretched across the door, crumpled it, tossed it down the corridor, and watched for a few seconds as it bounced away and disappeared somewhere aft. When I looked around my cabin, I realized that I must have been out longer than I thought, because someone had managed to clean up the room, and returned the personal gear I'd taken down to the surface. Whoever it was had even thought to return my guitar to its restraining strap over the bunk. I think that was the first time I'd felt even remotely happy since returning to the ship. I even felt good enough for the moment to ignore the blinking message light on the comm panel for a while.

It felt good, closing my eyes and strumming the guitar. The sound always eases me when I'm upset, always helps me to relax. I didn't even mind that much when the comm panel started beeping at me again.

"Terry, are you back yet?" It was Doc. No sense putting it off any longer; I knew I'd have to go through a session with the psych sooner or later. We always did when ever one of us came out of a danger situation. Might as well get it over with.

"Yeah, Doc, I'm back." My voice triggered the unit into two-way mode as I continued softly strumming the guitar. "What do you want?"

"Nothing, just now. I just wanted to make sure you were OK. But I would like to get together with you sometime soon for a little chat. You've been through a lot in the last few days that I think we need to talk about, don't you?"

"Yeah, sure," I said. "If you say so. I've been doing a lot of thinking in the last hour or so, and I think I've come up with a few answers. At least I've figured out some answers to a few of the questions I've been asking myself lately."

"Oh, really? Care to tell me about them?" he asked. He seemed genuinely interested. But then doctors always seem interested in your problems, whether they are or not. It didn't really matter, I felt like talking anyway.



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95

Absolute Magnitude

"Well, first off," I began, "why aren't I dead? I should have been, and you know it. You can't explain why I went into that coma, but apparently that's what saved me. And what about the bear, why did he die? He shouldn't have, there was still plenty of oxygen in the cabin air for him."

"So you think you've figured it out?" He sounded very patronizing.

"Yeah. *He* did it. He kept me alive. That's what that singing we heard was all about. Something got our guys down on the planet, but it wasn't them. The bears were just innocent bystanders. Something else had already gotten to Gallagher and Planson when they came along. They just made their dying easier, made their pain go away because they knew they were going to die. Just like the one on the lander knew I was going to die. And that's why it sang to me.

"But I didn't die, did I? The Song, and The Dream kept me alive long enough for the ship to reach me, to pump in air."

"That's an interesting theory, Terry," said Doc. "Hey, who knows? I've seen a lot of strange things on these survey flights. Maybe you're right. Just consider yourself lucky that you made it as high as you did before the meteor hit the lander. If you'd been in a lower orbit, the siren may have had enough time to finish you off before we got to you." He'd missed the point entirely.

"But don't you see?" I shouted at the comm panel. "They aren't killers! They don't put their victims to sleep before they kill them, like some kind of vampires. They aren't vicious animals at all. The one on the lander thought I was going to die, and tried to make my dying easier. Taking the pain of dying away from me is what killed it." My hands were shaking. I hadn't even noticed that I was gripping the neck of my guitar so tightly that my fingers were beginning to hurt. Forcing myself to calm down, I again started strumming.

"Well, maybe you're right," he said. "Anyway, we might have an answer by the time we get home. You probably haven't heard, but the guys who were on the last lander brought back a live siren before we broke orbit. They've got it down in bio now.

"In the mean time, why don't you try to get some sleep. We can get into this tomorrow when you're feeling a bit more rested. All right, Terry?"

Assured that I would be a good boy, he broke the connection.

It took almost an hour before I got the courage to call down to bio. "Yes, what is it?" he answered, his voice keying the communications unit into two-way. As he did, I reached out and flipped my panel into the 'lock' position. I was pleased to hear that it was the same tech I'd talked to a few hours ago. He was obviously not pleased about being interrupted in his work.

His work. The microphones on the comm panels were excellent. They picked up everything in the room, and in the background, I could hear it. It was making noises, but the noises didn't sound right. The animal was restrained somehow. It couldn't be in stasis, or it wouldn't be able to make any noise at all. Maybe it was drugged. Or maybe they'd even gagged it.

"Hello? Who is this?" the tech wanted to know.

"It's Correll, we were talking about the bears when I was there earlier. Remember, you told me that you wished you had a live one to cut up." I tried to keep the conversation as light as I could. Tried like hell to keep the horror I was feeling out of my voice. "I just wanted to see if you'd found out anything yet."

"Oh, yeah, hi kid. No, I don't have anything yet; just getting started, really. All I've gotten so far is some blood, fur, and tissue

samples. You should of heard him yell when I took the skin scrapings. I've got him tied down to the cutting table now. I'll be starting vivisection in a few minutes if you want to come down and watch." Vivisection was SOP when the landing teams brought something interesting back. I was hoping they'd keep this one alive, though, since it was the only one we had. I was wrong.

"I've got a better idea," I said. "How about if I come down and start cutting you open for awhile?"

"Hey, what the hell's your problem, anyway?"

"In fact, why don't I just come down there right now? I'm sure you've got an extra knife or two."

"You gotta be nuts. Suppose I just get security to throw your crazy ass in the tank till the psych can iron your problems out," he said. And the whole time he's yelling at me, I can hear him trying to buzz security on the comm panel, but he can't because I've got it locked at my end.

"If you want security, I guess you'll just have to run and get them. I'll wait. I'm in no hurry," I lied. I was in a big hurry.

I could hear a mixture of sounds over the comm: something small and metallic hitting the deck plates, the tech going for the door as fast as he could, the usual electronic beeps and clicks of the lab equipment, the bear. The bear. I realized what the sound was, even through the comm. It was the sound of fear; cold, brutal fear. He was crying in fear; and in pain.

Once I'd switched the comm panel back to unlock, it didn't take long before it seemed like half the ship was trying to reach me; the tech had been faster than I thought. Before I answered, I slipped a cassette in the player built into the top of my bunk, and listened as the soft guitar sounds filled the cabin.

"Terry, is everything OK?"

"Oh, hi Doc. Yeah, everything's fine. Why, something wrong?" I was trying to sound calm, as if nothing had happened. I wanted him to think I really had no idea what he wanted. I wanted him to think I was schizoid, or flipping out, or anything; I really didn't care what he thought as long as I got him up here.

"Look, Terry. I'm going to come see you. Would that be all right with you? Would you wait there for me if I came to see you?" he asked softly.

"Sure."

"All right, Terry. I'll be there in just a couple minutes. Do me a favor, and leave the comm on, OK? Just leave the unit on."

"All right, if you want me to," I answered. But by that time, I was already starting for the door, setting the lock from the inside before sliding it shut. I could just barely hear the tape playing from outside as I headed to bio with my guitar.

The tech had lied to me, I saw, the moment I entered the lab. The bear was strapped down to the examination table all right, but the tech had already started cutting on one of the animal's legs. He just lay there, moaning, unable to move because of the system of tubing-restraints-electrodes common to this type of examination. As his eyes turned toward me, I could see that he wasn't in too much actual physical pain caused by the procedure; whatever drugs they had given him before they started were seeing to that, I was certain. But I could feel in the small sounds he was making that his pain was caused by the sheer terror of going through a torture that he couldn't possibly understand.

I didn't know how much time I had. Sliding the door closed, I locked it from inside and slowly approached the bear. I slowly, carefully began to remove some of the paraphernalia attached to him.

Siren

He started thrashing around as soon as I got his legs free, trying to bite me several times but couldn't because of whatever they'd injected him with. He did manage to break free before I had the last of the straps off, and jumped across the room. Some of the electrodes were still attached to the shaved places on his skin, and the thin wires dangled behind him as he sailed weightlessly to an overhead light.

"It's all right," I said quietly, hoping that the tone of my voice might convey my thoughts where the words wouldn't. He blinked down at me from that light, nearly panic stricken, the open leg bleeding badly now that it was away from the tubing and equipment of the examination table. He gripped the light tightly as he frantically looked around the room for some place to run, to hide.

He was just hanging there, shaking, looking at me when he started to cry again. It was that horrible, sickening kind of whimper you hear from the porch when your dog has been hit by a car, and he's just managed to barely make it to your door where he knows you'll make everything all right again. The kind of whimper that cuts into you, because you know he hurts, you know he's terrified, and as he looks into your eyes he can't understand why you won't please, please, please make the hurting and the fear go away. But you can't do anything for him. You can't even touch him, because the sound of his cry makes you helpless, and you just want to run away and you don't know why.

And as I looked at him, I began to cry. I would not run away, couldn't. I played. From memory, I played *The Song*. The strains of the melody filling the room. The notes clear, clean—more; the guitar, *The Song*, sounding only as it can in zero g.

The little animal began to calm. The shaking became slower and slower as I continued to play. The whimpering stopped and his panting slowed. As he relaxed, he stopped looking around the room and turned slightly back in my direction, and he opened his mouth in the same way the bear on the lander had.

"Who?" he sang.

"A friend," I answered, again not knowing if I was speaking aloud or not. I fought the urge to stop when I heard the security team at the bio door, trying to bypass the lock circuitry from outside. I could see them through the glass, pounding on the door, yelling at me to let them in. I did my best to shut them out of my mind and continued to play. "Please, don't be afraid."

And as I played, a feeling of peace flowed over me; and, I think, the siren as well. I could sense that he was no longer afraid, no longer in pain.

And as the sounds of *The Song* filled the lab, I could feel *The Dream* begin to draw the two of us closer together, to connect us somehow. I could feel the bear as he fell into sleep, a sleep from which I knew he wouldn't awake. I felt the total peace that I knew he felt.

And as we shared *The Dream* as one, I felt him say how beautiful *My Song* was, and how safe he felt. I heard him thank me.

And I felt strong hands on my shoulders. I felt myself being shaken violently and being held against the wall by one of the security men, pinned there as someone else bound my hands

behind me. When they turned me around, I saw the blood on the wall where my face had hit; I looked at my reflection in one of the wall cabinets and saw the blood begin to gather at the end of my nose in a glob that just stayed there. I hadn't even felt the force of impact against the wall, and was only now beginning to notice the throbbing aches from the several blows I must have taken from the security men. One of them had a fair amount of blood on his hands and face; but I didn't know if it was mine or his. I didn't care.

My vision started clearing, and I could see pieces of my guitar floating around the room. Several of the larger pieces had already come to rest in corners, leaving only the smaller ones still in the air—how long had it taken? I hurt in several places, and I wondered just what they'd had to do to wake me.

Doc was there. When security was satisfied I was under control, they let him come over to where they were holding me. He looked at me, and I could see genuine worry and concern in his face. He took a handkerchief or something and gently wiped some of the blood from my nose and face.

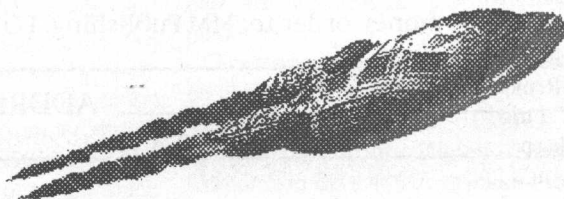
"Are you going to be all right?" he asked quietly. I tried to answer, felt my head swim.

"It's OK, Terry. Don't try to talk just now. I saw what happened. I heard. We all did. Let's get you to the infirmary. Sorry about the nose, but we had to snap you out of it somehow. I almost thought we'd lost you there for a moment. Glad you made it." Then he smiled and reached out and softly put his hand on my shoulder. I could tell from the touch of his hand that he meant it. Maybe he wasn't such a bad guy after all. Maybe he'd really been a caring person all along, and I just didn't bother to see it. That thought made me feel better, just in itself.

An injured person in zero gee is an easy thing to handle. With one person on each side, you become just another weightless bundle, easily carried. As they slowly floated me head-first out of the room, I got a chance for one last look back. The room was a wreck. I must have put up quite a fight, although I don't remember it. The pieces of my guitar had all finally come to rest in various parts of the room. Maintenance was already there, starting to clean up the mess. The biotechnician was there, too, helping put the lab back into shape.

I guess he didn't really hold any kind of a grudge against me, because he smiled at me as they took me to sick bay.

The last thing I saw before they carried me out of sight of the lab was that tech. He had retrieved something small and yellow from one of the corners of the room, and as the door slid shut I saw him put it very, very gently into a freezer unit.



Joe Lazzaro is author of *Adapting PCs For Disabilities*, published by Addison Wesley. He is also a frequent contributor to *Byte* on the subject of adaptive technology. He dabbles in science fiction and has been published in *Analog*. Currently project director for the Adaptive Technology For The Blind Program housed at the Massachusetts Commission For The Blind in Boston, he can be reached on the internet as Lazzaro@World.Std.Com or at his web site at <http://world.std.com/~lazzaro>

Building an Accessible Future

by Joe Lazzaro

Alex is a computer programmer, a father and husband, and an amateur chess master. He also happens to be legally blind. He walks down the central corridor of the main Lunar settlement each day to work, while a tiny assistive device that looks like an ordinary pen helps him navigate the underground complex. He stands in the central subterranean rotunda, with corridors branching off like the spokes of a great wheel. Hundreds of people bustle through the cut-rock corridors each day, but not quite like Alex does. He waves the pen like a wand, listening to its mechanical voice. "Public telephone," it says. He moves the pen more to the right, and is rewarded with more feedback. "MacDonalds restaurant," then with more scanning, "public information kiosk." Smiling now that he has located his target, he walks towards the information kiosk, running one finger down the left edge of the touch-screen. The kiosk speaks aloud as his finger travels over unseen graphical icons one at a time. Alex presses twice on one icon, and is rewarded with a brief verbal message. "The chess club will be meeting in public room 35 on the main level this evening at 7:30." Satisfied that his evening of convivial social interaction is well in hand, Alex heads for work, stopping for hot coffee and a light breakfast from the fast food eatery.

Since the dawn of humanity, physical and sensory disabilities have been a bitter fact of existence. As the human life span increases, thanks to new treatments and medicines, we are ironically faced with a greater chance of encountering a physical, sensory, or cognitive disability as we sail towards the sunset. I am using the term disability in the same context as it is used within the Americans with Disabilities Act. According to the ADA, disability is defined as any condition that seriously impairs a major life function such as seeing, hearing, walking, or learning.

The real tragedy with disabilities, often worse than the actual impairment itself, is caused by a new life that must be lived in a world that is fundamentally inaccessible. You can probably imagine many objects that can

be inaccessible: buildings, sidewalks, computers, televisions, telephones, books, magazines, newspapers, household appliances, and so on. As you might also imagine, inaccessibility differs from one disability to another. The access barriers facing persons who are blind are quite different from those of wheelchair users, or those experienced by persons who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. Using increasingly powerful assistive technologies, we can solve many of the technical problems of inaccessibility. In this article, I will use the term Assistive Technology to describe any device that helps persons with disabilities accomplish a given task independently. As computers play a significant role in the assistive technology field, I will spotlight some interesting trends in the computer field that will contribute to our more accessible future world.

Just as our early ancestors roamed the deserts and plains at will, the future of computing seems to be taking us back to our nomadic roots. We are no longer satisfied with being confined to our desktop computers. We now use computers in a wide variety of settings: in the recliner watching television, in the car, on the beach, in a board room, on a plane, in a hazard suit, in a cabin in the mountains, etc. It doesn't take a college education to figure out that computers are becoming smaller, faster, cheaper, and widely interconnected. New computer platforms appear on the market each year that offer advances in micro processor power, memory, and disk storage capacity. The ever expanding Internet and cellular phone networks are playing the role of backbone in connecting computers together, allowing individuals to exchange information anywhere, playing a major role in computers becoming truly nomadic. As computers grow smaller and more interconnected, a wide range of assistive technologies are developing in parallel, ready to become the user interfaces of choice for the truly nomadic systems of the not too distant future. I am speaking of technologies like voice synthesis and speech recognition, which will provide a natural interface for nomadic

computers. Thanks to the growth and development of the personal computer, the selection of assistive hardware and software products has literally exploded. We can select from a wide variety of computer-based assistive technologies: voice synthesis, speech recognition, video magnification, and even braille.

VOICE SYNTHESIS

Voice synthesis technology provides a natural interface between humans and computers, using letter-to-sound rules to turn text into speech in real time. Voice synthesizers are talking computers that plug into PCs and other equipment through standard expansion slots, serial ports, or parallel ports. Voice synthesis has become practical for desktop, notebook, and even tiny palmtop computers, thanks to ubiquitous and inexpensive sound card technology. Voice synthesizers can be used by persons with vision impairments to read computer screens with an unlimited vocabulary. Persons with learning disabilities utilize talking reading comprehension software to reinforce learning. The masses are also benefitting from speech systems, as speech becomes a standard part of computer operating systems. The Apple Macintosh was the first computer platform to take advantage of speech and sound technology for its operating system. Microsoft is building a new technology known as SAPI, which stands for Speech Application Programmers Interface. This will allow Windows 95 and NT users to employ speech synthesis and voice recognition technology to control their computer and to operate applications software. It goes without saying that speech is rapidly becoming an ordinary part of mainstream personal computer platforms.

Numerous voice synthesizers are available on the market, ranging from \$1,000 to \$100. The \$1,000 DECTalk Express voice synthesizer from Digital Equipment Corporation has a 486 class micro-processor, an unlimited vocabulary, nine distinct male

Absolute Magnitude

and female voices, and is the high-end of the text-to-speech market. Only a few years ago, the DECTalk synthesizer sold for around \$4,000, and was the size of a standard desktop personal computer. The current DECTalk Express synthesizer is smaller than a paperback book, battery powered, and weighs about 15 ounces. Digital Equipment Corporation has recently released Software Dectalk, which runs on standard sound cards. The Software Dectalk has an unlimited vocabulary, and has applications in both the telephony and disability market.

The SoundBlaster sound card from Creative Labs is shipped with most personal computers purchased today. The SoundBlaster is capable of producing music, special effects, and unlimited vocabulary speech. Software-based voice synthesizers that run on the Soundblaster cards and their clones represent the next generation of speech technology for personal computers. Software synthesizers will significantly lower the cost for unlimited vocabulary, text-to-speech systems, and will allow many more individuals access to this powerful, liberating technology. The SoundBlaster has changed the definition of standard equipment for the typical personal computer.

SPEECH RECOGNITION

A technology that can go hand-in-hand with voice synthesis, speech recognition systems are machines designed to process and respond to spoken commands, using sophisticated pattern-matching hardware and software. Speech recognition technology has become commonplace with today's powerful Pentium PC platforms, and prices are falling. Speech recognition systems allow you to control the software on your computer using verbal commands, and to dictate documents into your word processor. At its inception, speech recognition products were capable of vocabularies of only a few hundred words. Now, the lexicon approaches several hundred thousand, with vocabularies climbing with each product revision. The current generation of speech recognition systems are capable of recognizing words and phrases without pauses. This is known as continuous speech recognition. Dragon Systems (Newton, Mass.) has released NaturallySpeaking, the first continuous utterance speech recognition system to enter the speech market. In other words, you do not have to pause between words when dictating documents into your computer. IBM has rolled out a similar

product, Simply Speaking, which can recognize speech without pauses and has a vocabulary size approaching several hundred thousand words. This bodes very well for the future of speech recognition technology, which is poised to capture the consumer market.

Speech recognition is powerful assistive technology for mainstream computer users, those with repetitive stress conditions, as well as persons with disabilities unable to type on a standard keyboard or drive the mouse. Speech recognition is an ideal input device for nomadic computers that must be accessed under a wide range of conditions where typing on a keyboard may not be possible, practical, or even safe. Coupled with voice synthesis to read the screen, speech recognition provides a natural user interface.

VIDEO MAGNIFICATION

Video Magnification systems are powerful technology for persons with vision impairments but who are not totally blind. Magnified images are easier to see because they create a larger image on the retina of the eye. For computer users with some useable vision, video magnification restores the ability to read independently. If your computer can run Windows 95, it contains many of the tools you need to magnify the screen. The latest version of Windows 95 contains a simple video magnification program, including utilities to adjust font size, contrast settings, and overall color scheme, allowing end users with vision impairments to adjust the environment to one that is the most readable and comfortable for them. The Apple Macintosh also includes a screen magnification program built into the operating system called CloseView. The trend to include video magnification software in the operating system is one that is expected to continue into the future.

BRAILLE

Braille Displays are another powerful technology being used by persons who are blind to access computers. Braille displays are connected to the computer through one of the standard interface ports, and screen reading software routes information to the display. The braille display uses a software program that automatically follows the cursor. As the cursor is moved around the screen, the braille display shows what is under the cursor. The braille display can thus be used to access

software and control the operating system. The Braille-Lite from Blazie Engineering of Forest Hill, Maryland, sells for about \$3,500 and offers an 18 character braille display. The Braille Lite is portable, battery powered, and can be interfaced to a personal computer to act as a display. It can also function as a stand alone note-taker with braille display and voice output. The 80 character PowerBraille display from Telesensory Corporation of Sunnyvale, California, can be purchased in several character sizes: 40 characters for \$6,095; 65 characters for \$8,995; or 80 characters for \$11,295.

Unfortunately, braille is still one of the most expensive and complicated assistive technologies, selling for about \$150 per character. Braille displays also use a lot of moving parts, and are prone to breakdown. Research underway at Texas Instruments uses a matrix of small circular cavities filled with electrically responsive gel to generate braille characters for significantly less cost. When an electrical charge is applied to the gel, it expands against a membrane, producing the standard 1.5mm braille dot. The system can also be used to generate braille character sets of different sizes, useful for readers with reduced finger sensitivity from diabetes or aging.

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY AND COMPUTER OPERATING SYSTEMS

The mainstream computer industry has slowly been getting into the assistive technology business, urged on by an increasingly activist oriented disability community. Microsoft has just released Active Accessibility, software and debugging tools to make Windows software more accessible for users with disabilities. The main thrust of Active Accessibility is to embed assistive features directly into the innards of the Windows 95 and Windows NT operating systems. The embedded assistive features include options to enlarge text and graphics for visually impaired users, insert captions for users with hearing impairments, as well as utilities to help users with motor disabilities operate the keyboard and mouse more effectively. Other computer manufacturers like Apple, Sun, and IBM have also written accessibility features directly into their operating systems. With the growth of assistive technologies like voice synthesis and speech recognition coupled with efforts like Active Accessibility, we have a wide selection of technologies on which to draw for

Building an Assessable Future

the next generation of computer platforms that will utilize the concept known as Universal Design.

UNIVERSAL DESIGN

The Trace Research and Development Center at the University of Wisconsin is no stranger to the field of assistive technology. The Trace Center has been working towards solving the sticky problems of computer access for persons with disabilities for over twenty-five years. The center has been working with a team of scientists, engineers, computer programmers, and the disability community, to develop guidelines for the Design concept. According to the Trace Center, "Universal Design is the process of creating devices, environments, systems, and processes which are usable by people with the widest possible range of abilities, operating within the widest possible range of environments, conditions, and circumstances." In simple terms, Universally Designed products would be accessible to all users, including users with or without disabilities.

Designing products that are universally accessible means following two basic guidelines. The products must be accessible right out of the box, or they must be accessible through the application of third-party assistive systems.

An example to illustrate this point can come from a universally designed personal computer of the future, fresh from the manufacturer. The computer comes equipped with a graphical video display, standard disk and memory storage, sound card, and a Universal Interface port. Let's also suppose that the operator is a person with a mild vision impairment, they still have some limited but useable vision. The computer, running its standard software configuration, probably will not produce characters large enough for the visually impaired end user. The obvious answer is to increase the size of the characters and icons on the video display. The way to do this is by clicking on the control-panel and increasing the font size. This is possible with current assistive technology imbedded in Windows 95, but let's take a leap ahead.

Let's assume that the person is totally blind, and cannot read the video display, no matter how large the characters may be. Since the computer has a built-in sound card, we can turn the computer into a talking PC with fairly little effort or expense. We accomplish this feat by merely clicking on the control panel and enabling the speech-output option. This

will allow the person to hear back their keystrokes, and to read any information displayed on the screen with an unlimited vocabulary. Microsoft is currently working on the speech technology that will make this a reality in the not too distant future.

In the case of an individual with a motor disability that impacts their ability to type on the keyboard, we can also adapt our universally Designed computer to accommodate their special needs merely by loading the appropriate software. We can load a speech recognition program to accept spoken commands, or we can load a program known as a word-predictor that assists with typing. The word predictor turns short abbreviations into longer words and phrases. For example, the word predictor can turn "asap" into "as soon as possible" and so on. We can use keyboard or voice macros to turn single keystrokes into hundreds or thousands of keystrokes. If properly applied, Universal Design will make computers and other electronic devices and appliances natively accessible, and will also make these devices more easily adapted with third-party assistive hardware and software, greatly contributing to a more accessible environment overall.

THE UNIVERSAL INTERFACE

In the previous section, we discussed Universal Design, a methodology to make electronic equipment accessible to the community at large. As we discovered, one of the concepts of Universal Design involves easily interfacing assistive technology to mainstream devices if the device is not accessible right out of the box. Many devices do not allow assistive technology to be easily installed, and it is these devices that would benefit from a Universal Interface. These devices include computers, telephone systems, appliances, office equipment, or other devices. The Universal Interface will also be useful for computers and information servers installed for the general public, such as information kiosks, building directories, and automatic teller machines.

The Universal Interface could evolve into a reliable method for quickly and painlessly interfacing assistive technology to all types of electronic equipment. In simple terms, the Universal Interface allows complete control of a given device. The Universal Interface will also provide feedback to the user. It will permit two-way communication between the device and the end user, providing for complete control and feedback.

The end user could take advantage of many different flavors of the Universal Interface, each suited to a particular special need. Users unable to read the standard display of a given device could use a talking Universal Interface to access the system. Users unable to handle standard controls or touch-screens could use a Universal Interface equipped with speech recognition, allowing verbal commands to control the system. The Universal Interface will be small, lightweight, and battery powered, permitting it to be used at electronic teller machines, public information kiosks, as well as desktop and portable computers. In other words, the Universal Interface would function as a universal translator, providing accessible controls and feedback in the format most useful.

CAN WE REALLY GET THERE FROM HERE?

It is well within our technological reach to create a world that is accessible to everyone, no matter their abilities. It is also the correct and moral thing to create a society with a level playing field, where everyone can live, work, play, and exchange information as equals. If we create accessible computers and consumer products, many of the drawbacks to physical and sensory disabilities will be significantly reduced.

We can and must also create accessible cities, malls, schools, parks, transportation systems, everywhere people live, work, and play. Back in 1979, an interesting gadget was developed and tested that could make a big difference. I introduced this article with a fanciful description of the gadget known as the Talking Sign. The Smith Kettlewell Eye Research Institute built the first prototype talking signs in 1979 and proved that they could be used to locate almost anything from restrooms to public telephones. The signs employ infra-red light to communicate with hand-held receivers. The user can employ the receiver to locate any object equipped with a transmitter. Telesensory Corporation of Sunnyvale California is rolling out a commercial version of the talking signs almost twenty years later. Telesensory named the product Marco, which may be more appropriate than we realize. Just as Marco Polo helped discover uncharted territory, so may the talking sign and assistive technology help thousands of disabled persons chart a new life in an accessible world.

