

Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction

DNA PUBLICATIONS

Autumn 2001

Issue #17

Allen
Steele

Chris
Bunch

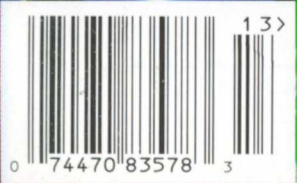
William
Sanders

Jamie
Wild

Mary
Catelli

Bart
Kemper

\$4.95 (5.95 Canada)



D. E. HARMAN '01

Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction

Autumn 2001

Issue #17

Fiction:

- The Law, in Its Majestic Equality** by Mary Catelli 5
Illustrated by Daniel Trout
- Fridays** by Jamie Wild 15
Illustrated by George Barr
- He Did the Flatline Boogie and He Boogied on down the Line** by William Sanders . . . 25
Illustrated by George Barr
- Incoming** by Bart Kemper 43
Illustrated by Joseph Bellofatto, Jr.
- The Stars Too Near** by Chris Bunch 49
Illustrated by Dominic Emile Harman

Features:

- Contributors Page** 2
- Primary Ignition** by Allen Steele 20
Facing Mars
- Book Reviews** 35

Cover art by Dominic Emile Harman.

Contributors

George Barr's artwork has appeared in *Fantastic Stories*, *Asimov's*, *Weird Tales*, and *Amazing*. He is one of the most experienced illustrators in genre fiction. He has also had short fiction published in *Pulphouse*, *MZB's Fantasy Magazine*, and *Weird Tales*. This is his third appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Joseph Bellofatto Jr.'s work has been appearing in magazines for years. He has done two *Absolute Magnitude* covers; this is his fourth appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Chris Bunch has written twenty three novels. He is best known for his Last Legion series available from Roc books. This is his seventh appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Mary Catelli has been published in a number of magazine including *Cricket*, *Tomorrow*, *Sword and Sorceresses XI and XIV*, *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, and will be appearing in *Fantastic Stories*. This is her first appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

John Deakins is a retired science teacher. He has one novel, from Roc, to his credit: *Barrow*.

Dominic Emile Harman is a British artist who has begun breaking into the U.S. market. His work has appeared in *Interzone* and *SF Age*. This is his sixth appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*. His cover for issue number twelve of *Absolute Magnitude* won best cover for 1999 in the Tangent website readers award.

Mike Jones is an contributing editor for *Absolute Magnitude* and does reviews for the Green Man website.

Bart Kemper is a professional photographer and this is his first professional fiction sale.

William Sanders is the author of more than fifteen novels, including *The Ballad of Billy Bad Ass* and *the Rose of Turkestan*, the Campbell nominated *Journey to Fusang* and *J.*, forthcoming from Warner Books. Sanders has been nominated for a number of awards. This is his first appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Allen Steele has been published in every major science fiction magazine. He's won two Hugo Awards and has eight novels and three short story collections to his credit.

Daniel Trout's work has appeared in *Mythic Delirium*; this is his first appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Jamie Wild makes his sixth appearance in the pages of *Absolute Magnitude*. He plays lead guitar, and occasionally sings badly, in a New York heavy metal band. He says he is trying to stay away from alternative rock and literary SF. "You can either sell out and try to impress people you don't like or have fun with it. I'm having fun!"

Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction

PUBLISHER/EDITOR IN CHIEF/ART DIRECTOR

Warren Lapine

ASSISTANT PUBLISHER

Angela Kessler

PUBLISHING ASSISTANT

John Perreault

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Allen Steele

Ian Randal Strock

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Mike Allen

Mike Jones

Catherine A. Reniere

ADAPTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

Joe Lazzaro

LAYOUT & DESIGN

Warren Lapine/Angela Kessler

DISTRIBUTORS

International Periodic Distributors

Cold Cut Comics

and others

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Get *Absolute Magnitude* delivered to your doorstep! Get four issues for only \$16. That's a savings of 25%. Make all checks payable to **DNA Publications, Inc.** U.S. funds only.

CORRESPONDENCE

We look forward to receiving your comments. All letters sent become the property of **Absolute Magnitude**. We reserve the right to edit and/or comment upon any letter included in the magazine. Correspondent's full address will not be printed except upon specific request. E-mail correspondence only—no manuscript submissions—to dnapublications@dnapublications.com. Visit us on the web at: www.dnapublications.com