PRIMARY IGNITION

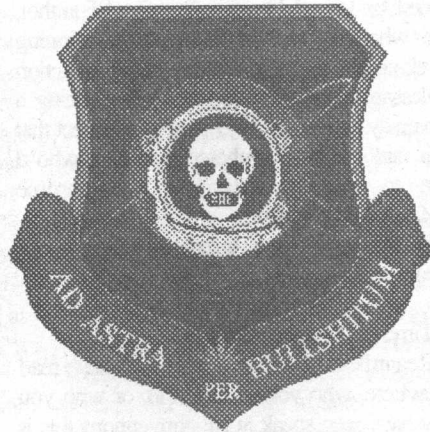
Bennett Cerf Asks: Do You Have A Restless Urge To Write? by Allen Steele

A Saturday afternoon in mid-summer, and within the penthouse suite of the Absolute Magnitude Tower, located in DNA Publications Plaza in the bustling metropolis of Greenfield, Massachusetts, the editorial board of this magazine has convened once more to consider submissions by potential contributors. Taking their seats around a large oak table, these urbane young men and women open each manila envelope in turn and, one at a time, pass the stories around the table. They carefully peruse every manuscript from start to finish, savoring every word in breathless anticipation of its startling denouement, before finally passing the submissions to the end of the table where *Absolute Magnitude's* editor and publisher, Warren Lapine makes the final selection from the possible candidates. Dozens of stories will be read today, but many will be chosen for forthcoming issues.

Yes, indeed. And if you drive a few miles down the road, you'll pass a sign in front of a nearby farm: *Choice Cow Manure*.

A Saturday afternoon in midsummer, and within a modest house on the outskirts of a small New England town, about a dozen of Warren Lapine's friends are slogging their way through an enormous stack of submissions: more than 1,800 stories, most of them from the United States but also a few from England, Europe, even Japan. Despite the best efforts by the first-readers—college students, local science fiction fans, a couple of writers—to keep everything organized, the living room is a mess: manuscripts cover the sofa, the end tables, the chairs, the floor. The carpet is filthy with food crumbs, the furniture littered with soda and beer bottles; get up for a moment to grab another drink from the fridge, and you'll probably return to find someone's pizza slice on your chair.

The atmosphere is loud, even unruly at times—one reader, a young mother, has to leave early, because the noise level is too much for her two-year-old daughter—but it's the joviality of a forced march. Nearly two thousand stories were received by *AbsMag* this month, and that's an average haul. During the course of a long summer afternoon, I personally read, or at least skimmed, about three dozen stories; from that tiny percentage of the total mass, I found only



thought were worth recommending to Warren, and two of those three were from previously published writers.

This is a slush party, an unkind name for an unkind process, and it regularly occurs at every magazine and book publisher when the time comes to read the slush pile. The term comes from the pulp era, when struggling writers usually lived in New York and often wrote everything from science fiction to westerns to mysteries. Once they finished a story, they would hop a bus down to a magazine's offices, and—since editors, wary of confronting writers who hadn't been paid for their work, usually kept their doors locked—toss their manuscripts through the window transom above the door. Unsolicited stories which landed on the floor below the transom were called slush: hence, the slush pile. The pulps are long gone, post-modern architecture has rendered transoms obsolete, and most writers don't live in New York any more, but the traditional name for unsolicited contributions has remained intact. Every now and then, the slush pile becomes too large for an editor to undertake without assistance, so he or she sends forth the word: pizza, beer, and all the stories you can read.

The slush pile is a form of literary Darwinism; only the strongest and most nimble survive, and the rest are toast. Every writer whose work you've ever read—except those desperate few published by vanity presses, that is—has endured this humiliating process to one extent or another. There are no shortcuts, no overnight successes; when you read a story in *People*

about so-and-so having his or her first bestselling book published without any previous writing experience, it's usually a smokescreen, if not a blatant lie. My first fiction sale was a novel which was discovered during a slush party; it's regarded as an "overnight success" in the SF community, but preceding it were nearly fifteen years of Monday mornings.

So what do you find during a slush party? A few precious roses growing from an enormous pile of cow flop. *Absolute Magnitude* is an SF-adventure magazine, so it's bound to attract space opera. Endless reams of space opera, in fact. One of the stories I put before Warren was a space opera which seemed to be well-written—but it's Mr. Lapine's decision, not mine, whether or not it will be accepted—yet to find that one story I had to struggle through a couple of dozen rehashes of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, each sporting a different variation of a terracentric interplanetary federation battling evil aliens. Among them were a not-very-clever imitation of Harlan Ellison's "A Boy and His Dog" (a guy and his telepathic dog fighting alien invaders), an overwrought galactic romance (long-winded aristocrats groping each other while fighting alien invaders), and—so help me, it's true; magazines still receive these things—an Adam-and-Eve story (Earth has been destroyed by aliens, and the last man and woman surviving are named...uh-huh, that's right). I was surprised that there weren't any William Gibson-Bruce Sterling-John Shirley-style cyberpunk stories; apparently that trend has had its day, and now the space shoot-'em-up is back in vogue, no thanks to the *Trek* and *Star Wars*, along with more recent movies like *Independence Day*. I can't wait to read what comes in after the big-budget *Godzilla* remake opens next summer. On second thought, perhaps I can...

I didn't bring home a doggy bag, so I can't reprint some of the howlers we found among the submissions, even if I was unkind enough to do so. But when Alison, reading aloud from a SF-murder mystery story she had found in the pile, informed us that the killer was supposed to be a one-legged man, I yelled "He won't get far on foot!" That comment received the loudest groans of...well, at least the last half-hour. It had been a long afternoon, and by this point the readers

Absolute Magnitude

were getting punchy; we were competing to find the worst prose.

Yet I can't sneer too much. My own novice efforts weren't much better; I had to write umpteen hundred thousand words, including a 685-page novel, before I learned my chops. I grew up in Nashville, Tennessee, the home of the country music industry, where to be a struggling writer meant that you wanted to repeat Kris Kristofferson's legendary "overnight success" by having your first song recorded by Johnny Cash. But Kristofferson paid his dues; he was a former Rhodes Scholar living out of a sleeping bag on a bar rooftop when he penned "The Silver-Tongued Devil and I." In Music City, there's an old adage among aspiring songwriters: you have to write a hundred bad songs before you get your first good one. Much the same goes for fiction writing, regardless of intent or genre.

If you want to have your work taken seriously from the moment someone at a slush party removes it from an envelope, there are some basic things that you need to learn. Since, upon half of the reject slips for stories I kicked back that afternoon, I wrote the same line—Please learn proper manuscript format—I now realize that many novice writers simply don't know what this is.... and writing is a trade which, just like law, medicine, or carpentry, requires a certain minimum standard of professionalism. Fortunately, there are no shortage of books that will teach you the basics. The late Scott Meredith, who formed the literary agency which bears his name, wrote one of the classic primers, aptly titled *Writing For Publication*. Ben Bova, the bestselling SF author and former editor of both *Analog* and *Omni*, has published a book called *The Craft of Science Fiction*, also recommended as a starting point. My esteemed colleague Algis Budrys had a long-running column in his small-press SF magazine, *Tomorrow*, which covered the finer points of SF writing; those essays are collected in *Write To The Point*. And there's dozens of others, ranging from Richard Curtis' *How To Be Your Own Literary Agent* to Norman Spinrad's *Stayin' Alive*, which will give you advanced lessons once you're past the boot-camp stage.

Judging from the sheer size of the *AbsMag* slush pile, there's no shortage of people who'd like to become published writers. To be sure, many would just like to have one or two stories appear in print, if only so they can say that their work has been published in *Asimov's* or *Fantasy and Science Fiction* or this magazine. During a recent dinner party, I encountered an old gent who called himself a "retired science fiction writer" on the basis of the fact that he had

published a story—one story—in *Astounding* back in the early '40s; this was a major point of pride for him, the fact that he once had a story accepted by John W. Campbell, Jr. You can't knock people like him for this pastime—at least it's more healthy than bar-hopping or using drugs—but for them writing is essentially a hobby, not much different than my own hobby of collecting and building scale-model plastic spaceships. Indeed, I know one major SF author, one who has written many award-winning novels and stories, who considers science fiction a pleasant break from his real job as being a university professor. Yet I strongly suspect that their ranks are outnumbered by those, who'd love to quit their day-jobs and become professional SF authors.

Which poses the question: why would anyone want to be a SF writer?

Time for a reality check.

Regardless of whatever you may have read elsewhere, who you've talked to, or who you may have seen speak at SF conventions this is the blunt, straight-out truth: science fiction writing is not an easy profession to enter, and an even more difficult occupation in which to stay gainfully employed.

Although almost every major American publishing company has an SF line, the number of titles those imprints publish on a month-to-month basis has remained more or less steady over the past decade. Meanwhile, the membership of the Science Fiction Writers of America has increased dramatically over the same period. This lack of equilibrium means that there are more authors seeking to have their novels published, while the opportunities for them to be published are more or less stagnant. There are also far less midlist novels published these days, both in hardcover and in paperback; those which do see print have shorter bookstore shelf-lives, and often disappear without racking up enough sales for their publishers to reap substantial profit from their publication.

A few years ago, a newcomer might have been able to break into the SF field by writing a novelization for a TV series or a role-playing game. Now the publishers of media tie-ins are usually considering proposals only from established authors, and the game companies are drastically cutting back their book-publishing divisions. So you cannot count on writing *Worf Gets A Haircut* as a prelude to publishing your interplanetary magnum opus. Yes, you still have a chance of having your wonderful first (or second, or tenth) novel accepted by a major publisher; as evidence for this, we still see a goodly number of first-novels published each

year. Yet the odds are about the same as winning fifty grand from a lottery scratch-card.

The same situation is beginning to affect SF magazines. There now are three major monthly SF magazines, two bi-monthlies, and a handful of small-press quarterlies. Almost all of them have lost readers, and their subscriptions are plummeting. Two of the three monthlies have dropped an issue from their annual publishing schedules, and have also dropped 20 pages from each issue published; the third has managed to last through thick and thin, although sometimes I wonder if it's really a CIA storefront operation...how else to explain its survival? The two bimonthly magazines are doing quite well, and one has even experienced a circulation increase, but both have severely limited space for fiction in their issues; only one in about 20,000 submissions is accepted. The quarterly small-press magazines, by and large, are hanging on by their fingernails; *Absmag* has increased its circulation, but others are walking on crutches, some are on life-support, and a couple are in coma.

The only thing all these magazines have in common is that each and every one of them receives thousands of submissions each month. Their authors ranging from multiple Hugo and Nebula-award winners to novices trying their luck for the first time. So when you submit a story to *Asimov's*, for example, you're actively competing against regular contributors like Robert Silverberg or Connie Willis or Mike Resnick or Nancy Kress or Terry Bisson...or me, for that matter.

None of us are rich. Most SF authors have rather plain, middle-class lifestyles; I know only two or three writers in this field who are wealthy, and even then they've earned their dough by means other than their literary careers. Most have day-jobs which somehow enable them to write during their spare time, or are supported by their spouses. Any appearance of glamour or wealth is entirely superficial; they're usually struggling to meet rent, mortgages, and car payments, and they buy clothes at outlet malls and clip coupons just like everyone else. A depressing number don't have health insurance, including a few who desperately need it.

A close friend of mine is an SF writer who has been published in all the major magazines, and several prestigious anthologies. He's a terrific writer; not very well-known yet, but you've probably read his work if you keep up with the genre. About 14 months ago, he quit his day-job to pursue writing as a full-time profession. He worked like a demon for over a year, producing two novels and over twenty stories in that time, and drastically tightened his

PRIMARY IGNITION

belt to the point that he seldom bought new books and almost never went out to a restaurant, a movie, or a concert. He's been collecting reject slips just like any new comer. Last week, as I write, he took another day-job. He doesn't like losing his freedom, but at least he's paying his bills.

I've published nine books, most of which have been modestly successful and have earned their share of good reviews (along with a few nasty ones), and about forty stories. My short fiction has been reprinted in many anthologies, and my novels have been translated into several languages. Three of my works have been optioned for motion pictures. I've got a Hugo and a Locus award, and my stuff has been short-listed for another Hugo, a Nebula, and a Philip K. Dick award. I quit my last job as a newspaper reporter just over ten years ago, and with the exception of a brief two-week stint as an editor at a computer magazine, I haven't collected a regular paycheck since then.

I'm not about to haul out my tax statement for public scrutiny, so you're going to have to trust me on this one: I'm just getting by. Every check from a publisher counts, no matter how measly it may be. A few years ago, my finances hit a rough spot, and I almost considered applying for food stamps until some stories I sold during the six previous months were finally paid for. I didn't have to go on the dole, yet for a short time my dogs were getting better nutrition than I was. And I like eating; after 40 years, it's a habit to which I've become accustomed. And don't tell me about job options. I'm too frigging old to return to heavy labor, too dumb to learn computer programming, and too eccentric to ever wear a tie again. Like it or not, hell or high water, I'm a self-employed writer until I die.

So, once again, why would anyone want to be a SF writer?

You may have visions. You may hear voices. You may have stories that you're aching to tell. You may simply have an urge to do something different than whatever it is you're doing now.

You may have aspirations of achieving fame and glory. You may want to see your byline in a magazine, or on a paperback cover. You may want to sign autographs. You may want to be called the next Heinlein. You may want to share bright, intelligent conversation with Harlan Ellison and Greg Bear and Larry Niven. You may want to make an acceptance speech during a Hugo awards ceremony.

You may want a free lunch. You may want a free steak dinner. You may want to have your airline ticket, hotel room, and meals picked up by a major SF convention, plus per diem and all the

beer you can drink. You may want to be courted by editors and publishers. You may want to hear that someone hiking through the Himalayas spotted one of your novels in a Kathmandu book stall. You may want film producers calling you to ask if you're interested in having something you've written made into a movie. You may even want to open your mail one day and find a royalty check for nearly twice as much money as you earned before you pulled the plug on your old job.

Well, you can have all this, and more.

All you have to do is pay the price.

All the remaining days of your life, you will work your ass off, and rarely will you receive a moment of rest. No paid vacations, and you'll often find yourself working on Christmas, Easter, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, Columbus Day, and Thanksgiving. No group insurance or 401-K plans; kiss your dental coverage goodbye.

You'll haunt your mailbox for overdue checks while all your creditors are shutting down services and threatening to take you to small-claims court. Get used to the taste of macaroni and tuna casseroles.

You will spend many sleepless nights lying awake in bed, tormenting yourself with doubts about your talent. You'll be halfway through a story you've been developing for the last six months, then pick up the latest issue of *Analog* and discover that another author—sometimes one of your friends—has written approximately the same story and thus scooped you.

You'll visit bookstores a month after publication of your last book, only to find that it's already been removed from the shelves, while umpteen copies of the latest serial-killer novel are on display in dump bins next to the cash register. You will have relatives and well-meaning in-laws tell you that writing that sci-fi stuff may be fun, but you need to get a real job; your wife's Uncle Bennie will offer you a sales position at his plumbing supply company ("It starts at sixteen a year, but you can move up..."). Or they'll tell you that you're pretty good, but maybe you should write something more commercial, like serial-killer novels.

You'll suffer through scathing reviews of a novel you've sweated blood over, and although you'll have a sneaking suspicion that the reviewer didn't even finish the book, there's nothing you can do about it that doesn't make you sound like a crybaby.

And every day, you'll have to drag your weary self back to your desk, so you can pound out three or four more pages of a story that no one may ever read.

If you're lucky, you'll die of a cardiac arrest while you're at your keyboard, and not from

some nasty lingering disease that gradually soaks away your ability to write. If you're even more lucky, there will be enough money left in your savings account to pay for your cremation; your tombstone will be your books, if anyone's still reading them six months after you're gone. Don't count on it; John O'Hara was the bestselling mainstream novelist of his day, and Clifford D. Simak was considered a giant in the science fiction and fantasy genres. Try finding a copy of *Butterfield 8* or *Why Call Them Back From Heaven?* in a bookstore today.

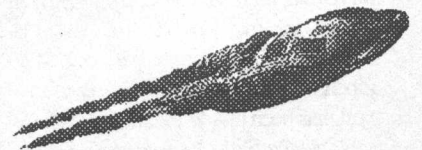
There is only one good reason why you should write science fiction, and if I have to tell what it is, then you've missed the point.

Sometimes I think it's better to simply remain a devoted reader. Reading is easy; you find a comfortable chair or couch under a good source of light, perhaps put on some music and pour a glass of wine, and then you lie back and let yourself be seduced. There's no work involved there; the only suffering you'll ever endure is when a writer delivers a story you don't want to read...and then you put it aside and find another book or magazine. I've never heard of a reader receiving a reject slip, but I could paper the walls of my office with all the ones I've received.

Science fiction has enough writers already. What the genre desperately needs are more readers. People who will gladly pass up the latest slash-and-burn CD-ROM in preference to a new writer's first novel, or will weigh two tickets to a bad movie against a year's subscription to an SF magazine and will opt for filling out the coupon. Readers are invaluable while most writers are replaceable, because writers can't exist without someone reading their work.

If you've got the guts, if you've got the stamina, if you're willing to write story after story for year after year without earning a dime, if you're willing to take it on the chin and come back begging for more, if you're able to learn from your mistakes...then stick it out. But if you don't know exactly why you want to write science fiction, then perhaps you should apply for a higher position in the firm and become a lifelong reader.

It's a great job. And it beats being the guest of honor at a slush party.





1998

Veritas

by Daniel Abraham

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As he spoke to his wife, he began to understand that the question was not "Does she suspect?" but "Does she know?"

"One of her friends' parents is taking her to riding lessons," Gloria said from the screen, "but I'm afraid I won't get out of ultrasound in time to be there. You know how that goes. Could you plan to pick her up? I know it means leaving work early..."

"No trouble," Paxton said. "I'd be happy to."

"You're sure?" Gloria asked.

In college, before his father's death, Paxton had hustled extra money at poker games on frat row. There was one guy who had always smiled when he had a bad hand. Paxton felt that smile on his own face now. Blowing work off was unlike him, almost suspicious. He was overcompensating, grinning at a hand of ten-high nothing, but he couldn't help it.

"No, no trouble. I've got things pretty much tied up here, anyway. Nothing I can't delegate."

Gloria nodded, smiling. She suspected, but did she know?

"Well, I'll see you at home, honey," Gloria said.

"Tell the little guy hi for me," Paxton said, and Gloria rubbed her distended belly. "I'll see you both at home."

"Love you," she said.

"You too. Bye."

The office was suddenly silent, and the screen faded to black. Paxton stood up, walked to the window. There were thunderclouds on the horizon, huge grey towers of mist. Lightning flashed, but no rumble of thunder reached him. For a long minute, he looked at the storm, then pressed a palm against the cool glass. Better do it than dread it. His father had always told him that, beetled eyebrows knotted seriously. Better do it than dread it, Pax. You'll have to do it eventually anyway, and the dreading wastes your time.

He walked back to the screen and replayed Akabe's message. The doctor was a young woman for her profession, Asian and African features blending with her French accent into a wholly cosmopolitan woman. Paxton trusted her mostly because he found her utterly inscrutable. She looked pleasant but impassive on the screen.

"Mr. Cort," the recording said. "Dr. Akabe, here. Please call me as soon as possible. There have been some abnormal results I'd like to go over with you. At your first convenience."

He steepled his fingers, pressed his lips against them. Despite his father's advice, dread welled up in him like dark water. AIDS? Or just the clap? Had he passed it on to Gloria? The baby? He connected to Akabe's office. Better to know. Better to be sure.

The receptionist—a live man, not a computer simulation—asked him to hold the line. A few moments later the screen clicked over to Akabe's desk.

"Mr. Cort. Thank you for calling. I was wondering if I could schedule an appointment with you. At your convenience, of course."

"Is it something serious?" he demanded. His voice must have been strange. Akabe sat back a few inches and blinked. Then her head tilted

slightly, thinking.

"You are in perfect health, Mr. Cort. There's no problem. There have been some unusual results from the lab. Something we should discuss."

That didn't sound precisely venereal. A glimmer of relief began to slip into Paxton's heart.

"My wife?" he demanded.

"Mrs. Cort is fine. The baby is fine. Really, it's nothing to worry about Mr. Cort. Could you come in tomorrow, perhaps?"

"Ten-thirty," Paxton said without thinking.

"Good. I'll expect you then."

Akabe nodded curtly—her usual sign-off—and cut the connection. Paxton leaned back in his chair, the soft black leather squeaking under him, and laughed. It was okay. It was all right. His hands were trembling. He connected to Chelsea's home machine. She was busy, he knew. In the meeting she had rescheduled to meet him. He wouldn't have to speak to her.

Her recording was simple, polite. "This is Chelsea Howe. I can't take any calls at the moment, but please leave a message and I'll get right back." Two hours ago, he had been in a hotel room, looking into those recorded eyes. He pushed the thought back, away.

"Chelsea. I have to cancel our ten-thirty tomorrow. Doctor's appointment. Call you later."

He closed the connection and put away his work for the day. Outside, the wind was blowing, the storm coming nearer. Becky's riding lesson might be canceled, and he wanted to be out of the office before Chelsea could call back. She wouldn't call him at home. She had more tact than that, at least.

In the elevator, on the way down, he examined his reflection in the black marble. Distinguished, well-dressed, successful. He had a good life. He was respected, he had a wife, a daughter. A son on the way. He was wealthy, comfortable. And he knew with an almost mathematical certainty he was screwing it up. It was a matter of time.

Akabe's office was comfortable, informal. There was no desk dividing patient from physician, only a writing table and computer against one wall. She sat in a comfortable chair, he sat on one end of a couch. It was a room designed for breaking news.

"Thank you for coming in," Akabe said.

"Hey, doctor's orders," Paxton said. Akabe smiled politely.

"Would you like anything? Coffee?"

"No, thanks."

"All right." Akabe took a manila folder with two bright colored stickers on the side and sat in her chair beside the couch. "Now then, Mr. Cort, we've had some odd results on your most recent physical. Nothing suggesting pathology, you understand. Just an anomaly. May I ask you a few questions?"

"Of course," Paxton said.

"Have you ever heard of Lethe treatments?"

Absolute Magnitude

"Vaguely," Paxton said. "It's that false memory thing."

"Yes," Akabe said. "Briefly, it's a method of inducing screen memories under the influence of an artificial neurotransmitter. It's used primarily in cases of post-traumatic stress where the patient is experiencing flashbacks of the trauma. With guided hypnosis, a therapist can block off the memory of the traumatic event. The connections made with the artificial neurotransmitter are much more sensitive than natural memory pathways. Whenever the patient begins to remember the event, his or her brain shifts into the screen memory. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but I don't see what it has to do with me," Paxton said.

"The treatment leaves after-effects, Mr. Cort," Akabe said, handing two sheets of paper to him. "The first page shows the NRPC scan of an untreated control as contrasted with a patient with Lethe memories. You see the peak at 362?"

"Yes."

"The larger the peak there, the more Lethe induced memory. The second page is the result of your scan."

Paxton looked at the second sheet.

"That peak," Akabe said, "represents a huge amount of screen memory. More than I have ever seen in a clinical setting. Have you ever had this treatment, Mr. Cort?"

"No," Paxton said. "There's a mistake."

"That was my assumption as well," Akabe said, taking the sheets back from his outstretched hand. "But it did give me pause. I've been over your medical records very carefully, Mr. Cort. Frankly, I think not everything matches. For example, the scars on your lungs."

"I worked in an architect's office when I was a kid, running blue-line prints. I got a lungful of anhydrous ammonia once."

"Unlikely," Akabe said. "The scars aren't consistent with that. Caustic fumes are more likely. And the wound in your chest. A hunting accident, wasn't it?"

"I was out with my dad when I was fifteen. Some idiot thought I was a deer."

"The upward angle between entrance and exit wound was explained as deflection off your rib, but there's no sign of that on the rib. I would like to suggest an alternative, Mr. Cort."

Akabe leaned back, gauging him with cool, thoughtful eyes. He could feel her considering how to go on.

"There is a chance, and I'm only going to say a chance, that you are not who you believe yourself to be. That amount of screen memory could account for quite a bit, if it is real. A childhood. Perhaps even a life, up to a point.

"As I see it we have two options. Lethe treatments are intended to be temporary. The connections made under Lethe are vulnerable to a site-specific blocker. They can be 'turned off' when the patient has learned skills to help deal with the trauma. The blocker is called Veritas."

"And if I took it, what would happen?"

"If you have not had Lethe treatments, nothing. If you have, the screen memories would simply become unavailable. You wouldn't forget your wife or your child. You wouldn't become a different person. But you would remember whatever is behind the screen."

"And my parents? My childhood?"

"If they are fictive, you would be physically incapable of remembering them."

Paxton laughed and shook his head.

"I don't recommend it," Akabe said. "Not yet, at least. The other path we can take is more conservative. I would like, of course, to

re-run the NRPC scan to verify the results. And then, perhaps a little detective work. Taking the Veritas treatment without more information would be jumping blind."

"I understand," Paxton said. "What do you need for the scan?"

"We can get you in as early as next week," Akabe said. "Say Thursday at noon?"

"Okay," Paxton said, not sure what he was cancelling.

"There is a very real chance this is just laboratory error. It may be nothing," Akabe said.

"What are the chances?" Paxton asked.

"I don't want to leave any possibilities unexplored," Akabe said.

"You should play poker," he said.

He left Akabe's office in a daze and took a cab back to his office. Everything seemed subtly altered. His desk, the view out the window. He sat, looking at the mountains for a long time before he realized he was still wearing his jacket.

He bent over, his forehead pressed to the cool of the window, breathed deeply ten times, then took off his jacket, checked his messages, cancelled his next meeting and called a private investigator whose discretion could be counted upon. There were some things he wanted to know.

"Akabe says everything's going just fine," Gloria said, rubbing her belly idly. "No trouble at all."

"Good," Paxton said.

The bedroom was dim. Rain pattered against the windows, and the forecast called for more. Paxton sat in the bed, a book in his hands, but he wasn't reading, couldn't concentrate.

"I called you at work today," Gloria said, a subtle shift in her voice that caught his attention. "You weren't there."

So she was checking up on him. And he had failed the test. Funny that today of all days he was innocent.

"I was at Akabe's office," he said. "She called me yesterday, right after I talked to you."

Gloria propped herself up on an elbow. Thank God he hadn't had to lie to her outright.

"Is everything okay?"

"Test results were a little strange. We'll run it again."

"But nothing bad? It's not cancer, is it?"

Paxton leaned over and kissed her shoulder.

"I'm fine," he said. "It's just a laboratory glitch."

Gloria sighed and lay back down, submerging in her own thoughts. They'd met in Central Park. He didn't remember what he'd been doing in Manhattan. A meeting with someone or other, something unimportant. It was autumn, and the leaves were turning. He went to the park in the upper Eighties to look for a leaf to take home with him and then walked south in the cool afternoon. She'd been in the playground at the southern end, flying on a swingset made of thick chain and wide, comfortable rubberized plastic. She was beautiful. Children had been playing nearby. He'd stopped, his hands pushed into his coat pockets and watched her.

"They're great," she'd said to him when she stopped.

"Sorry?" he'd asked, taken by surprise.

"The swings. They're great."

"Oh," he'd said. "Yeah."

Her name was Gloria Jarvis. She was a lawyer. He was Paxton Cort. He ran a charitable trust. An inherited position, really. Father's money. They'd shaken hands, and three months later, married. He

wondered what had become of that leaf. He couldn't remember. Maybe it was still around someplace.

It had been a mistake, moving so quickly. He saw that now. They hardly knew each other when they'd gotten married. Her ideas hadn't matched his expectations. There had been arguments. But not so many. Not too many. Not really. Then they'd had Becky. Tiny little Becky who was starting junior high school next year. And now the new baby—Charles if Paxton had his way, Glass if Gloria picked. Glass. What kind of name was Glass, anyway?

And then Chelsea. Like an earthquake, like a car crash. Something unforeseen, powerful, damaging. Chelsea.

Gloria yawned, and he remembered to turn the page of his book, though he didn't know what he'd just read. Sooner or later, Gloria would find out. What happened then, he didn't know. But he expected to hate it. A gust of wind blew the rain hard against the window. He put his book aside. He didn't know what to do. Not about any of it. And Akabe.

"You know," he said, remembering as he spoke "when I was nine, my parents took me to San Francisco for the first time."

Gloria turned to him, surprised to hear him talk.

"Hm-mm?" she said, sleepily.

"One day, we just walked around. I remember I saw a teddy bear in a shop window in Chinatown, and I had to get it. It was necessary. So my mother got it for me, and I carried him around the rest of the afternoon, even though he got soaking wet. And that night, when we got back to the hotel, we all piled onto the bed, even the teddy bear, and watched an old movie on TV. I kept that bear for years."

"What happened to it?" Gloria asked.

"I don't know," he said.

The machine was like a head rest, forcing his gaze on the blank ceiling. The head rest hummed.

"Just a little more, Mr. Cort," the technician said. Paxton had to fight the urge to nod.

"No trouble," he said.

He drummed his fingers on the table and waited. Long minutes later, the head rest clicked softly and went silent.

"All right," the technician—a red-haired boy in his twenties—said. "We'll get these to your doctor this afternoon. You'll probably hear from her in a couple days."

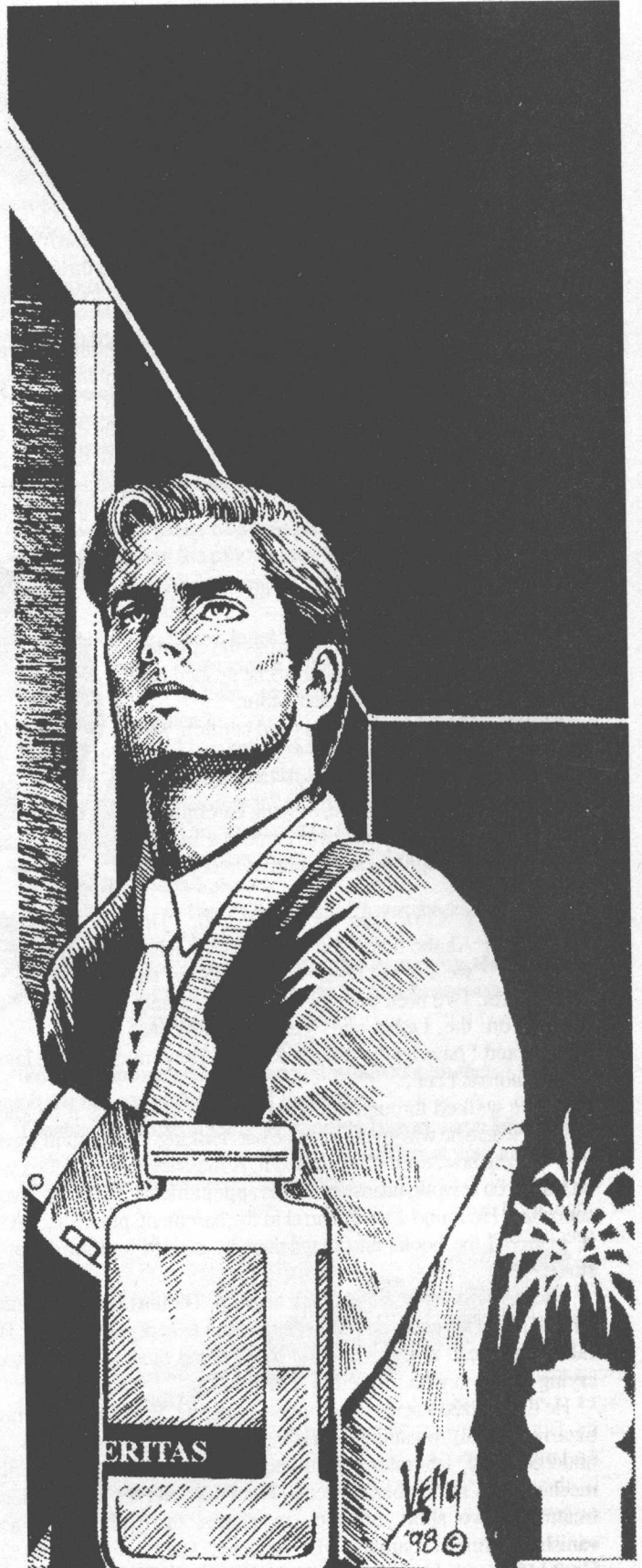
"Thank you," Paxton said, pulling on his jacket. The technician smiled professionally, nodded and turned back to the screen. Paxton leaned over, hoping to catch a glimpse of the chart, but the screen was filled with a table of numbers and codes that meant nothing to him. The technician looked back up.

"Where's the bathroom?" Paxton asked.

"Down the hall to the left. Just past Radiology. Can't miss it."

Paxton walked down the hall briskly, wishing the screen had made sense, wishing that he knew already what Akabe would say when she called. The bathroom was empty. His own face in the mirror over the sink caught him. Grey temples. Wide lips. Three hard lines across his forehead that wrinkled whether he frowned or smiled. It was a good face, a pleasant one, but it felt like seeing a stranger. A wave of vertigo washed over him.

He leaned against the sink, cool water from the tap running over his hands. He was just stressed. That was all. He was fine. He met his reflection's eyes. He was fine, but he had to know.



Absolute Magnitude

He walked out of the bathroom and took the elevator to the first floor of the hospital. Admissions. Emergency room. Pharmacy. He opened the door.

Two people were in the room. An older man stood at the counter, a young woman at the back counted pills into an orange bottle. Paxton cleared his throat and went up to the counter.

"Can I help you?" the man asked.

"Yes, my doctor said you have Veritas here?"

The man frowned.

"Yes," the pharmacist said. "Do you have a prescription?"

"Yes," Paxton said, pulling out his wallet. He rifled through it for a moment. The young woman in the back paused and looked at him. He could feel himself starting to blush.

"I... ah seem to have lost the form," he said, pulling out two hundreds low behind the counter where the woman couldn't see them. "Do you think we could just... I mean...?"

The man blinked, looking down at Paxton over the counter. The blush continued to rise. They were motionless for a few seconds. Just as Paxton was about to put his money away and rush out, the man turned away, walked into the back room, returning with a small glass bottle.

"Thank you," Paxton said.

"That'll be thirty-six dollars," the pharmacist said. "And your insurance card."

Paxton pushed the hundreds across the counter, folded under his card. The pharmacist pushed one bill back, then counted back sixty-four.

"Just have your doctor call us and confirm, Mr. Cort," the pharmacist said.

"Okay," Paxton said. "Thanks."

He went back to the office, moving carefully, as if the vial in his jacket pocket was explosive and the slightest bump might mean the end of everything.

"Mr. Cort," the recording said, "Dr. Akabe here. The test confirms what we saw last time. It seems this isn't a simple error. I've been doing a bit of background reading on the Lethe and Veritas treatments, though, and I have an hypothesis for you. How much do you know about Thomas Leer...?"

He walked through the library, trying to walk as if he knew where he was going, what he was looking for. He didn't want help now, even if he needed it. A message from Chelsea was on his screen at work, unanswered. His appointments for the day were cancelled. He found a study carrel in the basement, put his jacket on it, gathered the books and magazines he needed and sat down to study.

The basic facts were simple, easy to grasp. Thomas Leer had pulled himself out of the gutter and up to the podium to accept the Nobel. His father had been a drunkard. His mother had died of lung cancer, crying for a son who refused to see her.

He'd attempted suicide three times—hanging, shooting, and (most bizarre of all) breathing caustic fumes while working as an undergraduate laboratory instructor. Then his papers on the mechanics of remembered events, his work with the Lethe/Veritas treatment, two short, unhappy marriages, the Nobel prize and vanished. Amelia Earhart, J.D. Salinger, Bobby Fischer, D. B. Cooper, Thomas Leer.

What surprised Paxton was that all the versions of Leer's life seemed so sketchy. There was so much that was hinted at, suggested, but never said. It might have been journalistic excess and double-entendre or Leer's reticence. There was no way to be sure.

The last interview with Leer was a chatty puff-piece in an alternative culture magazine called Junqvist Norm just after he'd accepted the prize. Paxton read it carefully.

JN: So what does it feel like to be the youngest scientist to win the Nobel prize.

TL: All right, I suppose.

JN: People are saying you've unlocked the last secret of the human brain. That's quite a weight to carry.

TL: That's a crock of shit, is what that is. I figured out a little bit about how memories get laid out. That's all. I mean, it's interesting, but it doesn't touch on any of the really deep questions.

JN: Deep questions like what?

TL: Like why is memory important? Like what makes us decent human beings? Like what makes us happy? I don't know any of that shit.

JN: But you have shown how to erase the tape of memory and...

TL: That's bullshit too. There is no tape of memory. All I've done

is learn how to lie with chemistry. Look, back when I was in college, I had this roommate who was the best liar I've ever met. He used to make extra money playing poker with a bunch of rich frat boys. He told me one time that he could convince them that his hand was shit if he was holding a straight-flush. He could convince them that he was bluffing. Do you see? He could pretend he was pretending to have a good hand. He'd run the betting up through the roof and take it all. And then he'd do it again. He was brilliant. I just did some biochemistry that turned out to be useful.

JN: So lying is more important than science?

TL: I don't know. Lying is what I do. Convincing people something happened that didn't. Only since I'm such a rotten liar, I have to do it with drugs.

JN: Your technique is being used on people with post-traumatic stress disorder. Shell shock. It's helping people to cope. That's got to mean something for you.

TL: (shrugging) Sometimes lies heal you. Sometimes they don't.

Paxton closed the magazine. He took the detective's report back out of his jacket pocket and unfolded it. He read the conclusions again.

There were records of his parents, of his school attendance, of his rise up the corporate ladder. But the records were shams. The whole house of cards fell apart when looked at carefully. He appeared in no high school yearbook. None of his friends from his college days could be found. It was like a dream fading with the morning, or else ice melting.

He put the report back and took the container in his pocket out. The Veritas looked like lime kool-aid. He swirled it gently. It wouldn't even make him high.

Unfaithful corporate executive living an absolute lie or else tortured genius. To be or not to be.

"Better do it than dread it, Pax," he said to himself. "Just pick."



Veritas

Three days later, Paxton walked up to the front door and let himself in quietly. Gloria was on the phone in the living room, laughing with one of her friends. He took off his jacket and hat, put them in the hall closet. The hardest part was probably over. Probably. He'd have to see.

Gloria caught sight of him as he passed the doorway. He hesitated. A flicker of pain covered immediately. Suspicion. And fair, in this case. If she'd called and found him away from the office, she'd have been right. He had been with Chelsea. He waved gamely. She raised her hand. He went to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water.

"You're home early," she said. "Things okay at the office?"

"Kind of a rough day, actually," he said. He couldn't look at her eyes. Not yet. "Had to break off an arrangement with one of our subcontractors. Sam Garton and Chelsea Howe."

Her smile slipped a little, and she folded her arms over her belly.

"There was a different company with a much better offer," Paxton said, meeting her eyes at last. "I shouldn't have stayed with Garton and Howe as long as I did. Stupid of me, really."

Her face was cool, thoughtful. The unconcerned, happy veneer was thinner, attenuated. Then briefly, she nodded.

"Pasta tonight?" he asked.

"Yes, and Becky's going to a birthday party for one of her school friends at six thirty, so it's going to be a little late."

"I'll have a snack then."

Gloria walked to the hallway.

"You want to go with me to get Becky? She'd love to see you."

"Sure," Paxton said. "Oh, and I arranged things with the board. I'll be taking the paternity leave."

There was a silence. Then Gloria appeared in the doorway, her purse in her hand, her coat half on. They looked at each other for a long time in silence, until each was certain that the other had understood.

Glass was born a week and a half early. Paxton wanted to be in the delivery room, but Akabe stopped him in the waiting room with Becky and Gloria's mother. There were some complications. Nothing serious, but she recommended a c-section. Paxton boggled, panicked. Gloria's mother had to step in and say that was fine, whatever she thought appropriate.

"The same thing happened to me," Gloria's mother said, patting him on the shoulder. "It's genetic."

A long hour later, Akabe returned smiling.

"Everything went beautifully. The baby is being taken to maternity now."

"What about Gloria," Paxton asked.

"Not quite ready for human company. We're still cleaning her up."

"Thank you, doctor."

"Of course. Let me take you to him, eh?"

The four of them, Paxton, his mother-in-law, Becky and Dr. Akabe, went quietly to the maternity ward where Glass, tiny, pink and confused lay in a crib, his toothless mouth opening and closing.

"He's beautiful," Gloria's mother said. Paxton nodded agreement.

"Could I speak to you for a moment, Mr. Cort?" Akabe asked.

"Yes. Of course."

Akabe nodded curtly to Gloria's mother, smiled at Becky, and led Paxton down a short corridor to an empty examination room.

"You didn't return my call," Akabe said. "I think we have some things to talk about."

"I don't know that we do, actually," Paxton said. "I've been doing some homework. I don't really think I'd care to be Thomas Leer."

Akabe raised her eyebrows, but didn't speak. Paxton hesitated under her impassive gaze, then went on.

"We all decide who we're going to be, doctor. All of the time. My case is just a little more extreme than most. That's all."

Akabe crossed her arms in silence, then nodded.

"I was going to insist that you come in," she said. "But it seems that you've worked things out to your own satisfaction, eh? I must admit, I'm disappointed."

"You'd hoped to be the one who discovered the missing genius."

"I am the one who did that," Akabe said. "I'd hoped to be able to tell someone about it. But life is disappointment, I suppose."

"Sometimes."

"Good luck, then, Mr. Cort."

"Thank you, doctor. Do you think Gloria . . . ?"

"Of course. This way."

Gloria was still weak. She was pale, nestled in the crisp hospital sheets. Her hair lay on the pillow uncombed and stringy. Dark circles sank her eyes. She was beautiful. Paxton took her hand.

"Hey, lover," she said, smiling.

"You look a little peaked," he said.

"A little," she said, shrugging. "Long day at the office."

They laughed a little.

"He's beautiful," he said.

"I know it," Gloria replied.

They sat in silence for a moment. Paxton feeling the tears coming, laughed and brushed his eyes with a sleeve.

"Hey," Gloria said. "I was thinking."

"Yeah?"

"You remember that story you told me? The one about your trip to San Francisco with your parents?"

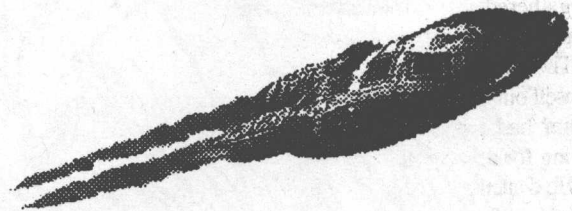
Paxton nodded.

"What was the movie? The one you watched with them? I want to watch it when we get home. All four of us."

"Casablanca," Paxton said. "Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman."

"Claude Rains," Gloria said. "Here's looking at you, kid."

"We'll always have Paris," he replied.





John

Bud Sparhawk's work has appeared frequently in *Analog* and his story "Primrose and Thorn" was chosen for Gardner Dozois' *Years Best*. This is his first appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*

Mercenary

by Bud Sparhawk

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Twenty thousand cash and immediate discharge was their offer after the reds declared peace and the cost of defense was more than the civvies could bear. All I had to do was take a few tests to qualify and, if I passed, sit still in a strange metal room for an hour. Somatic taping they called it.

For me it was a way to have that binge I'd been promising myself since Tyler's Bluff, since Begaziville, since Phu Cat and the labor uprisings. Always something to keep us busy at what we did best. But with twenty thousand dollars the women, drugs, and booze would come easy. All I had to do was sit in a chair for an hour. Nothing to it...

Only the room is different when my eyes snap open and the piercing headache they warned me about strikes. As predicted it only lasts a second before it disappears. Looks like somebody's painted the walls flat white while I was dozing. Then I notice that I'm sitting on a dias instead of a chair.

"Welcome to the future, soldier boy," a voice booms out beside me. I spin around and see a large bear of a man holding out some clothing. They're blue, but with the look of a uniform about them. He smiles in a not-nice sort of way. "Your original self died forty years ago," the big man says. "You're a duplicate we just ran off from the tape he contracted to make." Again there's that not-nice smile of his. "We've found the best way's brutal—tell you exactly when you are and get the shock over with. Briefing and outfitting is down the hall. Now move it mister, we've got a division to clear through here!" I slip on the blue and get.

Weeks later I'm sitting beside a tree listening to a brook babble not twenty meters away. The sun's shining and the sky's a peaceful blue. Little puffs of summer cloud dot the sky here and there. My clothing has taken on a green-brown hue, the protective coloration seems to be built in to it. Not much change in weapons though; the muzzle velocity's a little higher, but there's less recoil than I'm used to for this calibre. Firepower's greater and so's accuracy, but otherwise it's the same weapon that killed Og the caveman—something that throws a massive object very fast and very hard. It's a gun.

My earpiece beeps the alert and I'm up and facing west. Two beeps and I start to creep forward, eyes peeled for sign of the enemy. Somewhere off to my right and left my flankers parallel my course while behind us are the second line. Crap, the French and the British did it this way in the Hundred Years War—*le meme change, ca plus change*.

Three beeps and I start to double time. Still no sign of contact anywhere along the line. Then I hear the sharp crack of small arms fire. Someone must have spotted us.

Then comes the steady whine of bullets and our squad leader's call "Hit 'em! Hit 'em!" And my legs pump the double time up to full steam ahead. Trees, bushes, grass, blue sky, and little clouds disappear from my senses. Anything that isn't friend, enemy, or cover is ignored by my brain. My vision becomes razor sharp. The whole world takes on an unbelievable clarity. If I wished I could count every speck of sand on the trails, every leaf on every tree... if I wanted.

My foot comes down on the leading edge of the slope and I lean into the incline toward the ridge. Peripheral vision picks up my flankers pacing me on either side. The one on the right erupts with fountains of red as four or five rounds hit him. Too bad. I'm dodging, twisting, and stooping to make myself as difficult a target as possible. Is it instinct or training? Who cares?

Then I'm at the ridge line and see the dun colored soldiers waiting for us. I bring my gun down and systematically squeeze off six rounds; four less of the enemy to worry about. Then I roll and come up on the reverse slope with another one in my sights. I pull the trigger and see him fall. At the same time something hits my side twice with a hammer blow; thud, thud. I take a second to glance down and see red blood ooze out of craters in my side. I clap a hand to them to try to push it back. Vision blurs and darkness rushes in. Who did it? Who? As I die I realize that they never told me who we were fighting, or why...

Twenty thousand cash buys a lot of talent and I was one horny son-of-a-bitch after Tyler's Bluff. Shee-it, with a stake like that I could throw a personal orgy that would make history. I'd be a fool to turn their offer down. Sit in a chair for an hour and get twenty crisp k-notes. Nothing to it, nothing at all. And I'd walk out a rich man.

But the guy who unbuckles me from the chair is different from the one who strapped me in. This one's got a funny look to him; oriental cast to the skin and a touch of red in his cheeks that doesn't look natural. "What the hell..." I begin, but he shushes me with a wave of his hand.

"Do you feel well?" he asks in stilted English. "Our tapes are not new, often reduped, parity not reconciled. Errors are possible," he concluded.

I don't have the faintest idea of what he is talking about. I feel great, though and tell him so. He rewards me with a warm smile. "Is the year 273, my time. Is your future." So I'm a duplicate. Well, Georgie boy, I sure hope we enjoyed that twenty k bash of ours. The missing past doesn't bother me much—what could I do about it anyway?

Absolute Magnitude

Shortly afterwards I am dressed in mesh clothing that shimmers and makes it hard to tell where the edges are. One guy lounges against the wall and just sort of 'blends in.' Great camouflage.

I learn from the squad that we've probably been duplicated several times since the original taping session. I can't remember, I say and they laugh. Likely you've been killed a hundred times since your original tape was made, they explain. How many armies you been in, boy? And on who's side?

The dink with the rouge on his face stands near me with a funny weapon that looks like a grenade launcher. Short wide barrel with a shotgun type shell; takes five to the clip. End of the stock is curved to brace against the hip rather than the shoulder. There's a flexible wire at the business end that is used as a sight of sorts. He shows me how to open the breech and load the clip when there's a scream.

Suddenly the wall at the far end of the room starts melting away. I throw myself down and roll under a nearby bench by reflex. The melting stops and through the hole I see a hot-pink blossom of fire fade away about a hundred meters out. The wall is a heap of slag, but there is no heat radiating from it—strange.

"This way," screams my instructor and races for the door at the opposite end of the room. Half of the guys follow him. The rest of us are a little wiser and wait to see what happens. Rouge face and five others melt halfway through the instant they clear the door frame.

Then I'm up and running toward the melted wall, dive through and roll into the depression on the other side. The slag's cool, but sticky. I realize that I'm still holding the demonstration weapon.

Two flashes on my right, high up, near the tree line. I bring the gun to hip, wiggle the sight to match the spot and squeeze the trigger. Five seconds later I see a few of the trees melt away about fifty meters beyond where I aimed. Naturally, I am no longer in the place where I fired the shots—only a fool sits around to see where his shots have gone. I'm well and away by the time an answering salvo melts what's left of the building into my former position.

Keeping low I creep around the skirmish line and get to a hill behind the attackers. Soon I see their positions: heavy weapons there, a squad of soldiers here. Then I see more, lots more. Over on the other side there's a huge camp with what looks to be a million people in it. I look up and notice that a second moon is rising. Where the hell am I anyway? I raise my hands and stand up, slowly so as not to alarm anyone.

My captors have been very nice and haven't blamed me at all for shooting at them. After all, how was I to know that I had been reduped by the seditious Paristers? Well, they continued, that's what the fighting's all about—the right of citizens to their own obligations. Naturally I didn't want to help *those* kind of people, did I?

I didn't understand a thing they said. Hey, would Genghis Khan's men have understood the credit war we fought at Tyler's Bluff, or the political considerations at the root of Viet Nam?

"We're on a planet called Talex, part of the Transfer Group," they explain. "It's a developed world, or was until the Paristers took over. Now we're trying to regain the natives to our way of thought. Would you like to join us?"

"What the hell, why not?" says I.

"Good," they reply, "but let's dupe you for insurance. Won't take a minute; just sit right next to the machine. Say, when this is over

would you like to see some of the other worlds in this group? Yes, we'll do just that. Now just a second while I adjust this..."

“I didn't hurt, not at all, so?” Through the momentary haze of the sharp headache I see a fuzzy faced animal the size of a man staring into my eyes. Am I in another world or in my own future again?

"We have needs of fighter mens. I am Trisse. I, my people, we have got duplicator from other humans who help. Please to go with others. They will tell you of our needs. Please to go that way."

So I went, still numb from the shock of finding out that man was not alone in the universe.

The fuzzies, as we called them, were apparently allies of the humans, along with a dozen or more other life forms with forgettable names and unforgettable bodies. The battle was with another assortment of aliens, equally as memorable, over issues they tried to explain to us in great detail but just couldn't; the cultural gap was too great.

"Trisse are pan-regional," one of them explained, "as are our dear human friends. These," it indicated the enemy horde with a gesture of his ears, a flick of the tips that we'd learned was the dismissal/hateful aspect, "all wish to be capital invested. Large group, large effort." Huh? Okay, try to explain to caveman Og about corporate mergers, or stock option battles—you'll have the same luck as the fuzzies had with us.

What few humans of this era that we saw weren't helpful either. Effeminate types they all were, soft and small, ever so polite and shy. None of them talkers, either. They'd just look at you and giggle all the time. Found out the 'real' humans (we being the 'other' humans) didn't actually fight. No sir, they just delivered duplicators and helped their friends tutor us in the new weapons and stuff.

Four months of learning to talk the present common language—*I'in intra 'staal du 'lays* they call it—and how to use the new weapons and equipment and how to operate some of the sweetest personal gear you'll ever see and then they march us into a booth for transport to another planet. Goodbye spaceships, hello transporter I smile as I step into...

...and walk out of a booth into winter with two gees tugging at my gut and a stab of pain that feels like its going to split my head in two. No wonder they made us wear these trusses. The enemy's around the planet, buried under a blizzard while we build our strength here. Behind the booth's a big cigar shape. My squad leader tells me its the ship that brought the tapes.

Sure, makes sense: a master copy's easier to transport than a line soldier. Only what happened to our 'originals'? Were the Trisse a little too efficient? Could there be a pile of corpses behind that transport booth I entered—or did I live out a fun-filled, world spanning life? Never know, I guess. My mate wonders if there are more of him in other places around the globe.

Dawn comes and I'm blended into the snow so you couldn't find me if you stood right on top of my position. In my hands I've more deadly firepower than a whole battalion used to carry. Soon I'll be using it on the aliens. An hour later they open their lids on the hatches and climb out. That's when we hit them with everything we've got—hard! The mop up operation is pathetically easy—find an alien and pop him with a few rounds. No prisoners in this era.

Mercenary

The Trisse on the side of the booth looks at me funny. "Do again," he says so I march back around and step into the booth once more... And step into water up to my ankles as the familiar headache hits once again. Hell, I thought we'd be going to someplace cold. Typical HQ SNAFU. Then I realize that the truss, the personal gear, and the weapons were all gone. I'm naked as a babe, as are all around me.

Something splashes near me and holds out a bundle of spears to us. The creature is like nothing I ever saw before, even sobering up from the worse drunk of my life. Its top resembles a walrus and a lizard mixed up together while a pair of rope-like arms extend from the waist. "Kill 'ce gruuuu..." it mumbles with breath that smells of fish and salt. I notice nearly five hundred men like myself, all naked and armed with spears standing in the shallows. Five dupe booths stand on stilts nearby. There is a fuzzy at each. "Hey," I yell, "you said we'd be fighting arnoids in the snow!"

"That was nearly two hundred years ago," the fuzzy replies. "These are what we want you to kill now." He points at some large animals up on the beach. They appear to be twenty cows of some sort, with long sharp horns.

Nothing to it, I say and walk toward them with the spear. Huh, I wonder as I reach the beach and see clear across the island to the other side, there's no land here except this little beach and the cows. How are we going to live after we kill them? Twenty cows won't feed five hundred of us for long. And where's the ship?

"You will die here," one of the cows says wearily as I slip the spear into her gut. "We are a demonstration of how bloodthirsty you humans can be. It's a strong selling point for the Trisse. They should recover their investment very handily with this sale." She stops talking as some of the nearest guys sink their spears into other parts of her anatomy.

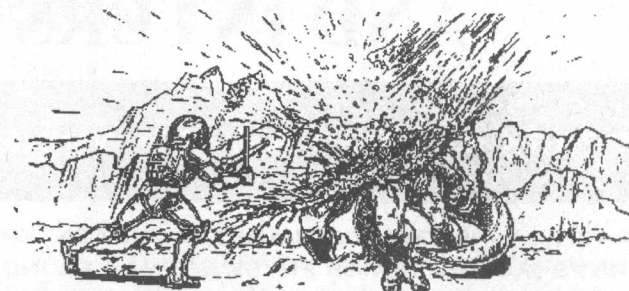
The headache strikes again as I step out of the booth and face a green monstrosity that would give the arnoids nightmares. This one doesn't speak—just hands me a pack and pushes me out the door.

The pack contains food, clothes, weapons, and all sorts of training manuals in ten languages. English isn't one of them and I have to struggle through with broken *l'in intra 'staal du 'lays*. A few of the others speak it as well and we translate the cover of the manual to be "Standard Indoctrination Manual—Human."

I see four or five of myself in the crowd. Matter of fact nearly everyone is duped four or five times. No sweat. I pointedly ignore other copies of myself, as do the others with their duplicates. No doubt every one of me thinks of himself as the 'real' one while the rest are copies.

In a few days we were fighting other greenies, just as ugly as the first one I saw. They come apart when you wave this pair of wands at them. Nothing to it. They don't even fight back. The war's over in a week. Human losses—one, a guy that stepped in front of a wand, but, what the hell, there's two more of him on either side.

The other greenies, the friendly ones, visit our camp. Setting up special lighting for us, they say. A group of them are erecting stands on all corners of the camp. Funny looking lights; just like larger versions of the wands we've been using.



The headache strikes me between the eyes and I find myself sitting there, feeling so damn tired. My leg seems to be missing. "mumble... mumble... bad tape...mumble, mumble..." a voice whispers nearby. "...mumble, mumble... cancel the run..."

The headache strikes me between the eyes and I find myself staring into the wide set brown eyes of a certifiably human human. "All right, how do you feel?" he says in English. "Try to walk around a bit. Good, guess you're one of the lucky ones. Too damn many bad tapes in this lot. OKAY, sit over there with the others and I'll brief you in a bit."

So I shuffle over to the bench and sit beside a dozen of myself. I'm not surprised—it was my own face that had greeted me. Back at the booth I'm pulling another of myself from the seat.

Turns out that I'm many, many years and billions of miles away from the fuzzies. They are no more, a vanished race. I tell myself about the big commercial trade they had in human soldiers, after they fled the alliance with their tapes. I feel sick when I tell me about some of the things we've done, all unknowing soldiers, if that's any excuse.

My first glimpse of the aliens is enough to overcome any pacifist feelings that I might have had. I could recognize and accept the alienness of the fuzzies and the others. They were so strange and unfamiliar that wonder overcame the ugliness. But these creatures are too close to our human form, horribly disfigured caricatures of everything that is human. They look like gnomes, without the cute features. Huge splay feet, spindly arms, and gigantic genitals in relation to their bodies. Their faces were beyond description; imagine a flayed baboon's head, the kind with the blue muzzles and red noses, and you come close.

So I shoot the first alien I encounter out of pure horror, using a weapon the size of a pen whose operation is a mystery. Point it at a human and it does nothing. Point it at a gnome and... squish, red mush. I kill a hundred before the day is done. The next day I do even better. The war lasts six months. I am victorious. The planet is mine alone, all two million of me.

"Who were those creatures?" I ask another of myself. "And where is this world?"

Myself replies that he doesn't know. Maybe someone else does. I look at the bloated red sun and the thin ring of rubble that circles the planet. The stars look sort of the way they used to look back home, so we must be somewhere close.

I wonder if I'll ever see the Earth again. Maybe I could find out what the human race has done to itself.



Far Haze and Distant Thunder

by Steven Sawicki

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Not many people realize it but modern day Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror publishing owes much to a bunch of guys in the fifties who were just fed up with not getting enough of the stuff they loved to read. They decided to do something about it and started publishing it themselves. They created small, in-house, publishing presses with names like Fantasy Press, Gnome Press, Arkham House, Shasta, and a few others. These houses published people such as Asimov, Lovecraft, E. E. "Doc" Smith, A. E. van Vogt, and a few other lesser known authors. Needless to say, many of those books today go for a hefty sum. This tradition of small press publishing continues.

Dreamweaver's Dilemma, Lois McMaster Bujold, NESFA Press, ISBN 0-915368-53-6, \$12 plus \$2 shipping inside US, \$4 outside US. Trade paperback, 250 pgs., NESFA Press, P. O. Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203.

NESFA has been publishing books for decades now. Each year, they put on a convention in the Boston area called Boskone and publish a book to commemorate an author's guest of honor appearance. These books traditionally have been trade paperback sized hardcovers of limited edition. Recently the NESFAns have branched out: last year they produced a wonderful C. M. Kornbluth collection in traditionally-sized hardcover format. This book, *Dreamweaver's Dilemma*, was originally published to commemorate Bujold's appearance as guest of honor at Boskone 33 and was produced in a limited hardcover edition. Recently the book was re-released as a trade paperback.

This edition is a great example of one of the wonderful things that small press publishing does. The book is crafted with care, printed on natural (acid free) paper and offered at a price that compares with many paperbacks. This is a work of love. Of course any work of love quickly falls on its face if there's no content worth absorbing. *Dreamweaver's Dilemma* contains six works of fiction by Bujold; two unpublished short stories, "Dreamweaver's Dilemma," and "The Adventure Of The Lady

On The Embankment," along with three previously uncollected stories "Barter," "Garage Sale," and "The Hole Truth." The fiction is pretty representative of Bujold's work, although I would say that there might indeed be a pretty good reason why "The Adventure Of The Lady On The Embankment" remains unsold. Barring this one story, the rest of the reading is pleasurable. Unless you have been an avid magazine reader over the past decade the; work will be new and fresh. If the book contained only these offerings it might still be considered worth the price; it contains more, however, thus making it a bargain. There are four essays, an interview, a biography, a bibliography and a list of awards that Bujold's won. The latter three are only as up to date as the publication date. Still, the information is accurate and useful if you are a fan or a collector. The interview is well done and insightful, while the essays provide a glimpse into Bujold the person. As a package this is pretty much a complete deal. I would highly recommend it to both Bujold fans and to anyone who likes well crafted books.

In the good old days of SF, say the mid fifties, publishing a book was a pretty big deal. It took lots of cash, lots of skill, and lots of time. There weren't many options open to people, you pretty much paid for something which looked like something the big press could have produced. Today we have computers and very sophisticated desktop publishing software. In the past couple of years alone, it has become much easier to produce something which, while comparable in quality, is actually quite different from the major publishers. Books published by the small press right now come in all shapes, sizes and price ranges. Some are collections honoring an author for an achievement (say a convention appearance) or because they have been too long out of print. The Bujold above is a good example of the former and NESFA's Kornbluth a good example of the latter. Some books, however, are works that would not generate enough interest for mainstream publishers to take a chance on. These efforts come in two flavors; those

books which are too narrow genre'd and those books which are seen as too outside the mainstream in content to draw a large enough following to generate enough interest from pro publishing.

The Final Tricks Of Funnyman and Other Stories, Bruce Taylor, ISBN 1-890464-00-7, Ministry Of Whimsy Press, P. O. Box 4248, Tallahassee, FL 32315, \$12.99, 183 pgs. (Include \$1.24 in additional postage when ordering from the publisher.)

The Troika, Stepan Chapman, Ministry Of Whimsy Press, ISBN 1-890464-02-3, \$14.99, 251 pgs. (Include the \$1.24 here too.)

The Ministry of Whimsy is the brainchild of Jeff VanderMeer, who has been plugging away at this form of publishing, more or less, for better than 13 years. Jeff's particular bend is surrealism and surrealist fiction. What's surrealism? Imagine a Dali painting in print. Imagine writing that's a cross between horror, SF, fantasy, magic realism, literary, and child-like simplicity and you may just have caught a glimpse. Imagine some pretty strange stuff. Like all other genres, there are extremes at either end of surrealism. Off the top of my head, I'd have to say that *Funnyman* enters on the mild side while *Troika* dances way toward the other extreme.

Bruce Taylor has been writing for 20 years or so and he's produced mostly short fiction. His work has appeared in many different small press and semi-pro places, including *Twilight Zone*, *Pulphouse*, and *New Dimensions*. Not every story here is a reprint however, there are new pieces as well. Of the 30 stories which make up this collection, 24 have seen print in other places. Taylor is a gifted writer; gifted in the sense that he does not feel the need to take every reader by the hand and lead them to the end. Taylor is capable of setting a scene and allowing the reader to either succeed or fail on their own. This is risky business for a writer and can be confusing for the reader when it does not work. It is exceedingly wonderful when it all comes together. Sometimes a re-reading will bring forth the light. Sometimes, I think, it is

Absolute Magnitude

all just too far away from individual comprehension. These are, in a sense, stories in time and place as well as environment. Taylor provides the time and the place and you bring the environment. Most of the pieces here are fairly short, 3 to 10 pages, so even if you fail to achieve understanding, it's not that hard to go back and relook or to just toss up your hands and say, maybe later.

"Popcorn," one of the stories in the book is a great example of one of these stories. It's a tale of a young man who owns a flower shop and who is also quite taken with himself. Plainly said, the guy's a jerk, and Taylor lets us discover this through the young man's thoughts. It's the man's birthday and he gets a very special gift, an incredibly special gift, one could say. What he does with it is where the magic comes in. The ending is unexpected and it leaves you nodding your head as if recognizing the life that seems to be seeping off of Taylor's pen onto the page. "Alternate Reality 578.5" is a great example of a story where presentation is almost as important as content. This is a story involving a man in a bathtub, a cat with running shoes and a conversation covering life, dreams, reality and sanity. Frankly, I'm pretty sure I missed the point, although I did enjoy the reading. It's interesting how that works, how a good writer can make a story work on more than one level, so that different readers are able to approach and get out of a work different things at different times. Throughout this collection, we are presented with stories that confound, that confuse, that twist and turn like convoluted thoughts, leading us around until we are dizzy with a bizarre sense of amazement, wonder, and sometimes confusion.

If Taylor is a series of short incursions into surrealism, Stepan Chapman, with his work *The Troika*, is a full dive.

The Troika is a novel involving a sentient jeep, a brontosaurus and an old Mexican woman. The three travel together through a desert with purple suns and often change bodies. But as odd as that sounds, it is only the beginning of the strange journey they are on. Overlaying this scenario are frequent and individual trips to the past to recount the odd lives each has had interspersed with visits to the "Angels" who manipulate their reality. Chapman has more subconscious imagery in his work that you can imagine. Chapman weaves and dives between settings and layers and characters until you are not sure exactly what's going on, only that it is important. Are the three mad and being led to sanity or are

they being controlled by a madman? This is an interesting book on a number of different levels. Now, I won't become academic and start talking about how the trees represent the true repressed desires of massed humanity (although now that I mention it, those willows did look as if they were sighing or perhaps weeping), but I will talk about how this book initiates interest in the reader and then guides you along from scene to scene, regardless of whether or not Chapman's characters are in the present or the past or the right bodies.

This is an interesting book not only for what is said but for how it's said. This is an intriguing look into the subconscious wonders that may be surrounding each of us all the time. One could certainly argue that it is not only cutting edge but exactly where the combined genre's of SF, Fantasy and Horror should be in terms of limit stretching and genre-bending.

One of the more tried and true reasons for small press book publishing is to keep the past alive in a form fondly remembered. Sometimes this is simply a matter of reprinting the classics as they were originally published. Sometimes it's a matter of repairing an injustice or a perceived injustice by restoring a text to its original form. Sometimes it's a matter of collecting a body of work together in one place. Sometimes it's an effort of homage. All of the above is incredibly and extremely subjective. Having had the opportunity to actually read many of the magazines from the twenties and thirties I can report that in my opinion, it is a good thing, at least in terms of entertainment value, that they were printed on such crummy paper. Still, it is the marketplace which ultimately decides just what is cream and what is curd, remembering that both come from the same place and are merely a matter of taste.

Girls For The Slime God, Mike Resnick, Ed., ISBN 0-9659569-0-3, Obscura Press, Wunzenzierohs Publishing, P. O. Box 1992, Ames, IA 50010-1992, \$15, 216 pgs.

This book collects, in a serial form, a somewhat amazing progression from the future to the past and back again. It is one of the things best documented in a format like this because everything gets pulled together and sequentially presented. *Girls* is a trade paperback book which essentially tells the story of one Lorna Rand, reluctant space heroin who has a difficult time remaining fully clothed. Believe it or not, that's what this book is built around. The book tells the story,

as recounted by Mike Resnick, of how a playboy article written by William Knoles in 1960 recounted the pulp tradition of brass bras, bikinis and Bug Eyed Monsters as cover illustrations and internal fiction devices. Unfortunately this also indicated that Knoles did not read any of these pulps since such content was pretty much sorely lacking. Not totally lacking, however, as this book illustrates through the reprinting of three Henry Kuttner short stories; "Avengers Of Space," "Dictator Of The Americas," and "The Time Trap." These Kuttner tales alone contained more nudity (all in the spirit of galactic conquest of course) than many entire magazine runs. Kuttner created Lorna, a poor woman who has more difficulty keeping her clothes on than you could ever imagine. To wrap the book up is an Isaac Asimov response to the Playboy article, a script for a Resnick productions costume convention presentation, and an afterward by Barry Malzberg.

This book is nicely packaged with a three color cover including a fine depiction of a naked (her long hair covers the most important parts) Lorna as well as what must be three minions of the aforementioned Slime God. The contents, and here I must remind you that the science fiction of the fifties is quite different from the SF of today or even near yesterday, are reprinted in a true fashion. Understand that Kuttner was a fine writer for his time, a great plotter and a more-than-capable wordsmith. Understand also that this is pulp fiction and should be read as such. Kuttner may have been a good, even a great, writer, but the material is dated, involving steely eyed, square jawed heroes getting in places where they should not be, for reasons that are flimsy at best, and acting as if they'd left their brains at home because who was going to need them anyway? How any of the women got there is beyond trying to figure out, except, perhaps, that you can't get them naked if they aren't present. The Knoles and Asimov articles are great bookends, and the entire book works because the sum of the parts is vastly greater than any of the parts themselves. If you've ever wondered about BEMs, pulp fiction of the thirties, or Slime Gods then this is an anthology worth picking up. It's also worth picking up if you'd like to support future efforts in this vein, as is the case with all forms of small press publishing.

Occasionally the small press publisher uses a freedom presented by the control inherent in such undertakings to produce work that is too risqué, politically incorrect, gross or bizarre

Far Haze and Distant Thunder

for the mainstream publisher. Sometimes this is a valuable asset and sometimes it merely confirms the mainstream decision not to print. Still, that such work can even see print is a wonderful thing and we should all encourage and support the efforts of those who strive to see that we are presented and occasionally confronted by work that makes us think. It is, after all, the subjective and collective voice of the consumer which makes the ultimate decision and we should encourage as broad a marketplace as possible for this decision to be wrestled with.

Ragged Angels, Della Van Hise, Eye Scry Publications, P. O. Box 688, Yucca Valley, CA 92286-0688, \$9.95, 200 pgs.

This book is a product of Mkashef Enterprises which publishes the vampire magazine *Prisoners Of The Night*. Mkashef also does vampire poetry and essentially is developing a name for itself by trying to break the vampire mold. They have spent time actively requesting and encouraging their writers to think about vampires differently. This book represents one of those efforts.

To be blunt and up front, this book succeeds on one level but fails on another. This is a vampire story told from the perspective of an individual who gets caught up in such matters during, if you can believe such things, a science fiction convention. Where the novel succeeds is in the presentation of the vampire universe as one which is seductive not only in terms of the immortality but in the sexuality of bloodletting. Where many other books only hint at such things and usually in a heterosexual context, *Ragged Angels* presents it more or less up front. Understand that there are no graphic scenes here of male to male coupling but there are certainly enough conversations, feelings and outright leanings to make things very clear. Van Hise has made a wise choice here. Too far in one direction and the book begins to carry the wrong emphasis. Not enough and the point is lost. Let me say that there is enough to make a straight male uncomfortable in the reading. (And isn't that what this kind of writing is supposed to do? Make one uncomfortable?) It is not that Van Hise adds a homosexual ring to the vampire legend but that she makes every bite a sexual ritual which forever changes an individual, giving them not only immortality but a sexual desire for all who get bitten and who have bitten. This is not so much a new twist to the whole vampire thing as an illumination of what has, for decades, been talked about though mostly in terms of

the male/female relationship. Unfortunately, this seems to be Van Hise's sole writing strength. The remainder of the writing is a bit flowery, almost Victorian in nature. This would have been fine if the book were set in the 1890s or even in the 1920s with the assumption that such things would have carried over and that immortals take longer to let go of slang, language and culture. But this is not the case. The book is set in modern day with modern day people and the prose keeps getting in the way. Van Hise also tries to introduce a subplot of mystery and double dealing which is never developed enough to become more than an annoying reminder that there is this stuff hanging in the background. We are never really given enough information to keep wondering about the connections yet we are reminded often enough that there is something else going on that should be important to us.

The writing itself in terms of plotting, pacing and scene design is actually quite good and if Van Hise continues to grow, write and learn there may be more interesting material forthcoming. There is mention that portions of the book appeared in vastly different form in the magazines *Prisoners Of The Night* and *Tomorrow*. I would surmise that this vastly different form would be the short story and I almost wish I had the chance to double check those stories against the novel. My sense is that with a more tightly paced format the work would be more interesting and intriguing. Still, it's not a bad read, just one that is not as fulfilling as it might have been. It will be interesting to keep an eye not only on Van Hise but on Mkashef publications as well.

One of the more little known aspects of small press book publishing is that you can get into genre bending. Sure, Arthur C. Clarke could probably get a mainstream novel with just a hint of scientific speculation in it published as SF. Sure Paul Preuss could get a mainstream novel published as SF even though it contains just a hint of future physics on page 384 of 390. Sure Stephen King could get a mainstream novel published as horror just because he can. But could you actually develop, market and sell an entire line of books which danced the highwire between not only genre but fiction and non-fiction? Is there a market for science fiction mysteries? Are there people out there who will buy occult fantasies? Is there a place for satire in horror? The small press continually tests such questions with real products. Oftentimes such tests produce bricks which quickly sink out of

sight. Occasionally a few float for a bit. Once in a while one actually develops sails.

The Father, The Son, And The Walkperson, Michel Mery, III Publishing, ISBN 0-9622937-9-2, P. O. Box 1581, Gualala, CA 95445, \$10, 192 pgs.

Let me talk first a bit about III Publishing and some of the efforts which have been produced by publisher Bill Meyers. Interestingly enough, Michel Mery best describes III Publishing's efforts in the forward to this book when he says, "Writing fiction nowadays, all the while being wary of not mentioning science and not speculating about the future, seems to me just like trying to drive from New York to San Francisco without EVER making (even in this re-Newted America of ours) a left turn." He continues later in the forward to say, "Now just consider, if you will, these stories as mainstream fiction with a re-attached lost limb that you can call 'science' or 'speculative.'" III Publishing has been producing such work for quite a while now. Sometimes it has a fierce satirical bend such as when they published "The Last Days Of Christ The Vampire," which dealt with a vampire Christ, his fundamentalist zombies and their quest to convert teenagers in Providence, Rhode Island. Sometimes it's a blending of magic realism and post modernism as in when they published "Geminga, Sword Of The Shining Path," which mixes genetic engineering with politics and artificial consciousness. Regardless of what they are mixing together or what they are producing, III Publishing is almost always dancing the fine line between genres. It is material most often labeled as literature, regardless of the true content.

In the case of Mery's work, there are so many different styles and genres mixed here that one's head spins moving from story to story. This constant movement actually makes the book somewhat difficult to read in doses any larger than one story at a time. Mery's stories take place anytime, although many happen within the next century. Many of them are dialogues, sometimes between the writer and his characters. Most are moral plays, or in the simplest forms, thrust points or statements. Many of these stories involve God or something approaching that entity. And it should finally be noted that none of these stories are easy. Mery's writing is very similar to an artist's painting. Sure it may immediately represent something but there is often a deeper aspect to it and sometimes the representation is known only to the artist and the rest of us

Absolute Magnitude

can merely stare and wonder. This is the case with much of what happens here between these covers. There is fiction about the future and about people in the future who are projections of things existing today. There are conversations about reality and insanity and religion as well. There are pieces which are almost incomprehensible in their imagery and focus. One would call some of the pieces almost absurdist in a projecting kind of way.

There is not much of a pattern here even though Mery returns to some themes, characters and settings a couple of times. Each piece is fresh and different, representing a singular vision of the author. Strange stuff that combines more styles and traditions than could comfortably be thought of or listed. This is truly unique stuff and I am at pretty much at a total loss to find something to compare it too. Kafka a bit, Aristophanes a touch, the dada movement perhaps—but always more than any one of them. Truly, if you are looking for something different you should try this book or, in fact, take a chance on almost any of III Publishing's offerings.

Finally, small press book publishing allows a publisher to just plain publish what they want to. All too often we forget that publishing basically works this way. Any editor that tells you they always buy material because they know it will sell is either kidding you or not long for the business. Editors buy what they like. Publishers, on the other hand, can usually be convinced to publish what they think will sell. The small press lets publishers act as editors and produce works based solely on love. Sometimes these are self publishing efforts and sometimes they are not. Whatever the case it is often a mixed bag in terms of quality and can be used to make the point that there is a reason why there is usually three or four people involved in a publishing effort.

Extreme Measures, Gary Lovisi, Gryphon Books, Gryphon Publications, P. O. Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228-0209, \$15 plus \$2 p&h, 164 pgs.

Gary Lovisi has been involved in small press publishing for better than a decade. He edits the magazines *Paperback Parade* and *Hardboiled*. The first is a magazine geared to collecting paperbacks and the second is geared to detective/police/crime fiction. This collection falls into the crime fiction category and is a presentation of 15 tales of murder, mystery, mayhem and madness.

These are not nice stories. These are not tales where justice is always served and where the

ending is always happy. These are stories which dare to delve into the minds and natures of individuals who would just as soon stab you as shake your hand. While the tales share some aspects of horror they are far more akin to front page headlines. Lovisi's stories are about serial killers and detectives and private eyes and murderers and rapists and the fine lines that sometimes just barely separate us from them. These stories are as much about the evil and the madness that inhabits creatures who kill and maim as they are about the process that is used in the creation, justification, exhibition and sometimes catching of the perpetrators. The stories are short, individual sojourns into hell and back, sometimes on the back of a trained assassin, sometimes in the passenger seat of a betrayed husband and sometimes in the back of an inner city squad car.

Lovisi has been involved with this kind of writing for a long time and it is apparent that he not only enjoys publishing it but that he enjoys writing it. His style is straightforward, punching out at the reader like slugs burping from an old .38 caliber handgun. His intention is to present a slice of life as it appears on the streets. One needs to separate the content from the writer. The content is nasty in places while the writing is always sharp and clear. You may not enjoy a particular scene or character action but you will always enjoy the way Lovisi puts together the words used to create that action. This is really fun stuff, unusual and fresh and a bit outside the lines of what you might be used to. Writing this good deserves support, however, and who knows, you just might find yourself crossing a genre line and wondering why there aren't people this nasty in your usual mix of science fiction or fantasy. Extremely involving.

Next time we return to the magazines to take a look at what's out there in terms of SF for those of you who can't get enough of a fix here. As always you can reach me care of this magazine or by email at sfreviewer@bigfoot.com. If you've got something you'd like reviewed you can contact me for info on how to get it into my hands. Understand, though, that not everything that touches my fingers gets into a column.



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Alan Dean Foster is a *New York Times* best-selling author. He has a bachelor's degree in political science and a Master of Fine Arts in Motion Pictures. He has published dozens of books and this is his third appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

The Question

by Alan Dean Foster

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Even had they known it was unlikely anyone would have tried to stop him. A few might have sensed his intention. The majority simply ignored him. Had they known the truth they would have been indifferent at best, at worst afraid. Some might have thought him mad. Others would have been amused.

He did not ask for their advice because they had none to give. What he planned had never been tried before, and there were reasons why. Why risk death for no good reason?

Or was there a reason? Lachlan wasn't sure himself. He only knew that he burned to find out.

To leave the Home. Why would anyone want to? Why even contemplate such a thought? There was nothing Outside to make life more enjoyable. Nothing dwelt beyond the Wall save death, and only a true fool wished to hurry that meeting. Within the Home was warmth, food, shelter, companionship. It wasn't even confining. Within its protected boundaries was room enough for thousands without crowding. Life was simple, straightforward, and fulfilling. One could live peaceably or engage in ritual combat with others of similar tastes and desires. It was purely a matter of individual choice, a commodity which existed in the Home in sufficient quantity to please the most discriminating.

There was not even any need to work, because of the Servants.

It was they who produced and served up the food, kept the Home clean, saw to the people's medical needs, maintained the buildings and the mechanical infrastructure. Tremendously strong and of immense stature, they nonetheless moved with care lest they accidentally harm the feeblest citizen. They were especially gentle with the young, often playing with them and bringing them special treats. If a Servant did injure one of the people it devoted itself to restoring the injured one to health.

When the seasons changed and the weather turned bitter it was the Servants who ensured that the Home was properly heated. They would rouse themselves from sound sleep in the midst of the worst storms to repair leaks or broken drains. Meanwhile the people slept on contentedly. They slew the occasional carnivore that prowled too near the Home and cursed it clumsily while the people looked on and offered approval.

Thus shielded and cozzened, why would anyone so much as think of leaving the Home?

Lachlan had no answer for that. He could not have said what drove him to contemplate madness. So he said nothing, merely watched and waited and bided his time.

His own doubts aside, the Wall was his only obstacle. There was no need for another. Slim but invulnerable, it towered above the Home. The Servants had raised it to keep the sanctuary secure from the carnivores that prowled the wild lands Outside. It also had the effect of keeping all the people inside, but no one thought about that. No one wanted to go beyond the Wall anyway. No one except Lachlan.

You could easily see out between the uncuttable metal cables that formed the Wall. Frustrated carnivores broke their teeth on it, wore themselves out trying to surmount its great height, exhausted

themselves attempting to dig beneath. The Servants had built it well. The Home was impenetrable.

How could Lachlan expect to succeed where powerful killers repeatedly failed? It was the problem he contemplated daily, without solution. Until the big rain came.

It started without warning or scouting thunder one sultry evening. The humidity increased until water seemed to condense out of the surrounding air; fat, heavy drops that arrived like the opening salvo of a military bombardment. It pounded the Home and gouged the dry earth. The lower levels of the Home flooded as drainage channels overflowed, unable to carry off the rain as fast as it fell.

Aroused Servants stumbled from their quarters and worked frantically to stave off serious damage while the people looked on safe and secure from inside. The Servants labored miserably in the rain but none of the people moved to help them. That would have been contrary to tradition, and undignified as well.

It took the Servants a long time to get the flooding under control. Only when the storm began to let up did they allow themselves to rest, eventually returning tiredly to their own quarters.

As the water level began to fall the people gradually emerged, chatting excitedly, commenting on how the unprecedented deluge had altered the landscape in the immediate vicinity of the Home. Having nothing better to do, Lachlan joined them. As was his wont, he ranged farther than his companions, wandering alone to the furthest reaches of the Home while trying to memorize every detail of the terrain beyond the Wall. That's when he saw his chance.

When he came across the narrow gully he could hardly contain his excitement. He did so because he had to. If anyone else noticed the newly cut arroyo they would immediately call it to the attention of the Servants, who would rush to repair the breach in the Home's integrity.

Lachlan glanced anxiously behind him. For the moment he was alone. He stood there thinking hard and fast. More time to prepare for this moment would have been desirable. It would, for example, be better to have eaten his fill since there was no way of knowing what he might find in the way of food on the Outside. He was not nearly so concerned about finding water, not after the recent storm. It would have been better to make a plan.

But how did one plan for the unknown? Lachlan was a creature of impulse. He knew what he wanted. The gully was there *now*, gaping invitingly beneath the Wall. There was no one to argue with him *now*. There was no reason to hold back.

He turned for a last look at the Home, at his home, the only one he'd ever known or ever might know. For an instant he doubted his purpose. He never doubted himself.

The invulnerable arcology stood immovable and secure, drying in the sun behind him. From within rose the voices of the people. Some he recognized, others he did not. The Home was too large to know all who dwelt within. Now he planned to abandon that familiarity and comfort for the mystery and possible quick death of the Outside. There would be no roof to shelter him, no soft heat to warm him at night, no attentive Servants to see to his every need.

The Question

Perhaps I am mad, he thought as he turned and raced toward the gully. No one saw him; not any of his friends, no strangers, none of the Servants. The path he had utilized to flee would be discovered soon enough, whereupon the Servants would hastily seal it to prevent the ingress of any dangerous local fauna. That meant that if his determination weakened and he wished to return he might not be able to do so.

No time to ponder such possibilities now. Was he losing his nerve before he'd committed himself? He resolved to think no more about returning. He was going to be the first of his kind to learn what lay Outside.

It was so easy. A quick dash took him down into the gully. Then he was racing along its length, ducking beneath the formerly impassable underside of the Wall, feeling the lowermost cable brush his forehead. A few more steps found him climbing the slight slope on the far side, until he stood once more on level ground.

It was dirtier, the surface here untended by Servants. That much was to be expected. There was ample evidence of the presence of game. He would not starve. By turning and straining his neck he was able to view the outline of the Home. He could still hear the babble of everyday conversation as his companions went about their daily tasks.

Then he tensed. Two servants were examining the gap that the storm had cut beneath the Wall, while curious citizens clustered around them. He'd made his run just in time. As he looked on, one of the Servants happened to glance up and see him. Obviously surprised, it pointed in his direction and made a rumbling noise. Several citizens spotted him at the same time and called out.

He'd been seen. The alarm had been raised. He should not have paused to catch his breath and consider his situation until well out of sight of the Home. Now it was too late. Furious at himself, he turned and rushed off through the surrounding brush. He knew that behind him the Servants would be on the move. They were powerful enough to fight off any prowling carnivores and would not hesitate to do their utmost to "rescue" him. But Lachlan didn't want to be rescued.

There was still a chance to elude their well-intentioned pursuit. The Servants were massive and powerful, but also awkward and slow. Any of the people could run circles around them.

The brush would slow them. He raced through the dense vegetation, ignoring the branches that took swipes at his face, easily clearing rocks and protruding roots. He was in excellent condition and ran easily, comfortably, full of the knowledge of what he'd already accomplished.

He was certain he'd left them far behind when he came up short, staring straight ahead. Here was something he'd never heard of, which was not surprising since he was the first of the people to encounter it. It was astonishing, daunting, and altogether terrifying. No one could have suspected such a thing. It was beyond belief. But not, he thought, beyond imagining.

There was a second Wall.

A Wall that moved.

It was utterly different and far more impressive than the impenetrable Wall which protected the Home. This barrier was in constant motion, a wide river of brightly colored lethal blurs which would destroy anything that tried to force its way through, including the most powerful and dangerous carnivores. Yet it was not solid. He could see the gaps that occurred at irregular intervals between the blurs. The latter traveled at lethal velocities. To try to pass between would be suicidal.

The Wall that surrounded the Home prevented entry. This one was deadly. It was designed not merely to Stop, but to kill. It looked powerful enough to kill a Servant as easily as a citizen.

Nervously he paced the barrier's boundary. Wind blew outward from its depths, warning of the fate that lay in store for any foolish enough to try forcing a path through. The barrier's designers had made no attempt to disguise its purpose. Wind and color shouted at him: here lay death.

A sound made him turn. Lurching clumsily toward him through the brush were the two Servants. He knew it would be useless to try arguing with them. They were incapable of understanding. Their programming was immutable and his most reasoned protests would not alter their intentions. Convinced they were aiding him, they would return him gently but firmly to the Home.

Lachlan damned their good intentions. He'd come this far, had made it beyond the Wall. Not the Servants nor anything else was going to prevent him from advancing.

They spotted him and altered their course to intercept, emitting coded recognition noises and proffering service. No doubt they expected him to react normally and turn to greet them.

Instead Lachlan pivoted, took a deep breath, and plunged into the chaos that was the second barrier. He could hear the Servants' startled exclamation behind him and took perverse joy in their surprise.

They accelerated but were stopped by the barrier. As Lachlan had surmised, it could prove fatal to them despite their size and strength. Slow they were, but not stupid. He had no time to study their reaction because every ounce of his being was now devoted solely to trying to pick a path through the destructive gale.

It was an infernal device, designed to lull one into a false sense of security before smashing them out of existence. He advanced cautiously, every sense alert. No matter what happened now he knew he would not, could not, go back.

The Servants continued calling to him. He could hear the concern in their voices and deliberately shut them out. The violent roar of the barrier was loud in his head as he ran on, running as he'd never run in his life. Sprint, pause and wait, retreat slightly, chose a new direction and sprint again. The worst part was not being able to gauge how far there was to go. He could only continue to progress, carried onward by strong legs and hope.

The motion of the barrier was patternless, death on a scale as random as it was expansive. The trick was to keep moving, if not always straight ahead. Sideways sometimes, backwards when prudent. He dared to feel hopeful. He was still alive.

Halfway through he discovered that he could see the other side, the true Outside. Not the bastard mirage that lay between the Home and this hitherto unsuspected obstacle. It was covered with dense vegetation, unrecognizable flora blanketing hilly terrain. It drew him like a half-forgotten dream. Ancient emotions swelled unexpectedly inside him. He knew that he had to reach that place, had to finish what he'd started. Not just for himself, but for all the uncaring, ignorant people he'd left behind.

The feelings that filled him brought with them a power and determination he'd never known he possessed. Confidence replaced fear. It was a mistake. Too soon by half to celebrate life. He'd failed to reckon with the insidious subtlety of the barrier's designers.

As he hurried toward his goal, the river of wind and color abruptly and without any warning reversed direction. It was almost as if it had been waiting for him to relax before springing the trap.

Absolute Magnitude

At the last possible instant he threw himself forward, sensing the mistake he'd made. No one else but Lachlan could have reacted so quickly. None the less, he wasn't quite fast enough. The impact was terrible. He felt himself flying through the air, saw the ground coming up to meet him, and hit hard. Pain raced up his right leg.

Get up, something inside him screamed. Get up before the peace you're lying in vanishes. Get up or die!

Somehow he managed to gather his feet beneath him and rise. The barrier surged and ebbed threateningly. He knew that if he failed to move, and move quickly, that it would finish him in seconds. He staggered on, not running effectively any more, just stumbling in the direction of the green grail that lay somewhere ahead. Whereas previously he had put his faith in good judgment and condition he trusted now to whatever luck remained to him.

Several times death missed him by inches, though in the haze of pain that rose from his injured leg he hardly noticed its grazing caress. He found that his foot would accept some weight. Not broken then, but painfully sprained. The rest of his body was a single shaken, mobile bruise. That from the most glancing blow the barrier could mete out.

But the Outside was close now, oh so close. He could smell it.

As he stumbled forward a single immense blur bore down on him. He tried to time one last sprint, but events inside the barrier happened too fast for thought. It was obvious that he wasn't going to make it, that his injured leg would neither allow him to advance nor retreat in time. All he could do was watch the final seconds of his life tick away. Instead of peace, frustration filled him.

A great roaring rushed through his skull as darkness descended. He felt himself being lifted off the ground. The barrier swallowed him completely, spinning him in circles preparatory to tearing him apart, sweeping him up in its irresistible flow. He imagined himself becoming part of the ceaseless current, fragments of Lachlan rushing past at high speed to assault the next individual foolish enough to challenge the maze.

Then it was over, as quickly as it had struck.

He lay there breathing hard, several dozen yards from where he'd been engulfed. It took him a long moment to realize that instead of striking him, the great blur had passed over him, the vacuum created by its passage whipping him along before depositing him in its wake.

A second such encounter would surely destroy him, mentally if not otherwise.

Not pausing to wonder if any strength remained to him, he struggled erect and lurched onward, too exhausted and hurting to think.

Something solid blocked his path. He blinked, studied it, and realized it was a simple high step. The step which marked the far side of the barrier. With a cry he gathered himself and jumped, nearly tumbling back into the slipstream, fighting to keep his balance. Behind him, too close, the barrier thundered.

It no longer mattered. He was through, across, beyond. From someplace deep down inside his soul he found enough energy to emit a bellow of triumph.

Safe now, he allowed himself to turn to regard the Servants still standing on the barrier's far side. Their faces still reflected the confusion they felt. They simply did not understand. Nor did they make any move to follow. Their respect for the barrier equalled his own, but their courage did not. He was alone now, as alone as one could be in the true Outside. What dangers lay before him, what

mysteries and threats and revelations he could not say, anymore than he could define the emotions that raced through him.

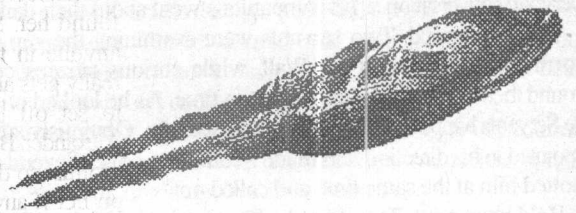
Behind him lay the security of the Home. Somehow that no longer mattered. Nothing mattered except that he'd accomplished what he'd set out to do. And he'd done the great thing without really stopping to analyze why it was so important that he do it. He knew only that everything felt right.

His leg throbbed. He was going to need food, and a place to rest while recuperating. With luck and persistence he would find both. He limped off into the woods.

On the other side of the barrier the Servants watched until he disappeared among the trees. Only then did the larger of the pair turn to his companion to voice the confusion he felt.

"I didn't think he was going to make it. No way, no how. Damndest thing I ever saw."

"Yeah." His shorter companion had a deeper voice but was no less puzzled, nor could he offer any further insight into what had taken place. I wonder why he wanted to get to the other side of the road anyway?"



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Book Reviews

Reviews by Lucas Gregor:

Demon King by Chris Bunch
Warner Aspect, 507 pages, \$12.99
ISBN 0-446-67327-7

Demon King, the sequel to *Seer King*, is the one of best heroic fantasy novels that I've read in years; possibly the very best second volume of a trilogy that I've ever read. Second books in trilogies are almost always problematical in that nothing much ever happens. People tend to travel a lot without actually ever getting anywhere. After all, the good guys can't win yet or we won't need a third book. While Bunch certainly put his characters through their paces, he lets them arrive somewhere and do things in this volume. Rare indeed.

Like *Seer King*, *Demon King* follows the fortunes of Damasters, head of Numantia's cavalry, as he faithfully serves the Wizard King, Tenedos. In *Seer King* Bunch gave us glimpses into the future that *Demon King* chronicles. Therefore we are not surprised when Tenedos uses Damasters badly. But surprisingly, Bunch still manages to pull a great deal of emotion out of the betrayal.

The scope of this book is even more broad than its predecessor. And wonder of wonders, Numantia actually feels like a real place in a real time, rather than another hodgepodge of Celtic knotwork. Gritty and realistic in a way that fantasy novels just aren't, this book is a pleasure to read. Once again, though, as with the first book in this trilogy, I must warn the unwary or meek, Bunch is quite frank in his handling of sex and I would not recommend this for anyone under the age of twelve.

Demon King is a triumph. The third book *Warrior King* has a lot to live up to. I'm looking forward to seeing what Bunch will do to top himself.

The Face of Apollo by Fred Saberhagen
Tor Books, 382 pages, \$25.95
ISBN 0-312-86623-2

The Face of Apollo is billed as the first book in the brand new Book of the Gods series. It starts out promisingly enough. Saberhagen is a masterful storyteller and he effortlessly pulls the reader along with his deft prose.

The protagonist, a fifteen-year-old boy, Jeremy has lived with his Aunt and Uncle ever since his parents were killed in a raid on their village. He has been unable to make friends with the other villagers and leads a dull and dreary existence. Then one day while pushing a wheelbarrow full of grapes along a forest path Jeremy hears something in the woods. He goes to investigate and finds a woman who is badly injured. Jeremy tries to help Sal, who refuses to go into the village and asks Jeremy not to tell anyone that he has found her. Since Jeremy doesn't really like anyone in the village he agrees. Sal never really gets any better and she and Jeremy try to set off down stream to find professor Alexander. Before they go, Sal makes Jeremy promise to deliver a small pouch that she has on her if anything happens to her. Of course something does happen to her and Jeremy has to run from his village with an unknown enemy hot on his trail.

In the pouch is the Face of Apollo. Through a series of bizarre events Jeremy manages to absorb the Face of Apollo into his own body, thereby becoming the avatar of Apollo. As I said, the action moves along smoothly and the book is quite well written. Unfortunately Saberhagen does not seem to be able to keep the steam up through the entire book. The ending had too much of *deus ex machina* (the pun is intended and you'll understand after reading the book) about it. Even so I have every intention of reading the next book in the series. Saberhagen has given us a rich new world to explore and even though I wasn't too keen on the ending of this book, I do want to travel down more of the byways that this series is sure to offer.

Homebody by Orson Scott Card
Harper Collins, 304 pages, \$24.00
ISBN 0-06-017655-5

Homebody is Orson Scott Card's first foray into horror since *Lost Boys*. The horror is quiet to be sure, but Card's writing is so masterful that any horror or fantasy fan should be happy with this one. The characters fairly leap off the page; Card has no equals when it comes to characterization.

The story's protagonist is Don Lark. Lark is a carpenter who buys old run-down houses, and then lives in them while he fixes them up. Lark leads a nomadic existence moving from one house to the next, never letting anyone get close to him. He is strong man trying to come to terms with the death of his daughter and the guilt that he wrongly assumes for it.

Almost from the start, Lark's newest acquisition, a broken down old mansion, seems to draw people to Lark when all Lark wants is peace and solitude. As the novel progresses, Lark begins to come out of his shell and feel alive again. Card does a wonderful job of misdirection and nothing is ever as it seems and just when you think you know where the novel is going, Card hits you with another curve ball. I thoroughly enjoyed this one.

Groogleman by Debra Doyle & James D. Macdonald
Jane Yolen Books, 113 pages, \$15.00
ISBN 0-15-200235-9

Groogleman is a young adult novel set in a future after some future catastrophic collapse. The book is an extremely fast read. Dan Henchard lives in a world where plague can take an entire village without warning and where the feared Grooglemen prey on the unsuspecting. Dan is set to begin his training as a weller, when his teacher Leezie is kidnapped by the Grooglemen. Along with a newcomer to the farm land, Joshua, Dan sets out to rescue Leezie. The adventure is arduous and dangerous and it makes Dan rethink everything he knows about the world.

This book is an excellent coming of age book that teens of any age should enjoy.

Adapting PCs For Disabilities by Joseph J Lazzaro
Addison Wesley, 304 pages, \$39.95
ISBN 0-201-48354-9

The print edition of this book is accompanied by a CD-Rom that contains the full text in order to provide access to the book to people with disabilities. Ultimately that is what this book is about, providing accessibility. Lazzaro delves into the technologies that will help make the computer

Absolute Magnitude

accessible to people with disabilities and what that will mean to the future. There are chapters on adapting the keyboard and the video monitor, as well as adaptive communications.

Lazzaro makes all of the technical explanations very readable and he knows his stuff. If you are at all interested, for any reason, in the exploding field of adaptive technologies this is the definitive text. Lazzaro gives us a vision of a future where technology evens the playing field of life and allows everyone to live up to their fullest potential. Even better, he shows us the way there.

Reviews by Joe Mayhew:

Iron Shadows by Steven Barnes
Tor, 383 pages, \$24.95
ISBN 0-312-85708-X

Iron Shadows begins with a *Mission Impossible* style rescue of a little girl from her abducting, non-custodial, gangster father by a blonde martial artist, Porsche "Cat" Juvell, her black ex-husband, Jax Carpenter, and her tech-wizard-but-wheelchair-bound-brother, Tyler. It is vivid, violent and well-paced from the start.

"Jax came in hooking to McGee's body. He landed solidly to the short ribs, evoking a gratifying gasp in response. A muffled reverse punch grazed Jax's cheek, snapping his head around. He saw stars, but never stopped. You never ever stop once you get them going..."

Its Hollywood super-detectives' next job is to rescue Kolla, sister of mega-rich Dr. Maxwell Sinclair, from the leaders of the Golden Sun sex-power cult, Joy and Tomo (half-Japanese-half-black-separated-siamese-twins born in Nagasaki after the A-Bomb fell. So far, it all takes place in the mundane world, right-now, complete with brand-names and California values, but when they see The Twins fire-walk at a Long Beach University Football Stadium rally, we wonder, where is Barnes taking us? Carefully revealing only what will whet your curiosity, he plays a strong hand of martial arts mysticism, male-bashing, cult-seminar sex and powers-beyond-belief stunts.

There is more wry humor than lasciviousness in Barnes' description of the Golden Sun's sex retreats. And contrary to the expected in a cult investigation story, the twins, Joy and Tomo are attractive, utterly sincere, and intensely spiritual. They are for some purposes Yin and Yang. However, they are terrified of the hellish *Iron Shadows* that are murdering some people at the edges of

their Golden Sun. Barnes keeps his readers guessing and interested.

Hand of Prophecy by Severna Park
Avon, 307 pages, \$14.00
ISBN 0-380976-39-0

During the panic caused by the return of the Faraqui slave lords, Frenna, a "Jatahn" (favored one), escapes from her abusive veterinarian master. Like all slaves, she has been infected with a virus which will keep her from growing older for 20 years, when that time is up, she knows she will "fail" and die—very painfully.

However, she is caught by Rasha, a Faraqui whose own family had bred hers to serve them in every way. She is swept away by his pheromones, but not completely. So he decides to give her to a friend who runs a TV death-circus on another planet. She must serve as a medic for the wounded gladiators. She must also dispense the mercy-killer, "Thanas," when their injuries are too severe for their virus to cure—or when their time is up.

Rasha had previously hid his renegade sister "Troah" (which means "the Hand of Prophecy," commonly used in the context of hopeless despair), at this gladiatorium. Troah's tattooed hand seems to be the channel of extraordinary powers. Though a slave herself, she claims to have a mystical cure for the virus and dominates the gladiators.

But Frenna has already seen one slave actually recover from the "failure." The cure, given during the slave's death throes, is a form of cancer which, though serious, is curable.

Frenna becomes masochistically bound up with Troah, as well as with one of the best of the gladiatrices, Hallie, another dominatrix. The Hand of Prophecy is at times gross, perverse and compulsive. It is a very dark book, indeed.

Outpost by Scott MacKay
Tor, 349 pages, \$24.95
ISBN 0-312-86467-1

In *Outpost*, seventeen-year-old Felicitas is in a deteriorating prison, watched over by alien robots which have started to fall apart. Until recently, her nights have been spent attached to brain-numbing dreamphones which take her back to the crime over and over again...if most of the details of her life were forgotten, she at least remembered this one thing: the identification tag stapled through her victim's ear. But she is getting some memories back, and there are strange, powerful dreams of Lungo Muso, one of the

Uominilupi (wolf-men), or Old Ones who built the prison.

The prison population is divided between the dead, who are completely absorbed by their dreamphones, and the *Superstiti* who have been able to awaken and are struggling to escape over the walls by means of a ladder built from the parts of the dying robots. As Felicitas joins them, she becomes aware that she can hear things even the other *Superstiti* cannot, and has a unique affinity for the devices and weapons of the Old Ones.

But the "New Ones" are coming. Lungo Muso shows her, and others, visions of total destruction of the planet, wrought by these time-traveling creatures.

Some of the Zombie-like Dead have been implanted with mind-controlling robot-spiders by the New Ones. They disrupt the escape and capture and convert (or eat) some of Felicitas' friends. Still, some of the *Superstiti* manage to escape, pursued by the implanted Dead. But one of their party has also been implanted. It is only a matter of time before it will take him over. Nevertheless, they reject his pleas when he begs them to kill him before it happens. Too late, they learn that his implant is also a homing-beacon for the Dead.

Lungo Muso has revealed the site of the New One's River of Time, from whence they will ignite the planet. If Felicitas can get there first, perhaps she will be able to stop them.

MacKay somewhat overuses the tension-devices of having his heroine dither and fumble about when early action might have paid off; wandering off, or being isolated when he needs her to be vulnerable (more common in the genre of horror) and depends on Felicitas' mysterious affinity with the *Uominilupi* to validate her character. Still, he has managed to put together a fast paced action adventure.

Reviews by John Deakins:

Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman
by Walter M. Miller Jr.
Bantam Books, 434 pages, \$23.95
ISBN 0-553-10704-6

It's been nearly forty years since Miller's classic *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. In a post-apocalyptic America, the last thread of civilization was preserved by the book-leggers, smuggling forbidden texts to a Benedictine abbey somewhere in New Mexico. Leibowitz, a booklegging Jew, is now remembered in legend as a Catholic saint. *Canticle* ranged broadly, following to Order from the violent stirrings of civilization near

Book Reviews

Texarkana, to the escape from Earth, as another nuclear winter begins.

This sequel focuses on the collision of a growing Texark empire and a resurgent Catholic Church. Instead of 1300's Europe, the action stretches across central North America, among clashes between matriarchal nomad tribes, militant mutants, and expanding imperial settlements.

Miller's writing is deeply professional. Like Frank Herbert, he takes the reader to the soul beyond the surface. His plot is as convoluted as a constellation, and it won't always deliver you where you think it should. You may hate the ending, but you cannot dismiss it.

I had trouble believing that ceremonial Roman Catholicism would survive intact, moved to a future, alien setting, and Miller's naming system was a little too Native American. The thread spanning all the action is the life of Blacktooth St. George, a monk of St. Leibowitz. Miller sometimes looks over the shoulder of Cardinal Brownpony, a clerical lawyer forced into a disputed papacy. He briefly follows the Texark emperor; a beautiful, mutated "genny" who loves Blacktooth and who somehow becomes a saint; and a nameless, immortal Jew, still hoping for the Messiah.

Relish the experience and the intricate philosophy, as one culture collapses before another. Spend the night in the haunted Meltdown; pray with an iconoclastic hermit Pope; ride fearfully into the dirty glory of battle; grit your teeth at love unfulfilled in the company of dying, fatal dreams.

Miller's world is too much like real life: the reader is dragged to places he never intended to go, but the other choice besides life...

The Masterharper of Pern by Anne McCaffrey

Ballantine Books, 371 pages, \$25.00
ISBN 0-345-38823-2

Thirty years ago, Anne McCaffrey introduced *Analog* readers to the planet Pern, a lost human colony, and their symbiosis with the telepathic/teleporting dragons. Hanging over Pern is the Red Star, an erratic planet, home of the mindless, devouring Thread. As the planets move toward conjunction, Thread crosses the space between, destroying every living thing on Pern's land.

This novel is a true prequel. *Masterharper* ends where *Dragonflight*, eleven "Pern" novels ago, began—with the Searching of Lessa, the dragon-queen rider who initiated Pern's salvation. Robinton, the Masterharper

of Pern, appeared throughout all but the final few novels, but his origins were never explored. McCaffrey begins at his (difficult) birth and follows the rising musical genius to the highest harper position. Pern is in crisis; Threadfall is imminent, but the planets have been four hundred years without conjunction. Belief in Thread, the usefulness of dragonriders, and the harpers' teachings-in-song is waning. Harpers, who have kept learning alive, are under attack, especially from Fax, a vicious dictator who is swallowing Hold after Hold.

Robinton must grow up with the rejection of his musically obsessed father, competing for the love of his empathic Mastersinger mother. Robinton becomes a bright strand in the Pern tapestry, intricately woven of hundreds of characters. McCaffrey has lost none of her touch, and she has not, over the millions of words involved, let her primary story line slip from her grasp.

The one complaint might be the co-existence of casual promiscuity and romantic love in Pern society. I have trouble believing in their intermixture.

No McCaffrey fan will be disappointed. A new reader would be better off beginning with *Dragonflight*, but this book is strong enough to either stand alone or to generate a new Pern fan for the author. Enjoy.

The Johnny Maxwell Trilogy by Terry Pratchett

SFBC Science Fiction, 408 pages, \$10.98
ISBN: 1-56865-620-3

Science Fiction Book Club stole a march on other American publishers, by snapping up rights to three small Pratchett paperbacks, previously available only in Britain. Pratchett's popular Discworld series is a high-profit enterprise this side of the Pond as well.

The three (*Only You Can Save Mankind*; *Johnny and the Dead*; and *Johnny and the Bomb*) are superficially stories about an unusual twelve-year-old and his odd friends. They are about adolescents, not for adolescents. Johnny has "an imagination so big that it's outside his head." Inside an "Alien Attack" computer game, the aliens surrender to him, rather than end up like the extinct "Space Invaders." Against the background of the televised Gulf War, Pratchett weaves a strong anti-war message through all three stories. He makes it clear: he hates war, but he could pull the trigger, with tears in his eyes. With his own family breaking up, the exhausted Johnny must lead the aliens out of

game space.

In the second story, Johnny is the only one who can see the dead, whose cemetery is about to be bulldozed by a faceless corporation. Pratchett seldom delivers the belly laughs, nor means to. The books are funny, but deep—far deeper than the subject matter. Read, and find out the difference between the living dead and a ghost.

Finally, Johnny and his friends encounter a time-walking bag lady and her manic cat, by way of saving a streetful of homeless folks from a WWII blitz. With bags full of time in a squeaky shopping cart, they move forward, back, and across time to turn on the air-raid siren and save their friend Wobbler. Because of their accidental interference, Wobbler's grandfather died in the bombing. A kid from the '90s would hate 1940, though he would become a billionaire using trivial future knowledge. Pratchett delivers time paradoxes as well as any author I've read.

This trilogy is a "fun read," with a wry look at British society (strangely familiar, except for the occasional Anglicism.)

Titan by Stephen Baxter
HarperPrism, 437 pages, \$23.00
ISBN: 0-06-105259-0

Former engineer Baxter deserves (some) high praise. Want to drive the Space Shuttle or an X-15? Want to experience the boiler room of a NASA control center in crisis, or a space station's cramped monotony? Want to live the "high" of space flight that hooks astronauts for life? He will put you there. His use of soft-screen computers to explore a "lost generation" theme is also well done. When he's hot, the pages turn themselves.

Seven years from now, NASA is under attack. Another shuttle disaster brings old enemies in for the kill. A collection of desperate dreamers engineers one last flight—to the organic slush of Saturn's moon, Titan. Their six-year, one-way venture should rekindle the public's affair with space, despite the election of an ultra-conservative president and a growing Chinese threat.

Then the whole novel disintegrates. Baxter repeatedly forgets inconvenient facts, even those he introduced. From hundreds of candidates: two lesbians, a Jewish intellectual, a hot-shot WASP pilot, and a 55-year-old NASA director are the best crew choices? He omnisciently follows his incompatible crew, except those he plans to kill off. He brain damages and blinds a character, then allows him intelligent conversation in the next chapter, and forgets that he's blind during a

Absolute Magnitude

violent scene. He emphasizes constant astronaut check-list practice, and then kills two characters and cripples another, who forget the instructions, in three separate incidents.

His depth of understanding of Global Warming is ephemeral. A publicly attempted murder is just waved off. His president becomes a dictator two elections from now, without a whisper from our disputative Congress or Supreme Court. Baxter hasn't a clue about conservatives' motives, much less the religious right. His Red China is right out of the '60s. China's one child policy evidently doesn't exist.

He postulates a tricky closed-loop ecosystem for his colonists, far out of our reach. The Chinese rendezvous several craft with an Earth-crossing asteroid, but are unable to correctly estimate its size. He invokes the supreme being, Carl Sagan, and then has to add an apologetic prologue.

The book is long and depressing. With fifty pages remaining, Baxter won't let the diseased survivors finally die; he resurrects them into humanistic heaven. Read the first hundred pages; then use this as a door-stop.

What If? Strategic Alternatives to WWII edited by Harold C. Deutsch and Dennis E. Showalter

The Empire Press, 272 pages, \$35.00
ISBN: 1-883746-07-0

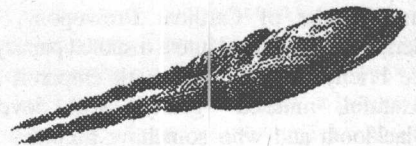
"Alternate history" is one of the most popular SF sub-genres. Within it, many volatile World War II decision points could have pivoted history into new "futures." It is almost a writer's rite of passage to explore an SF universe in which Hitler won the war.

Deutsch's and Showalter's team of sixteen professional historians have created a highly readable source-text. It lacks fiction's swashbuckling; the reader experiences the solidity of academic depth instead. "Suspension of disbelief" is replaced by belief itself. Considering that they are projecting fictional events, that is no mean feat.

The predictions themselves? The authors analyze seventeen general categories and fifty separate questions. There is no room here even for the bibliography. They deliver universal consensus on a few generalities. (1) A major Axis mistake was pulling America irrevocably into the war. Pearl Harbor was a misdirected fiasco, which a second strike would only have compounded. (2) The

chance of a Japanese victory was virtually nil; Germany could not have won any two-front war. (3) Breaking the Axis codes (or failing to) did/would not alter the war's ultimate outcome. And everybody's favorite? The chances of a German victory were dismally low. Hitler never understood the logistic and manpower depth of Russia and/or the U.S. Only a total ideological shift that let Nazis make willing allies of the Russian people might have produced victory in the east. In the west, Lord Halifax as British prime minister might have signed a separate, generous peace with the Reich. The remaining list of German winning combinations are only weakly arguable.

The authors omit entirely potential German nuclear development, and their conclusions about an inevitable Allied victory at Normandy are not universally held. Still, if you expect to be included in the next "Alternate..." anthology, this book is a must.



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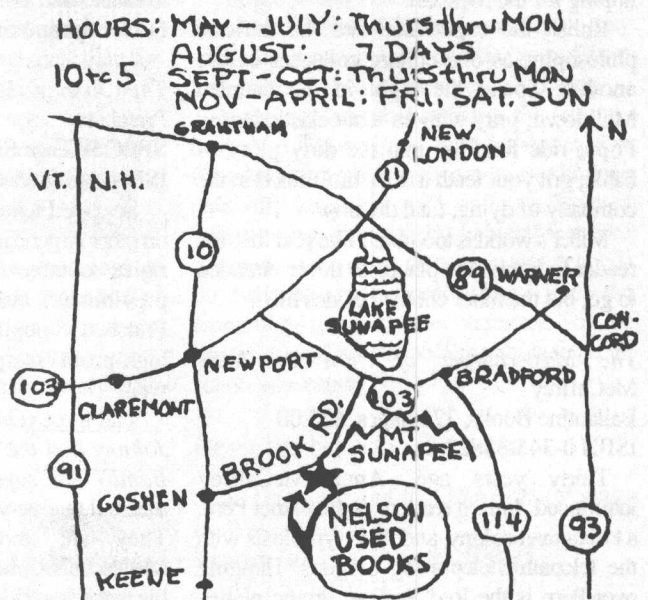
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Chris Bunch is best known as the author of the highly successful *Seer King* and *Demon King* novels; you can expect the third book in the series *Warrior King* in the near future. He also wrote the Shadow Warrior trilogy and co-authored the Sten novels and the Anteros Trilogy. He lives in the smallest town in the known universe, with his best friend Karen. This is his fourth appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Backblast

A Shadow Warrior Tale

by Chris Bunch

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Lorn Ware checked the bubble, slightly moved the leveling screw, stepped back from the double tripod and bar her recording apparati clung to. She unclipped the remote viewer/shutter release from her belt harness, looked into it. Right screen, foreground was a roseattened circle of stone she named a monument, though why the Al'ar should've put one up in the middle of nowhere was a puzzlement.

Just like, she thought, everything, or almost everything about the Al'ar is a mind-shatter.

On the left of her mini-screen was a huge Al'ar transmission towers, the closest of the long line that marched across this sere world from the abandoned, half-finished underground base to the middle of nothing, where the line simply stopped.

It would be a great holograph.

Artistic as all hell, she thought. Just like Herr Uber-Digger-Schwanz Frazier ordered. Perfect for the cover of the semi-annual report, sure to peel more funds for the Univee out of the government.

Until a real analyst happens to take a look at things.

She put that aside. *Dad always said Man can't serve two masters, she thought wryly. But what about Woman?*

She shivered as a chill, dead wind whispered past, then checked her timesend, and jolted. *How'd it get so late? You're piddling about with a bare minute-forty before the run...*

Ware concentrated on her viewer, listened for the barely-audible near-subsonic tone of building power, hovering over the release switch, not trusting the automatic shutter.

Picturesque as anybody could want when the violet arc fireballs toward me, jumping from tower to tower and past...

She caught a flicker from the corner of her eye, started to turn.

The blast of raw energy tore her body apart before she had time to scream.

Scholar Juan Frazier ran a hand over his nearly-bald skull as if anticipating new growth. The small twittering man with the hooded eyes reminded Joshua Wolfe of some species of bird, perhaps a woodpecker; or possibly the reptilian *hultsma* of Vega VI.

"Isn't it a bit irregular to send an investigator all the way from the Federation to inquire about an accident that's already been fully reported?" Frazier asked carefully. "Not to mention expensive?"

"Probably," Joshua agreed blandly. "But I'm a local boy, free-lancing in the Outlaw Worlds, so it wasn't that many jumps for me. As for irregular, I heard rumors there's been insurance problems on other university-funded projects."

"You don't have any idea, though, why the Univee...damnit, I hate that word... isn't satisfied with the information I provided," Frazier

persisted.

"Not really," Wolfe said. "But I'd guess it might be because your project's funded through the government. You know how *they* like to ask questions."

"Ah," Frazier said. "Ah, of course. Of course that's it." He visibly relaxed, but his eyes stayed fixed on Joshua.

His long office was cluttered with terminals, reports, a few models of Al'ar apparatus and, incongruously, a architect's holograph of an elaborate lakeside home.

There was a port behind him, looking out at the jumble of temporary buildings around the low mounded entrances to the Al'ar base, and, not far distant, Wolfe's grounded spaceship, the *Grayle*.

"As I understand it," Wolfe said, "your team is currently trying to put the Al'ar power grid back on line, correct?"

"Not just on line, but also trying to determine what that power was intended for. Another base? An exotic weapons system? Perhaps a launch-base? And all of this is but part and parcel of our complete investigation of all Al'ar remnants on Five." Frazier touched a sensor, and a wallscreen lit.

Planet A-6343-5, the fifth planet of the arbitrarily-numbered star system, given the A-prefix as a former Al'ar world, hung in space. The perspective closed on the planet.

"Here is the base we're at," and a dot lit on the map. "Transmission towers run out to...here." A line sketched onscreen.

The screen changed, and showed a single tower.

"This is the end of the line," Frazier said. "Or so we call it.

"Our first questions are," and Wolfe heard in his mind the tapping as earnest students began numbering their lecture notes, "what was going to be built here. Or, conceivably, what could be underground here, although none of our resonations have yet discovered anything. Why was this end-point so far from the base? Why are there only a scattering of buildings along the route?"

"I've scanned your reports," Wolfe said. "Since the base appears unfinished, maybe the Al'ar were just starting to develop this world."

"No," Frazier said. "That's not good enough. At least, I don't think that's the answer. Do you know anything about the Al'ar power source?"

"Just a little," Wolfe lied. He remembered very well the deep hum of the huge tower near the Federation embassy that was his boyhood home; and after that the tower beyond the internment camp his parents had died in.

"No one quite understands why the Al'ar chose to build these towers so, perhaps monolithic, might be the word," Frazier went on, deep into his subject. "especially since their cities are so ethereal. But

Absolute Magnitude

then, I suppose no one will ever understand the Al'ar, now they've vanished."

Wolfe's face remained immobile.

A laser pointer touched the tower onscreen. "This upper arm carries the main transmission, which is more or less fixed in position at a right angle to the direction of power transmission.

"On a developed Al'ar world, power would be transferred to the second arm, then diffused downward to receptors below, most generally atop whatever building they powered.

"Actually the power would be routed to these cylinders, call them holding tanks if you will, below the second arm, then transferred up. Here, just below the lower arm, you'll note these small columns. We think those were used to fine-tune the power transmission downward.

"At any rate, those columns, about your height, are where our problems have been occurring, and the reason our project's stalled for the moment." The small man's mouth twisted, and, surprisingly, emotion came into his voice. "Damn me but I'm sorry someone had to die! Especially that much against the odds! With all that desert to incinerate..."

"There were four previous backblasts," Wolfe said. "And the fifth killed Lorn Ware."

Frazier nodded jerkily.

"What was she doing out there?"

"That's what makes it worse," Frazier said. "What she was doing wasn't really necessary. She wanted to get some holos of the test. Lorn said they'd make a spectacular exhibit at the University... Univee as they all call it now, and I suppose I'd better adjust to it. She thought it might help when our budget was up for renewal, since it appears we're sort of stalled in place, and the government wants to see results for its investment." He shrugged small shoulders. "Who was I to argue? I'm not exactly a specialist in raising money.

"Maybe if I were..." his voice trailed off.

Wolfe waited politely, but the man didn't continue. After awhile, Joshua said, "So she just happened to pick a place where the flashpoint happened."

"Scholar Northover wondered if maybe that monument out there...there's some kind of Al'ar stonework, which we call a monument...might've drawn the blast," Frazier said. "Like lightning is drawn to a high point. He's the electromagnetic specialist with the team, so perhaps there's merit to his theory, and the monument was badly shattered."

"Was there anything of a similar nature to draw the other four blasts?" Wolfe asked.

"No. Or, at any rate, nothing that we can determine."

"I'd like to take a look at the accident site," Wolfe said. "If there's a gravsled I could borrow? I don't think I can get lost."

"I'll com the garage, and have one waiting. If you plan on eating with us, the next meal is at 1800 hours."

"Thanks. Speaking of which..." Wolf took an elaborate timepiece off his wrist, opened its back. "I'm still on Zulu shiptime."

"1430. The planet-day is 29.5 hours," Frazier said. "It'll seem like forever. But why don't you borrow one of these? They make life a little simpler."

He opened a desk drawer and took out a slender black device with a synthetic hook/eye strap, gave it to Joshua. "Let's see...that's unit

56," he said, and turned to a small domed case. He touched sensors on it. "And it's...1143 now..."

"That's a time-send," Frazier explained. "Everyone on the team carries one. It's nothing but a receiver, linked to a common sender. Set the sender when you land on any world for any length day, and all the units show exactly the same time, so there's never any trouble about synching watches, let alone making sure everyone has a timepiece that's capable of that wide an adjustment."

"Convenient."

"Especially when you have such a small team," Frazier went on, "and you're trying to keep some sort of order. It's handy when anything potentially hazardous is being investigated."

"How many people are on the expedition?"

"Twenty-three," Frazier said. "Sorry. Twenty-two, now."

"And you're on first-name terms with them? Like you evidently were with Ware?"

"I...we like to think of ourselves as friends," Frazier said. "Mostly, then, yes. Although there are some who prefer formality."

"Of course," Wolfe said. He eyed a rather ornate ring on the middle finger of Frazier's hand, was about to ask something when the door slid open, and a woman came in. She was a bit older than Wolfe's 35 years, athletically built, large-breasted, mildly pretty. Her hair was long, pulled back and then wrapped around her neck for convenience, and she wore an untailored set of ship coveralls.

"Scholar," the woman said, "we've got some preliminary pickups from the mole on the 14th level, if you're interested."

"I am," Frazier said. "Maybe we've found something worth sending someone down to investigate." He rose. "Oh. Pardon me. Joshua Wolfe, this is Scholar Mikela Tregagle. She's the expedition comptroller, adjutant, wheel-greaser, executive officer...the one who never makes a mistake."

"Hardly," Tregagle said, and her polite smile made her suddenly lovely. "I've merely been with Scholar Frazier for eight years now, so I should

know by now what's supposed to come next

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mister Wolfe, although the circumstances aren't the best," Tregagle grimaced. "Lorn Ware was one of our best. I don't think anyone was a harder worker."

"Except maybe you, Mikela," Frazier said.

The smile she gave him for payment was very warm. Frazier seemed not to notice.

"If you'll excuse us, Mister Wolfe," he said. "The garage is near the bubble's main entrance."

"I saw it when I landed," Joshua said. "I'll try to not be any trouble while I'm here. I'm sure the questions the Univee...pardon, the university, has can be cleared up in a day or two and I'll be on my way."

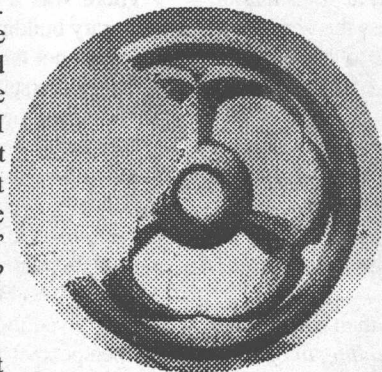
Wolfe left the expedition base, walked the quarter kilometer to his ship. The air was thin, slightly acrid.

As he approached, the airlock opened, and a gangway slid down. He entered the ship.

"Greetings," he said.

—Greetings,— the Grayle answered.

"This situation may become interesting," Wolfe said. He issued careful instructions. "Now to worry about me," Wolfe said. "Starting



Backblast

with the fact I'm chatting with a goddamned box." He went to a bulkhead near the airlock, touched a stud. The wall slid open, revealing racked pistols, rifles, grenades, machine weapons, even a semi-portable blaster. He considered carefully, took a tiny dart-like knife of black obsidian sheathed on a worked silver chain from a rack, put it on so the knife hung down the back of his neck; stuck a narrow tube-blaster in his halfboot, went back to the port.

"Wish me luck," he said, and went back into the dry desert wind.

A burly man waited beside a small lifter. He wore stained, worn coveralls and the lines on his hands had ground-in grease in them.

"You're the snooper," he greeted Wolfe.

"More a paper-shuffler than anything else," Joshua said, holding out his hand. "Joshua Wolfe. You're Dov Cherney."

The man ignored Wolfe's hand.

"I am. Why's the university so interested in Lorn?"

"I'll put it brutally," Wolfe said. "Insurance companies don't like to pay out near as much as they like to take it in."

"A lot of people die," Cherney said.

"They do," Wolfe agreed. "So what's your especial interest in Ware?"

"I don't think that's any of your business."

"I think it became my business after what you just said." He stared hard at Cherney, and the man's eyes dropped.

"Lorn was a friend of mine."

"Scholar Frazier said everybody on the team is friends."

Cherney snorted.

"I didn't believe it either," Wolfe said. "Unless there were twenty-three angels here."

"Not hardly."

"How special a friend was Ware to you?" Wolfe said, keeping his voice neutral.

"She was..." Cherney suddenly hiccuped, and turned away, blinking.

Wolfe waited until the big man turned back.

"Sorry," Cherney said. "I'm not used to things like this."

"Stay that way," Wolfe advised. "It's harder in the short run, but better." He didn't explain. "Go on."

"I thought a lot of her," Cherney said. "She was easy to talk to."

"Just talk?"

Cherney flushed. "Yes, dammit!"

"Her choice or yours?"

"Hers," the man grudging. "I wanted...wanted what I never got."

"How much did that bother you?"

Cherney started to get angry again, caught himself. "Quite a lot," he said. "I'm being honest. I lost my wife and son in a stupid accident two years ago. Saw the Univee was hiring for offworld, so I thought that'd get me out of things. Didn't think I'd get the job, but I guess scholars always need somebody who knows which end of a wrench fits your hand.

"Lorn used to come down here and talk. Suppose she wanted somebody to talk to who wouldn't rank on her. Which I didn't. But I guess I thought more of what was going on than she did."

"Rank on her?"

"Lorn and Tranh Van are...were...still working on their degrees, so they were the dot and carry types for the expedition," Cherney

went on. "I guess Lorn didn't realize what a pain in the ass scientists can be, not wanting to do anything outside their specialty, especially if it involves physical work.

"Lorn never had time for her own specialty."

"Photography?"

"Hell no. That was something Frazier decided she'd be good at. She's taking her degree in alien psychology, but Toni Acosta...that's Scholar Acosta to anybody lower-ranking than God or Frazier...keeps anything in that area, Al'ar or people, welded solid.

"So it was go here, do this, clean that, and Lorn was getting sick of it."

"Did it show?"

"Damned right it did. She was worried Tregagle was going to ship her back on the next resupply. The exec'd had more than a couple of what she called guidance sessions with Lorn."

"What was Lorn Ware like?"

Cherney considered. "I thought she was the prettiest, nicest thing I'd ever met," he said softly, and again had to find control. "But I'll be honest, Wolfe.

"There were those who don't...didn't agree. They thought she was a little too one-way. She was very determined to make it big, and didn't have much use for anyone who wouldn't...or couldn't...help her."

"Like you?" Wolfe's tone was equally soft.

Cherney jerked as if struck, growled, and a fist balled.

Joshua's right leg moved back half a foot, and his hands curled slightly. He was suddenly in a barely-noticeable crouch.

But Cherney's hands opened, and his shoulders slumped instead. "Yeah," he said tonelessly. "I guess like me. I just wish she hadn't tried so hard. Maybe..."

He was silent for a moment, then looked up at Joshua.

"But maybe not. There's your lift, Mister. Sign

the tripticket and logbook before you take it out."

Wolfe sat on the plinth of the shattered Al'ar monument, staring up at the transmission tower the backblast had reportedly come from.

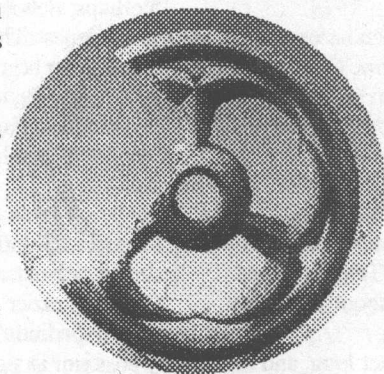
He looked at a small holo in his hand. A young woman sat in a sidewalk café in some city. It was summertime wherever the holo had been taken, because the woman wore stylishly-baggy shorts and a twin-vee top over small breasts. Lorn Ware.

Yes, pretty, Wolfe thought. Perhaps 25 E-years. Hair cut efficiently short, like most of the other scientists. Expression half-smiling, as if she'd been complimented before the shutter opened. Wolfe couldn't read anything else from her face.

He rested his head on one hand, closed his eyes, let his Al'ar-trained senses reach out.

The wind tasted bitter, like the past, too well remembered. Very faintly, it brought a mind-scent of a time long ago, when he had been a student of Al'ar ways, when he'd earned the Al'ar name, One Who Fights From Shadows.

Then war had come, and he'd been first their prisoner, then one of their most deadly foes, striking from nowhere, deep inside their systems.



Absolute Magnitude

At the war's height, the Al'ar had vanished, leaving their home planets in perfect order, and Man's galaxy a shatter of planets and ships, a galaxy that only now, eight years later, the Federation was beginning to put back together.

Outside the Federation were the lawless Outlaw Worlds, and beyond them the empty Al'ar systems.

A-6343-5 was between the Al'ar and the Outlaw worlds.

Joshua *felt* back into the past, *felt* for the Al'ar, almost saw their corpse-white forms as they built the towers. His most terrible enemies and his best...

His eyes blurred for an instant, and he wiped a sleeve across them, ignored the knife-force of the past.

Emptiness came, then he *felt*, very faintly, Man's arrival. The presence grew stronger, and he sensed Ware's presence. For an instant there was something else, then a flash of agony and the long swirl down into death.

He forced his mind back, *feeling* for that something else.

Wolfe stood, looked again at the transmission tower, then walked slowly to the broken monument.

He ran a hand across the blast-shattered stone, then looked out at the empty desert.

"Cute," he murmured. "Very damned cute indeed."

He smiled, but his smile was not pleasant.

Wolfe had been inside one of the Al'ar hidden bases twice, once when the Al'ar still held it. Even now, eight years later, his skin still crept, his arms wanted to be cradling a heavy blaster, and his senses reached for some warning before an Al'ar came from nowhere to kill him.

He felt sweat on his temples, unobtrusively wiped it away.

No one noticed — they were watching the woman 75 feet above move from handhold to alloy handhold toward the control deck about ten feet distant from her. The climber was Scholar Tregeagle, and Wolfe began to believe what Frazier had said about her vast competencies.

The chamber was enormous, more than a kilometer long, and as high, filled with glittering machinery, silent now, but looking like they needed no more than a signal to growl into life.

They were nearly two miles underground, and had descended on an antigrav generator crudely welded into an Al'ar descent tube that no one had been able to activate.

There were half a dozen scientists in the chamber beside the zebra-painted "mole" that floated two feet above the deck. The robot bobbed slightly in a stray air current, and Wolfe thought it was eager to be released to hunt deeper into the cavern after more Al'ar secrets.

"What do you think that is up there, Raoul?" Scholar Frazier asked, and Wolfe wondered why he didn't use the man's title.

"I'm not sure," a bearded man said. "I hope it's adjustment controls for the grid. Maybe I can figure out from there what's causing these frigging backblasts."

Scholar Frazier moved closer to Joshua. "That's Scholar Northover, our electronics man."

Wolfe nodded, wondered why Northover wasn't up there with Tregeagle instead of trying to figure out the Al'ar machinery from a distance.

Tregeagle reached for a stanchion, pulled herself onto the deck. There was a spattering of applause, and the woman bowed elaborately.

Joshua ate without talking, feeling eyes touch him, flinch away when he raised his head. He'd been introduced around by Scholar Frazier's deputy, Tregeagle, before the meal. A few scientists had tried cautious, nervous questions about what was new or interesting in the Federation, quickly dropped when they learned Joshua was based in the Outlaw Worlds, sectors they evidently thought were made up of murderers, barbarians and the déclassé.

Not far wrong, Wolfe thought. *Which is why I like them.*

He finished his meal, took the plate to the cleaning station at the end of the messhall. There were no scraps left from the processed protein slab the hand-scribbled menu had called "Meaty Surprise," nor from the vegblok that'd accompanied it.

Wolfe scrubbed the plate with waterless detergent, held it under the rinser for a second, then placed it in the nearby rack.

He leaned back against the wall and waited patiently until most of the scientists were looking at him.

"I just wanted to offer my apologies," he said, not sounding apologetic at all, "but it'll be necessary for me to interview each of you singly about the unfortunate accident." He put a deliberately artificial smile on his face, wiped it away.

"Saying that I feel like some sort of policeman," he said, and his eyes swept the narrow messhall. He didn't see the response he'd hoped for. It had been a cheap shot in the dark at best.

"Perhaps, Scholar Tregeagle, I could use your office." Again, it wasn't a request. The woman nodded.

"The quicker begun, the quicker ended," he said. "Scholar Acosta, if you'd be willing to go first?"

The small woman pursed her lips, then got up.

"Very well," and bustled out of the room, leaving Joshua to trail in her wake.

If Frazier reminded Wolfe of a woodpecker, Toni Acosta was a shrike, a butcher-bird. Within a few moments, she'd shredded Scholar Frazier ("nice enough, but years beyond being able to head an expedition"); her compatriots ("largely idiots who bussed every posterior in sight for their postings," and the dig itself ("poorly organized from the outset, oriented toward gadgeteering and gimmickry instead of analyzing and understanding the Al'ar psychology, which should be the real beginning and purpose of any investigation."); and left the blood-dripping remains impaled on branches for later savories.

Joshua noted his mind was running to Earth-bird analogies, and wondered if he was homesick. He shuddered involuntarily, which answered his question, and turned back to business.

"Your opinions are interesting, Scholar Acosta," he said. "What about your colleague?"

"You mean student Ware? Hardly my colleague."

"What was your opinion of her?"

"Utterly incompetent, like almost everyone studying psychology these days."

"Strong condemnation."

"Piddle," Acosta snapped. "Hardly nasty enough for these numbwits with addled psyches, trotting around trying to bring everyone down to their level, hoping that'll enable them to understand their own sewer-pipe thinking."

"You're generalizing."

Acosta looked at Wolfe sharply. "Perhaps," she said slowly, "I should be more careful with my words. But what an interesting choice

of words. Clerk-interviewers don't generally think in those terms nor use words like generalizing. Are you what you seem?"

"As the cliché goes," Wolfe said, "what you see is what you get."

"But perhaps not everyone sees you the same."

Wolfe nodded his head a bare inch.

"My specific objection to student Ware," Acosta said, "was she was more interested in self-advancement than learning. By that I mean she was the sort who'd come up with a flashy explanation for a series of events to attract the greatest attention, rather than spending any amount of time *thinking* about the events she'd observed before theorizing.

"I would expect, if she'd lived, she would have become a sudden wonder in the Federation, publishing some book that would neatly explain why men don't get along with women, or why women should do without men, or something of that sort."

"Was she any good at photography?"

"Who knows? She was such a snoop, always looking after other people's business, that I thought Mikela...that's Scholar Tregeagle...assigned her those duties to keep her busy. You know, I caught her going through my files once, although she said she was just looking for a paper I'd written on Al'ar life-patterns. But after I told her to get out of my office I found she was prying into my personal files, which I keep well-guarded, I might add.

"I always wondered who else's secrets she tried to pry into. If she'd died some other way, say a mysterious fall down in the caves, well, I don't know what I might be thinking.

"I suppose there's a bit of validity to the notion a psychologist isn't much better than a nosy-one at best, but she took things to an extreme."

Something Acosta had said earlier struck Wolfe.

"A couple of minutes ago you used two unusual examples of what Ware might write about in the future, why men don't get along with women, or why they should do without men. Were those deliberately chosen?"

"No," Acosta said quickly. "They merely jumped to mind. But after all, do *men* get along with women? What's your feeling on the matter?"

Wolfe didn't answer, but kept his gaze on the psychologist. Her eyes met his, darted away.

"Yes, I lied about Lorn Ware," Mikela Tregeagle said, sounding undisturbed. "I certainly would have sent her home on the next resupply ship, and the evaluation I'd send to her department head at Univee would not have been good.

"I lied because she is dead, and her father...he's a widower, by the way...should be allowed to mourn his daughter without any qualifications. *De mortuis nil*, and all that."

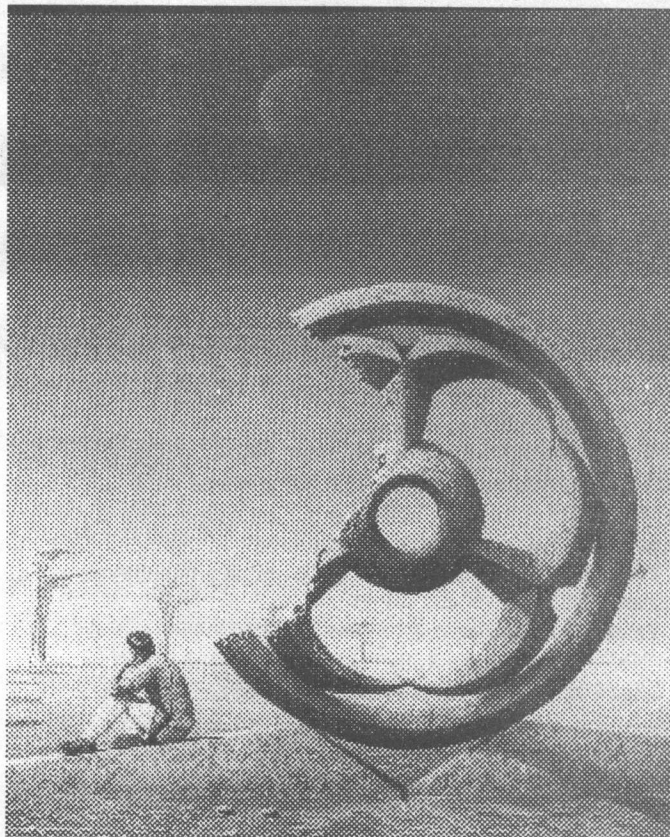
"What were her problems?"

"Mister Wolfe, I don't see why you're so interested in Lorn Ware's character or lack of same. I should think you'd restrict your inquiry into the accident that killed her, and, speaking personally, I wish you'd put in a request for more safety equipment for our team, to prevent further occurrences of this nature.

"We should be able to conduct all testing, all exploration of this base without human involvement, but we only have that single mole.

"Heaven knows what sort of boobytraps the Al'ar could have set down there, that're still armed and waiting."

"That's a valid concern," Wolfe said. He'd almost died a dozen times coming too close to alien leave-behind death devices. "But, to



be honest, I was asked to provide full details about this person. I'm not sure, but I think my company is considering involving itself more closely in these expeditions from the outset.

"I suspect they feel accidents are as much made as just happen."

"What, the old evil saw that people determine their own fate?," Tregeagle said. "Leave it to an insurance company to drag that one up."

Wolfe shrugged. "I'm not even their full-time employee, Scholar Tregeagle. Just a day laborer."

"Scholar...poo," Tregeagle said, and her brilliant smile came. "Some of us...like Scholar Acosta...love titles more than we perhaps should. I don't care. Call me Mikela."

"Certainly," Wolfe said. "Would you mind being a bit more specific about Ware's failings?"

"If you don't attribute them to me, I shall. First she was extraordinarily ambitious, to the point I felt she'd do whatever was necessary to advance her career."

"You're not the first to tell me that."

"I'm hardly surprised you already knew that," Tregeagle said. "It was patently obvious to almost everyone."

"I'd guess Dov Cherney wouldn't be part of that almost everyone."

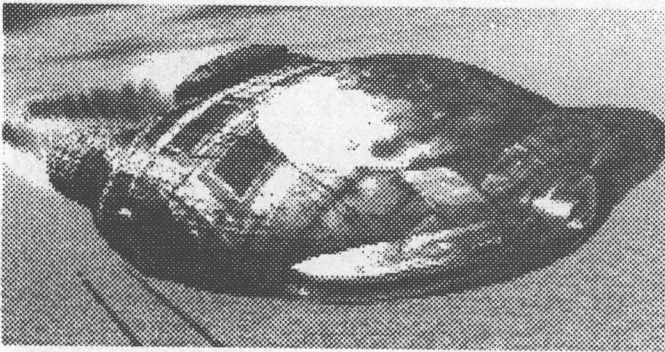
"No," Tregeagle said. "No, he wouldn't. What she did, or perhaps tried to do to him, is an example of my second criticism of Lorn. She wanted everyone to like...perhaps love her.

"She was willing to go to any extreme to make that happen."

"Cherney told me she just used him as a confessional. He wanted more, but didn't get it, he said."

"Well, if Dov told you that, I'll choose to believe him. Why not? The truth wouldn't matter anyway," Tregeagle sighed. "Poor Dov. He

Absolute Magnitude



surely deserved... deserves... better. Personally, I'll put what Lorn did to him as another reason to dislike her."

"It takes two to make a relationship," Wolfe suggested. "If she didn't want to play, that doesn't make her a villain."

Mikela's eyes took his, held them for an instant. Then her smile came again. "Of course not," she murmured.

"Were there any complaints about Ware prying into other people's business?"

Tregagle looked startled.

"No," she said emphatically. "Why? Has anyone..."

"Just a standard question," Wolfe reassured her smoothly.

Expedition custom, Wolfe learned, was to stay up as late as you could, for Five's night was almost endless.

He waited in the cleaned-out store-room he'd been given for a sleeping chamber until his timesend read 2700 hours, then slipped out into the dimly-lit corridor. The base was silent except for the hum of humidifiers, heaters, and the bedroom corridors were closed.

Wolfe carried a towel and soap container as a support for a possible thin alibi that he was looking for the refresher and couldn't find it.

He stopped at one door, hearing the groans of someone deep in a nightmare, noted the nameplate—Northover, the electronics specialist—for a possible inquiry into the nature of dreams, went on.

Ware's room was locked. Joshua took a flat finger-sized bit of plas from a pocket, held it to the keyhole, fingered a sensor. The pick vibrated in his hand, and the lock opened.

He went in, slid the door closed, touched the light sensor.

The room was a near-duplicate of his—folding bed, desk, book/fiche case, keyboard and screen, and a partial 'fresher in an alcove. The room had been stripped bare, and Ware's possessions were in a case and a metal-bound trunk on the bed. Both were sealed with straps.

Joshua selected the trunk, and took a small case from his pocket. He took a pair of tiny snips from it, cut through the metal as if it were paper.

The trunk held what he wanted—fiches, a few battered books, and Ware's papers. He rifled through them like the professional thief he'd been trained as, set some aside for immediate attention, others for later investigation.

Two hours later, he had something interesting. It was an expensive leather book, inscribed, in masculine handwriting:

To Lorn

I wish I could be there with you, but I can't, so write about everything so you won't forget to tell me everything. Love you

Da

The diary's paper was rich-feeling, hand-laid. Wolfe leafed through it, scanning entries. The first dozen or so pages were filled with careful handwriting, obediently listing everything that happened to Lorn Ware on her arrival on Five. Then the entries grew less and less, made days apart.

Joshua half-smiled. She was no better at a journal than he was. He turned a few pages, and stopped. Pages had been roughly torn from the book, more than a dozen of them.

He held the book up to the light sideways, saw the dent of writing on the unripped pages.

Amateur night, he thought. *Destroying the whole book would've been a lot—*

The door smashed open and Dov Cherney was on him, swinging a torque bar nearly a meter long.

Wolfe rolled sideways, and the bar crashed into Ware's trunk. Joshua snap-kicked to his feet as Cherney whipped the bar sideways at his waist.

Joshua's hand blurred, and he had the burly man's wrist in one hand, and the bar spun out of Cherney's grip. Wolfe's hand twisted, and the sound of the bone snapping was loud in the small room.

Cherney screamed and Joshua stepped into him, backhanded a knuckle-strike to the man's forehead, and Cherney, and smashed back against the wall.

Joshua recovered as Cherney collapsed half-on, half-off the bed.

Moments later, there were people in the doorway. One was Frazier. Just behind him was Scholar Acosta.

"Put him somewhere safe," Wolfe ordered. "And have everyone assembled in the messhall in an hour.

"It's time for a chat."

The signal had come two weeks earlier. Wolfe had finished a moderately nasty piece of business on Vavasour IX involving a man who'd run away from his wife with his company's assets and his teenaged stepdaughter.

The *Grayle* hummed through N-space, and Wolfe drowsed over a battered book.

Half his mind was on the ancient rhythms:

"And the lotos rose quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light,
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty..."

He was considering his penthouse on Carlton VI, the dry shudder of the martini he seldom allowed himself when he was operational, the raw beef seasoned with olive oil, capers and cheese, and what sort of Armagnac he'd finish the meal with.

He next thought about the company he might choose on that night, but set that aside. Carlton VI was still too far away for indulgences like that.

The com buzzed.

Wolfe set the book aside, went out of the master cabin, up steps to the bridge.

He studied the symbols on the screen, touched sensors. After a time the screen cleared, then read:

CALL TO BE RETURNED IN ONE E-HOUR. STAND BY.

Joshua went to the galley. He dropped a brownish chunk from one freezer into a stone bowl, took bread and cheese from a stasis-locker,

Backblast

carved off two pieces, put one in the bowl, buttered the other, grated cheese on top of it, and clipped the bowl into a slot in the oven. He set the oven, pressed a sensor.

By the time he'd cut two wedges of cheese, the smell of the French onion soup filled the galley.

He returned to the master cabin for his book, went back to the galley. When the soup was ready he ate slowly, intent on his reading.

He cleaned his dishes, returned to the bridge and sat in front of the screen for the few minutes remaining. He showed no sign of impatience, his face quite expressionless.

The com burped static, and RECEIVING scrolled across it.

"Wolfe," a neutral voice came.

"Yes," Joshua said. "No picture?"

"No picture."

"I'd appreciate some authentication, then."

"Golightly Seven Quill Quill."

Wolfe's eyebrows lifted slightly.

"Didn't know that was still current."

"It isn't," the voice said. "We keep it active for a few old-timers we call on every now and then."

"I'm listening."

"An agent just got dead on an archeological dig. We don't know if it was an accident or not."

"Where?"

"One of the Al'ar pioneer worlds. A-6343-5."

"Name?"

"Lorn Ware. She was going to Havelmar University. She'd already done some contract work before she went to school. Nothing serious, just the standard take a vacation among the stars and deliver a package sort of thing. She did all right, so we kept her on the possible list.

"She initiated contact this time, and said she was having trouble paying tuition and did we have anything.

"This dig on Five had just come up, and we like to keep track of anything that goes on around any of the Al'ar worlds, so we suggested she might want to apply for the job. Since it's Federation funded, it was simple to make sure she got it."

"Does anybody on the expedition know she's Intelligence?"

"Negative. Not even the director or the Univee itself."

"You sure?"

"Dammit, Wolfe, don't you think we know how to run a clean op?"

"No," Wolfe said. "I don't."

There was silence for a moment, then harsh laughter.

"Allah's teeth, but Cisco warned me you were a rough cob."

"How is he?"

"Fine. Said to say he still thinks you're a shit."

"Compliments flow when the elite meet," Wolfe said. "What're you willing to pay for me to investigate?"

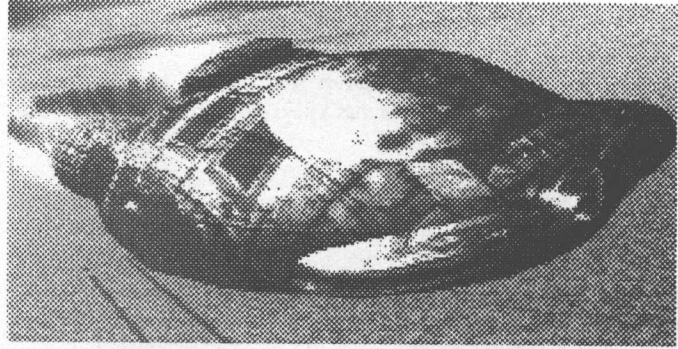
"Don't suppose I can call on your patriotism," the voice said.

Wolfe remained silent.

"I understand you've still got some kind of reserve commission," the voice tried next. "We could always recall you."

"You could always try."

"For the first time, I'm starting to agree with something Cisco thinks," the voice said. "All right. Federation Intelligence agrees to pay you whatever your standard per diem is, plus all expenses, plus thirty thousand credits when you turn in your report."



"That's a little steep for something you think might be an accident."

"Wolfe," the voice said, "we treat anything that's even *vaguely* connected to the Al'ar like it's radioactive.

"You know that."

Twenty faces looked at Wolfe in various stages of bewilderment, sleepiness and vague anger.

"Where's Scholar Acosta?" Wolfe asked.

"Probably thinks this is beneath her," Raoul Northover said. Someone chuckled.

"I'll get her," Mikela Tregagle said, and left the room.

"I said before I wasn't happy feeling like some sort of a policeman," Wolfe began. "I didn't and don't. But for all purposes, from now on you might as well consider me a Federation official, properly constituted, and—"

A scream from outside interrupted him.

Wolfe was the first into the corridor. The tube blaster was in his hand.

Tregagle stood in the doorway to Acosta's office, shaking, sobbing.

Joshua pulled her out of the way, looked in.

The shriek had impaled her last victim.

Scholar Toni Acosta was sprawled next to her desk, chair overturned beside her. Her face was purple, twisted, and Joshua smelt shit.

A triple-stranded wire was twisted deep into her neck.

"That saved me some elaboration about my exact credentials," Wolfe said flatly an hour later. "But you can assume they're legitimate."

Acosta's body had been moved to a cold-locker, next to the store-room Cherney had been barricaded in, and the team reassembled in the messhall.

"Scholar Acosta was murdered, of course," Wolfe went on. "As was Lorn Ware.

"From here on," he said, "things are going to get very bumpy indeed."

"Sorry, Wolfe," Northover said, not sounding sorry at all. "But there's no way the Ware kid could have been murdered.

"Not unless you either think the Al'ar leave ghosts behind or that somebody's figured out how to aim those goddamned backblasts."

"I'm not thinking either one," Wolfe said. "I know how Ware was killed, and you aren't close."

Absolute Magnitude

"I should suppose that's a relief," Northover said, "since I've been the man at the start switch on all the grid tests."

"Which means you're alibied."

"So is everyone else," Northover said. "I hate to shatter your cleverness, Wolfe. But the test that killed Ware happened at 1700, exactly."

"So the report said."

"We're a tiny team," Northover went on. "When anything important happens...and there's nothing more important than trying to make that power grid work...everyone has a job. A job where he's either in full view of somebody else, or else he's monitoring instruments and recording the results."

"That means every single one of us!"

"So if Lorn Ware was murdered...who did it?"

"And I'm not going to believe anything you come up with about two or more people working together, either."

The wind was stronger when Wolfe grounded the gravlifter beside the monument, keening sadly, and sending an occasional whisper of sand across the stone.

Northover and Wolfe got out of the lifter, and Wolfe took him to the monument.

"You see that stake with the red handkerchief on it?" Wolfe said.

"That's where Ware had her equipment set up."

"I saw it before," Northover said. "And I went over the site carefully."

"Not carefully enough," Wolfe said. "Or you would've noticed something. Take a good look at the monument. The blast tore hell out of it, right?"

"Obviously," Northover said. "I do have eyes."

"Use them, then! Look at the edges of the stone, where the blast hit. See the angle? That angle goes straight out into the desert, away from the transmission tower!"

The wind was suddenly very loud to the bearded scientist.

"Christ with a spanker," he said finally. "It sure as hell is. So the blast came..."

"From out there. Don't bother running a backplot," Wolfe said. "I already did. There's a nice big rocky outcropping, perfect for landing a gravlifter on, and for hiding footprints."

Northover swiveled, looked back, beyond the stake.

"Sure," Wolfe said. "If you dug up sand from the impact area and analyzed it — assuming you've got the right instruments — I'll bet you'll find that 'backblast' was nowhere near the wavelength the Al'ar used for their power-casts."

Northover was looking back and forth.

"Okay," he said finally. "I'll buy into it. But how was it done? Some kind of robot device?"

"From where?" Wolfe asked bleakly. "One of you brought it with him...or her? I'm supposed to believe that one of you is some kind of ex-saboteur or something and capable of rigging something like that from a handful of wire and bellybutton lint?"

"Sorry. I've read the background files on everybody here. Nobody qualifies."

"Even if I believed that, there'd be another problem. Assume there was some kind of blaster with a timer that somebody managed to pre-aim, knowing *precisely* where she was going to set up her recorders."

"She walks into position, the timer goes off, and she gets spattered. That's known as having God in your lap, and I'm an atheist."

Wolfe suddenly noticed Northover was a little white. "My apologies," he said. "I forget some of us are still civilized."

"Never mind," the scientist said. "Go on."

"Then, after Ware's dead, our murderer comes back here, unobserved, secures her gear and scoots before anybody arrives. The body was supposedly found about 1830 or so. That whole plot sounds like some kind of romance, and I'm not romantic any more," Wolfe said.

"You're right," Northover said thinking for awhile. "We were all together, talking about the test afterward, and then somebody...I think it was Cherney...said Ware was missing, and we went looking for her. Not enough time."

"But dammit, Wolfe, we are all accounted for at 1700!"

"Every single bleeding one of us!"

66 **S**on of a bitch, squared," Joshua muttered. "Cubed." It was a day and a half later, very late at night, and Northover was still right.

Wolfe had made up twenty little cards with each team member's name and where they were supposed to have been at 1700 hours, when the test was made and Ware died, and had them laid out on his tiny desk. For 15 minutes before and after the blast, everyone was well accounted for.

Allright. Consider all options. Was Ware in fact killed just at 1700? Of course, because she had to be at her recorders when the test was made. She wouldn't necessarily have been there a few minutes before or afterward. The killer had to have her at a precise spot at a precise time. That suggests some kind of robot, doesn't it, Wolfe? But then somebody would've had to pick the fiendish thingie up afterward, and there wasn't time for that, so that's out.

But why was she killed at precisely 1700?

At 1700, Wolfe realized, everybody including the killer, would be ostentatiously accounted for. The precision was for the alibi, not the murder.

Which gives me absolute zip-null!

He glowered at the cards, and there was a gentle tap at the door. He swept the cards into a drawer.

"It's not locked," he said.

The door opened, and Mikela Tregagle came in. She wore a white blouse, with two buttons at the throat undone, and close-fitting fawn pants. She was barefoot.

"I guess you and I are the only ones still up," she said, closing the door behind her. "I tried to sleep, but my mind keeps working, keeps remembering, and I thought maybe I'd mix myself some milk. It's a pity that Juan keeps a dry camp, or I'd be looking for a drink."

"Then I saw your light on under the door, and thought I'd intrude."

"You're not intruding," Wolfe stood, and slid his chair toward. "Here. Take a pew."

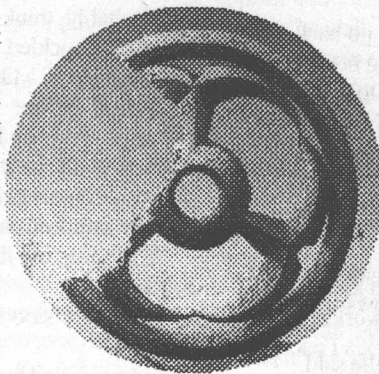
"I'll sit over here," she said, and sat on the bed.

"I'd offer you something," Wolfe said, "if I had anything."

"I'm all right," Mikela said. She looked away from him, at the wall.

"So what happens next, Joshua? Aren't you going to run out of questions soon?"

"Possibly."



Backblast

"Then what?"

"The Federation ship we sent for'll have specialists aboard. They'll take over."

"And what'll you do then?"

Wolfe didn't answer.

"Go back into the night like the mysterious being you are?"

"I'm not mysterious."

"Oh, but I want you to be," she said, lying back on the bed.

"Everyone thinks field work is glamorous. If they really knew. You spend a year or so sucking up to anyone with money who's a scientist hopeful for funding, which is never enough to do it right.

"Then you go out with the same people, the same faces you've been on eight, ten worlds with. Sometimes they're friends, sometimes maybe they were even lovers, maybe now they're enemies.

"You've heard all their jokes, all their stories, and they know all yours as well.

"About the only real pleasure is finding something new, and what the hell are we finding here? Another goddamned Al'ar base, and the only mystery is there's nothing at the far end, so far, although I know we'll find something sooner or later.

"Otherwise this is no different than what, seven or eight identical bases?"

"We'll be out here for another year, maybe two, then go back to the Univee and spend another two years making everything neat and tidy and publishable so all our enemies can have something to throw rocks at.

"Then I start trying to raise money again for wherever Juan wants to go next, and the cycle begins all over again."

"In the wrong light, anybody's job looks crappy," Wolfe said, feeling like a sententious ass.

"Maybe...but I'm still glad you materialized, regardless of the circumstances. It gets tiresome when everybody knows everything about everyone."

"Everything except the most important thing," Wolfe said. "Who killed Lorn Ware and Toni Acosta."

"Oh, that'll come out, sooner or later," she said. "Which means it's maybe not the most important thing at all."

"What do you think is the most important thing?"

Tregeagle's fingers moved to her blouse, unfastened another button. She looked up at Joshua, and her eyes were bright, glittering. "For me," she said huskily, "right now, it's what it's like to kiss you."

"There actually might be an answer to that," Joshua said. He crossed to her, knelt beside the bed. Her mouth opened under his, and he cradled her head in one hand.

Her tongue slid into his mouth, her lips moved under his.

Joshua unbuttoned her blouse, pulled its tails out of her pants. Her breasts were firm, erect.

Her hand moved down, unfastened the snaps of her pants, pulled them open. She wore no underclothing.

"Yes," she breathed when the kiss ended. "I do want to know more about my stranger."

“So you still don't have any idea who the murderer could be,” she said, much later, in the near darkness. They were still joined.

“Lots of ideas,” Wolfe said. “None worth thinking about, let alone mentioning.”

“I tried to play detective this afternoon,” Mikela said. “What about the idea that Dov Cherney killed Lorn, and then somebody else killed Acosta?”



Absolute Magnitude

"Two killers among 20 people? Aren't we supposed to be shaving with Occam's Razor?"

"Oh well," Tregagle sighed. "I guess I'll stick to being a dig-and-delver. Speaking of which," and she wriggled against him, "I do like your delver."

"Thanks," Joshua said, and kissed her. "Delving with you isn't a bad way to spend an evening."

"Morning. It's very late," she said.

"Yes."

"Aren't you sleepy?"

"Not very. But shouldn't you be thinking about going back to your room? I'd rather keep our business our business."

"In a while," Mikela said. "As for anyone knowing, you don't know how things work on an expedition. Everybody probably knows everything, like I said. But when it comes to sex, everybody pretends not to know."

"But you're right. It might complicate things. And there's at least one somebody I'd just as soon not have know."

"Although what he'd do about it..."

She stopped. Wolfe waited, but she didn't continue. He caressed one breast, tweaked her nipple until it was firm, and her breathing quickened. She lifted one leg across his thighs, moaned as he moved slowly, steadily in her.

66 **D**ov," Wolfe said calmly, "I know you didn't kill Scholar Acosta. But what about Lorn Ware?"

Cherney stared at him through the swollen purple ruin of his face. His forearm was shrouded in a plascast. "You wouldn't believe me if I said no, so yeah, I killed her. Killed both of them with my Al'ar deathtouch," he snarled.

"Thank you. Go back to your goddamned meditations," and Wolfe slammed the storeroom door a bit harder than he'd planned.

66 **I** get the idea you're groping at straws," Northover said. He sat in the middle of the gravlifter's front seat, eyes fixed straight ahead.

"I am," Wolfe admitted. "Do you have any other ideas?"

Northover shook his head. Wolfe steered the gravlifter toward the transmission tower, climbed until the craft was level with the second level.

"This was the first one that backblasted, right?"

"That's correct. But I don't know what you hope to find. I examined this tower closely from every angle, with as long a lens as I have. Whatever's causing these problems has got to be in the main generating apparatus, not on the tower."

Wolfe looked curiously at Northover.

"You checked this tower out from a distance? Why didn't you do

what we're going to do and land on it?"

"I don't think the arm would support something as heavy as a lifter," Northover said, not looking at Joshua.

"Come on, man. This is antigrav, remember? You could have a pilot hover the damned thing while you clambered around."

"I...couldn't. I can't."

"Why not? You don't weigh more than 45, 50 kilos."

Northover took a deep breath, looked away from Wolfe.

"I'm acrophobic," he said.

"Oh," Wolfe said. "That's why you had Tregagle shinnying up that wall in the cave instead of going yourself?"

"She...and Juan...Scholar Frazier...are the only ones who know. I told her when I first interviewed for the team, last expedition. She said it didn't matter, she couldn't see any reason an electronics analyst had to be a mountain climber."

"Then, when this project was presented, she remembered what she said, thought it was pretty funny, and said she'd do the climbing for me as recompense. Matter of fact, she did go out on the arms of this tower after the first backblast, but didn't find anything."

"I see."

"She's quite a woman. I've sometimes wished that I'd met her ten years ago."

"Why ten years?"

"That would've been before she met Juan, and fell in love with him."

"Oh?"

"They're lovers," Northover said. "At least they were, some years back."

"Why don't they partner in the open?"

"He's married."

"But obviously not faithful," Wolfe pressed.

"I don't know the reason. Maybe he's religious, or figures he's got some kind of duty to his wife, who I've never met. I'm pretty sure...hell, I flat know she still loves him. So why she does like she does...I don't know."

"But I've got enough trouble understanding my own life, so I don't have time for anybody else's."

"Why does she do what she does?" Wolfe asked.

"Never mind," Northover said. "I shouldn't have said what I did."

"Look, Wolfe. I've been trying to force myself, but I'm not going to be able to get out onto that arm, like you want."

"Don't worry about it," Joshua said. "You just sit where you are, and I'll tell you if I find anything. You tell me what it means."

"All right," Northover said. "But if I get a panic attack..."

"We'll drop down and ground the lifter immediately."

"All right. I'll try."

Wolfe brought the lifter close to the tower. The huge lower arm hung over him.

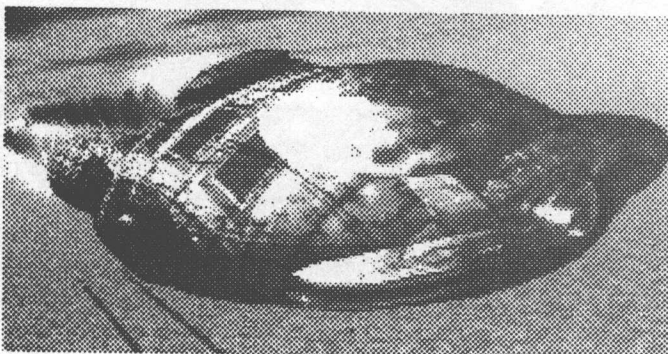
A light blinked on the lifter's instrument panel.

"Signal," Northover said. He picked up a mike, keyed it.

"Northover and Wolfe. Who's 'casting?"

The light went suddenly dead. Northover looked at Wolfe puzzledly, then shook his head. "Twenty damned people on this world, and we still get wrong numbers. Man and technology, the perfect union." Northover forced a laugh, clipped the mike back on its rack.

Joshua took climbing line from the back seat, tied it securely to the gravlifter's crashbar and gingerly stepped out onto the arm. He looked about for an anchoring point.



Backblast

"Will I hurt anything if I tie the lifter to one of these puppies?" He pointed to the row of round seven-foot-tall columns Frazier had theorized were used to fine-tune the power transmission to the receptors below.

"Nope," Northover said. "They're as solid as everything else Al'ar. Probably you could lift the tower by them."

Wolfe threw a double half-hitch around the column, anchoring the gravlifter, then made his way gingerly across the arm.

"This'll be interesting," he said. "Not knowing whether what I'm looking at is... what ho?"

"What is what ho?"

"Evidently you're wrong about these columns, and Scholar Tregeagle missed something," Joshua said. "They're a bit more fragile than you thought. Here's one that's worn through, right down at the base." He moved across the slippery alloy almost to the end of the arm, avoided looking at the long drop to the sands below, and knelt next to the column, examined the fault.

"Not worn through," Wolfe said. "Cut. Or maybe the weld or whatever joined it to the deck plating didn't hold. Correction. It had some help. There's hammer-strikes on the far side. On both sides, rather.

"Try this one, Northover. The column was cut, I don't know how recently, but I'll bet not long ago. Maybe by a blaster on narrow aperture? Then somebody hammered it out a ways, then back."

"I've seen holos of other towers on other planets," Northover said. "And gone over them a millimeter at a time. I've never heard of anything like this. The Al'ar didn't practice shade-tree engineering."

"No," Wolfe said. "But maybe somebody human does, who wanted to create a backblast."

"Why would anyone want to do that?"

"Let's go look at another tower," Wolfe said. "Then I'll try an answer."

He started toward the gravlifter, stopped as he heard, almost felt, a deep hum.

"Somebody's running the grid," Northover shouted. "Come on! We've got to get out of range!" He fumbled at the anchoring line. "Goddamit," he swore. "It won't come!" He jerked at the rope, further tightening the knots, then, in utter panic, jumped behind the controls of the gravlifter.

The hum was growing louder, and Wolfe felt his hair stand on end. The metal was more slippery than before, and Joshua felt like he was on ice. He forced his way, almost falling, toward tower the gravlifter was anchored to, just as Northover slammed thrust to the lifter's drive.

It jerked forward, the half-hitches held, and the gravlifter flipped, hurling Northover out.

He fell, screaming, but Joshua had no time for his death. The grid's power-hum was louder, and Wolfe felt pain grow, pain like his nerves were being stripped from his body.

He rolled over the side, dropped ten feet to the lower arm, found his feet. But that was no refuge. He remembered Frazier's explanation that the power would come up the angled arm from the "tanks" on the main tower.

He ran, nearly falling, to where it C-curved, slid down the curve, then leapt straight out, onto the top of the "tank." He almost fell, regained his balance, saw, hidden in the depths of the tower, notches that were some sort of service ladder.

He half-fell, half-jumped and had his hand in one notch, dangled as just above him, a series of violet fireballs slammed across the sky, dancing from tower to tower and the gravlifter exploded like a bomb.

The fireballs vanished.

Joshua swung, found another hand-hold, then his feet were in a notch. Quite suddenly his body spasmed. He held on until the reaction passed, then began the long, precarious climb down.

He'd walked almost two kilometers toward the base when the first gravlifter found him.

"Four dead now," Scholar Frazier moaned. "Gods, everybody wants to be famous, but not for something like this! And who'll be next?"

"We're huddled in our rooms waiting for the next murder, scared witless it'll be us."

"There won't be any more murders," Joshua said firmly. "Now sit down, and put yourself together. I've got some questions.

"First. That holograph of the house on the wall? Where's it located?"

"What? What the blazes does that have to do with anything?"

"Shut up and answer my goddamned question," Wolfe snapped. "Some bastard tried to kill me three hours ago, and did kill Northover. I'm the one who ought to be sitting there jellyfishing, not you!"

Frazier gasped a handful of breaths like they were the last ones promised. He looked at the architect's rendition of the lakeside mansion.

"This is absurd... but it's not anywhere. I'll never be able to afford something like that. My wife and I had it made as, well, a dream-scheme. She said maybe it'd be a good luck charm, or encourage me to make some great discovery and win the Nobel or the Federation Prix d' Découverte or something that's got a big fat wad of credits attached, and we'd find a lake and build our house.

"I kept telling her I'm not much more than a science-drudge, hardly a Schliemann or Vauxton, and I'll never be in the history books. But she keeps saying next time, next time I'll find something big." He smiled wistfully. "She's got more faith in me than I do."

"Evidently," Wolfe said. "Considering your affair with Mikela Tregeagle."

Frazier jolted. "How did you find out... who told you?"

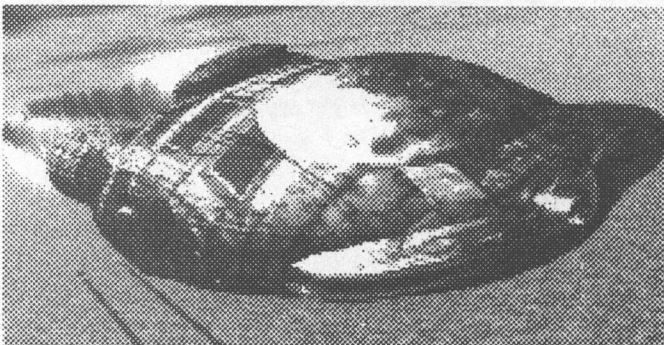
Wolfe didn't bother answering.

Frazier's face was red. "That was something I suppose shouldn't have happened."

"Happened?"

"Yes. It was three expeditions ago, and we'd been out a long time. Too long. I was getting discouraged, and Mikela has always been there for me. She was the one who raises the money, finds compatible team members, keeps everything smooth... really they ought to make her the expedition head.

"But she never wanted that, she told me." Frazier caught Wolfe's expression. "Sorry. I veered. Three expeditions ago, things happened



Absolute Magnitude

between us. The affair lasted until the project's end."

"Why did it end? Tregeagle looks at you like it's still going on."

"It's enough for you to know it's ended, isn't it?"

"No," Wolfe said, voice flat. "Talk."

Frazier swung around in his chair until he was facing out the port, back to Joshua. "I'm not worthy of her."

"Why not?"

"I'm... I'm impotent," he said, voice muffled. "I caught some kind of virus and... I'm completely incapable. No erection, no orgasm, not anything."

"So?" Wolfe was unimpressed. "Love isn't defined by just sex. Or perhaps love wasn't the reason you let the affair happen."

"Who knows why it started," Frazier snapped, turning back. "But I surely loved her... love her now. Can't you understand, Wolfe? I'm not a man any more. And now you're shaming me further."

"I've got a lot more sympathy for four corpses than for your lousy little ego," Wolfe growled.

"You're right," Frazier mumbled. "You're right. But you can sit there all day and tell me I'm a neurotic, but that doesn't change how I feel."

"That's the only reason I can't let myself object when Mikela does... does what she does."

"You mean sleep with other expedition members?"

Frazier nodded. His face held a pleading look. "I don't know. I really don't know for sure about that. I couldn't let myself think about that. Good God, Wolfe. How far down do you have to drag me?"

"Last question," Joshua said. "That ring you wear. The diamond's real, isn't it? As are the four, no five *falera*-stones. Where'd you get it?"

"It was a present," Frazier said.

"Who gave it to you?"

Frazier told him.

Joshua reached far under the desk, touched cold metal. He pulled, and the magnetic clip let go. Wolfe examined the small, rounded-edge square.

"And you thought you were a friggin' professional," he muttered in complete disgust.

The storeroom door slammed open, and Dov Cherney jerked up from his half-doze. Wolfe was across the small room, and picked him up by the throat.

"I've had enough bullshit," he said, his eyes hard, glittering. "Now, first I have a question. Then you and I are going to take a little walk and sit down with some nice friendly people."

"Get bent."

Wolfe whiplashed his knuckles twice across Cherney's face.

"I said, I have a question. You're going to answer it, or I'm going to smash that cast and break your goddamned arm so it'll never heal."

"Then I'll start on the other one."

"Don't even think you've got any legal rights now. I'm so far outside the law I could make you the fifth corpse and walk away without anyone saying one single word."

"Believe me, brother. You're going to talk to me."

"Now, here's the question. Lorn Ware wasn't sleeping with you. So who *was* she screwing?"

Joshua grounded the gravlifter just beyond the last transmission tower and shut off the drive. He clambered out, and walked away from the vehicle into the desert.

He let the silence build around him, entered it.

Again, the past whispered, again he *felt* the Al'ar presence.

Then it vanished, and there was nothing but the dry wind.

"Shit," he said to himself, almost in a whisper. "I should've known..."

He didn't finish the sentence, but got back in the gravsled, touched sensors. The drive purred alive, and he brought the lifter off the ground, spun it, and sent it fast along the line of towers, leaving a swirling line of sand behind him.

"*This is Joshua Wolfe,*" PA speakers and belt coms blared. "*All team members will assemble immediately in the messhall. That is an order from Scholar Frazier. I say again, assemble immediately.*"

A worried Frazier stopped Wolfe outside the messhall. "I went to get it, like you told me. But it's gone. Somebody took it."

Wolfe grunted. "Wonderful. Absolutely wonderful."

Joshua looked at the twenty scientists. Some looked scared, some worried, some curious. Dov Cherney glowered, Mikela Tregeagle sent a quick smile.

He stood behind a small cardtable. On it was a plas pitcher full of water, a glass, a recorder and something hidden behind the pitcher.

"We'll start at the beginning," he said. He held up the recorder.

"This is an official hearing, called by a properly constituted Federation law enforcement official under emergency circumstances."

"That official is myself, Colonel Joshua Wolfe, Federation Armed Forces."

There were a few gasps.

"I was originally sent here by Federation Intelligence to investigate the death of one of their operatives, Lorn Ware."

He sipped water.

"The reason for her presence doesn't need to be hidden. FI monitors all investigations into the Al'ar, for reasons I'm not privy to, but could theorize on. But that's of no matter."

"Ware was what we call a contract agent. She'd done some small jobs for FI, and wanted to keep on the payroll."

"Maybe she wanted prestige. Almost all of you have remarked on her ambition. Maybe she needed the money."

"Or perhaps she liked playing spy. She was, as some of you've told me, quite curious about things that weren't normally her concern."

"I don't know if she was constitutionally like that, or if she suspected something after the expedition reached A-6343-5."

"What the hell was there to suspect?" Frazier snapped.

"I'll get to that in a moment. Ware was, as I've said, ambitious. I don't know, and don't particularly care what her sexual preferences were."

"Dov Cherney was attracted to her, and was rejected."

"Mikela Tregeagle was not."

"Joshua!" Tregeagle was on her feet, her expression puzzled, hurt, the look of a proud mother watching a favorite child forget his recital lines. "That's not true!"

"Sit down, Mikela," Joshua's voice was gentle. She stared at him, then obeyed.

Backblast

"Yes, it is true," Wolfe went on. "I don't know what set Ware off. Maybe pillow talk. Or maybe I've got it all wrong, and Ware smelled something in the beginning, and Tregagle decided to find out how much she knew, and seduced her.

"Like she did me.

"As a sidenote, I'll add Tregagle also put a recorder in her own office after I stupidly decided to use it for my interviews. Mikela isn't a woman who leaves things to chance, it appears.

"In any event, Ware started looking for evidence. Evidence of large-scale embezzlement. Embezzlement that I'd suppose goes back for some years. That's a fairly serious criminal offense, and when the University will learn about it, there'll be civil trials I imagine.

"But this was a government expedition, funded by the Federation. And embezzling public funds is right up there with murder.

"Particularly when the whole investigation of these towers is specious. There's nothing out there under or near that last tower. I *know*, even though the way I acquired that knowledge isn't legally or scientifically admissible.

"I'll bet Mikela knew you were working a dry hole. Maybe some others did, too, but didn't say anything for fear the grant would be cut. Or maybe not. That's another paper trail for the lawyers."

People turned, craned at Tregagle. Mikela's eyes held on Joshua's face.

"How much was taken, and under what guises, I don't know," Wolfe continued. "There's many, from misreporting your salaries as greater than they are and pocketing the difference to fraudulent invoices from nonexistent contractors to whatever.

"Of course, the longer the project continued, the greater the opportunity.

"There are only two possible suspects. One is Scholar Juan Frazier. He probably didn't take very long for Ware to dismiss, with his poor little dream of someday having enough money to build a house by the side of a lake.

"That left Scholar Mikela Tregagle, who somehow had the money to buy Frazier an incredibly expensive ring. Maybe that's what caught Ware's eye. I don't know.

"Tregagle had access to *all* funds, not just the safe with petty cash, but everything. I'd suspect she's been stealing from the Univee for quite a few years, and this particular dig isn't her first adventure in larceny.

"Tregagle was the one who raised the money from the beginning, and set up the budget for each expedition, unaudited by anyone, least of all by her former lover, Frazier.

"Their affair, at least physically, stopped some time ago for reasons that don't matter. But the two stayed together.

"Perhaps Mikela still loves Frazier. Or perhaps she sees an easily-duped fool. Or perhaps she believes she loves him, and hides the hate even from herself. I'm hardly a psychologist, but that could explain her affairs. I wonder how many of you Mikela 'just happened' to encounter at a convenient place and time."

Wolfe saw eyes flicker in his audience, heard someone sigh.

"Ware began gathering evidence, snooping in any file, any computer, any fiche, she could access. And Tregagle caught her out. How much information Ware found, I don't know, nor do I know if Ware was able to conceal her evidence somewhere or if it was destroyed after her death.

"When Mikela Tregagle discovered the prying, Lorn Ware had to die.

"Now, if Scholar Tregagle were a common thug, an ordinary villain, she would have simply waited until she and Ware were alone somewhere, maybe underground in the Al'ar base next to a nice long fall, as Acosta suggested, and there would have been a terrible accident.

"But that was too easy, wasn't it, Mikela?"

The woman didn't answer, sat quite still with her hands folded in her lap, looking unblinkingly at Wolfe.

"She had to get cute. She came up with an elaborate scheme. First to cleverly sabotage the transmission towers to produce backblasts. I don't know how she learned that could be done, but I assume the prosecutor will find some paper she found.

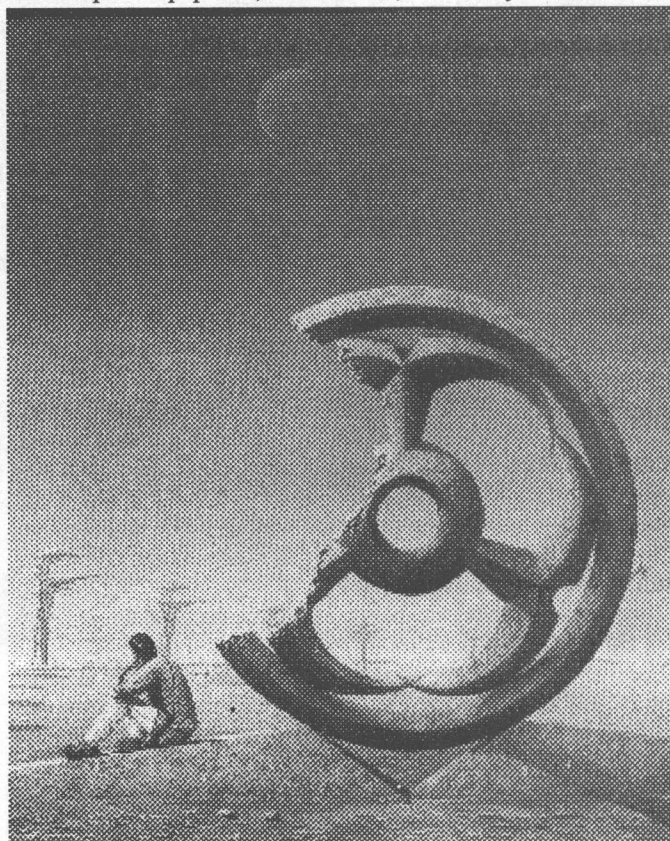
"Since Scholar Northover was an acrophobe, and Tregagle knew, that probably gave her the last piece to the plan.

"She visited the first tower, made certain cuts to the directional columns, and that produced a backblast to her complete satisfaction. Later she went back and hammered the columns back into place, so her sabotage was nearly unnoticeable. What were the odds of anyone actually landing on top the arms and examining them closely in any event?"

"Three more incidents, and everyone was convinced the power grid was very chancy, and anything could happen. She'd prepared the stage most carefully for her 'accident.'

"She'd already arranged for Lorn Ware to become the team photographer-recorder, and so, on this fifth trial, she no doubt had Frazier tell Ware to record the event, of course specifying that odd monument be in the picture for artistic reasons. Frazier doesn't remember things that way, but perhaps Federation interrogators will help his memory.

"Tregagle waited not far from the monument until Ware arrived and set up her equipment, then shot her, most likely with one of the



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heavy demolition blasters. I'd guess Tregeagle wasn't sure of her aim at that range, and wanted to make sure."

"Impossible," Frazier said. "If you're arguing she used the test-blast as a cover..."

"I am," Wolfe said.

"Then your whole theory falls apart. We were all together at 1700 hours, when Scholar Northover triggered the pulse."

"Agreed," Wolfe said. "But the murder happened a bit before then."

He pulled the straps of the timesend on his wrist free. The ripping sound was very loud.

"Nice gimmick," he said, turning the device in his hands. "Gives everyone a common signal. Or maybe not, if somebody has access to the transmitter in Frazier's office, and manually transmits a signal to one timesend, and the person on the other end sets up her equipment and moves carefully into the target zone exactly when she was ordered to.

"Right in line with a nice rock to stand on so there's no footprints, but a pity that monument's in the line of fire. Particularly when Tregeagle's shot cuts a nice hole in the monument that gives a clear line to the real line of fire.

"But Mikela's in a hurry, and doesn't notice. She gets her gravlift airborne, hauls back to base, and is where she's supposed to be well before the real 1700 rolls around.

"Cute," Wolfe said tiredly. "A little too cute."

He took the hidden object from behind the pitcher. It was his tube blaster. Holding it pointed down at the deck, he started toward Mikela.

Tregeagle jumped up, yanking the team's missing hand-weapon, an archaic blaster, from a leg pocket of her coverall.

"Oh no," she said. "Oh no. This is all a lie. And I don't listen to lies. I didn't listen to them from Lorn, I won't listen to them from you.

"Drop the gun, Joshua."

Wolfe's fingers opened, and the tube blaster clattered to the deck.

"Are you going to kill us all, Mikela?" Joshua said softly. "That's your only other option." He took a slow step toward her, then another.

His muscles were fluid, taut. His mind whispered: *wind, wind, unseen, unheard, behind you, beside you...*

A chair clattered. Dov Cherney was walking toward her, face frozen, lips moving silently, reaching for her with his one good hand. Mikela swung the gun on him, then she faltered, her eyes gaping.

Joshua Wolfe blurred, vanished.

She spun back, finger punching the firing stud. The gun bucked and blew a fist-sized hole in the back wall.

A blurred figure became Wolfe, diving forward and Mikela fired again, blast just over Wolfe's shoulders, and then she spun away, mountaineer's grace. Cherney had her for a moment, clumsily pulling her against his chest with his free arm.

She drove an elbow back, and doubled him as the blaster went flying. Tregeagle ran for the door. Frazier was up, hands bird-clawing at Tregeagle, trying to stop her. She shoulder-blocked him, and Frazier tumbled back over his chair.

Joshua scooped up his tiny blaster as Mikela slammed through the door. He went after her.

She was at the end of the corridor, at the outside door. She yanked it open, and he shot at her legs, drilled a thumb-sized hole in the doorway, and she was outside.

He ran to the door, booted it open. Tregeagle was running for one of the entrances to the Al'ar caverns.

"Stop!" Wolfe shouted. "There's nothing there!"

She veered, seeing the *Grayle* in the distance, gangplank extended, lock closed.

Wolfe knelt, braced, fired again, trying to wound her, but the close-range weapon sent its bolt a meter wide.

He ran after her, sucking harsh alien air, sand crunching under his feet.

But she was faster, clattering up the gangplank, smashing her fist again and again against the lock controls.

Over her head, unnoticed, one of the *Grayle's* weapons bays slid open, and the gleaming barrels of one of the ship's chainguns peered out.

It traversed downward. The wounded-dragon milli-second roar echoed across the desert as the ship followed Wolfe's orders and fifty three-quarter-inch collapsed uranium rounds shredded Mikela Tregeagle's body.

Joshua Wolfe stood over the mound that was as much a monument as Mikela Tregeagle would probably have.

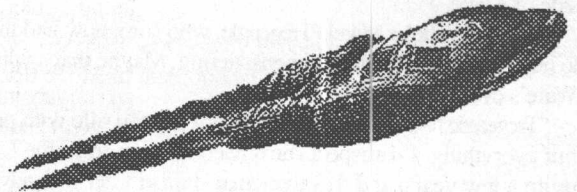
The members of the expedition stood knotted together, as if huddling against a winter gale. No one spoke. Then, one by one, they walked back, into the expedition's buildings.

No one had met his eyes, and no one spoke to him.

Wolfe waited until they were gone, then turned back to the grave. From memory, he quoted the ancient poet:

"The white flat face of Death, God's silent servant,
"And behind the face of Death the Judgement
"And behind the Judgement the Void, more horrid than active shapes of hell;
"Emptiness, absence, separation from God."

The dry wind and the silence swallowed his words.



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Letters Column

Dear Warren Lapine,

I am writing to thank you for issue #8 of *Absolute Magnitude*. As one who wouldn't normally be drawn to action/adventure SF (as opposed to more "serious"/psychological SF), I found your magazine to be a good read. I particularly enjoyed the serial by Shariann Lewitt. I was impressed and grateful to see so much space devoted to it.

Peter King
East Sussex
England

Dear Mr. Lapine,

I have been both a SF and fantasy fan for most of my life and I agree with your sentiments [editorial from *AM* #9] wholeheartedly. I currently subscribe to *F & SF*, *Absolute Magnitude*, *Pirate Writings*, and *Adventures of Sword and Sorcery*. Of the SF magazines I read, *Absolute Magnitude* is my favorite, for a number of reasons.

I also go out of my way to visit specialty stores and buy other magazines. I have recently bought *Nonstop*, *Analog*, *Asimov's*, and *Realms of Fantasy*. I have always believed that if you want something to happen, you have to stand up and take the reins. SF is full of heroes that have bent probability in their direction, through guts alone or sometimes sheer bravado. How can anyone read that much SF and not believe that destiny is in their own hands?

I have recently begun writing an editorial piece for an Internet domain called *Dragonsclaw*. The address is www.dragonsclaw.net. The name of the piece is "View from the Parapet." Issue 3 contained a full length review of *Adventures of Sword and Sorcery*, and Issue 4 will mention *Absolute Magnitude* in a very favorable light.

Small press and independent magazines deserve our support. Like the neighborhood stores that once lined the streets of Brooklyn where I live and that are rapidly disappearing, such magazines serve a purpose. It is here that many issues and topics that larger magazines wouldn't dare touch are brought to the forefront. It is here that writers and editors take chances that you just don't see in major

publications. It's the reason I became an SF fan in the first place.

Congratulations on a well conceived and well executed magazine. You have a subscriber for life.

Sincerely
Steve Lazarowitz
Brooklyn NY

—Steve, I couldn't agree with you more. I don't understand why so many of the movers and shakers of science fiction seem to accept the thought of defeat with aplomb. As far as I'm concerned, they'll have to drag me kicking and screaming away before I'll surrender. I believe in science fiction and I won't let up on trying to help bring about a second Golden Age.

Dear Warren

This is a first. I never thought I'd be welcoming a new nonfiction column. Currently, I subscribe to seven science fiction magazines—for the fiction. (The exceptions being science articles and editorials.) However, Steven Sawicki's column is an excellent addition to *Absolute Magnitude*. It will be very interesting to learn more about the semiprofessional and small press fields. Great idea!

I'm quite pleased to be one of your subscribers. Much good luck in the future.

Sincerely,
Ms. K.L. West
Mesa AZ

—Response to the column has been great. I'm more than happy to provide the service. It's time that the field looked after its own and stopped feuding. There's room for everyone.

Classified Ads

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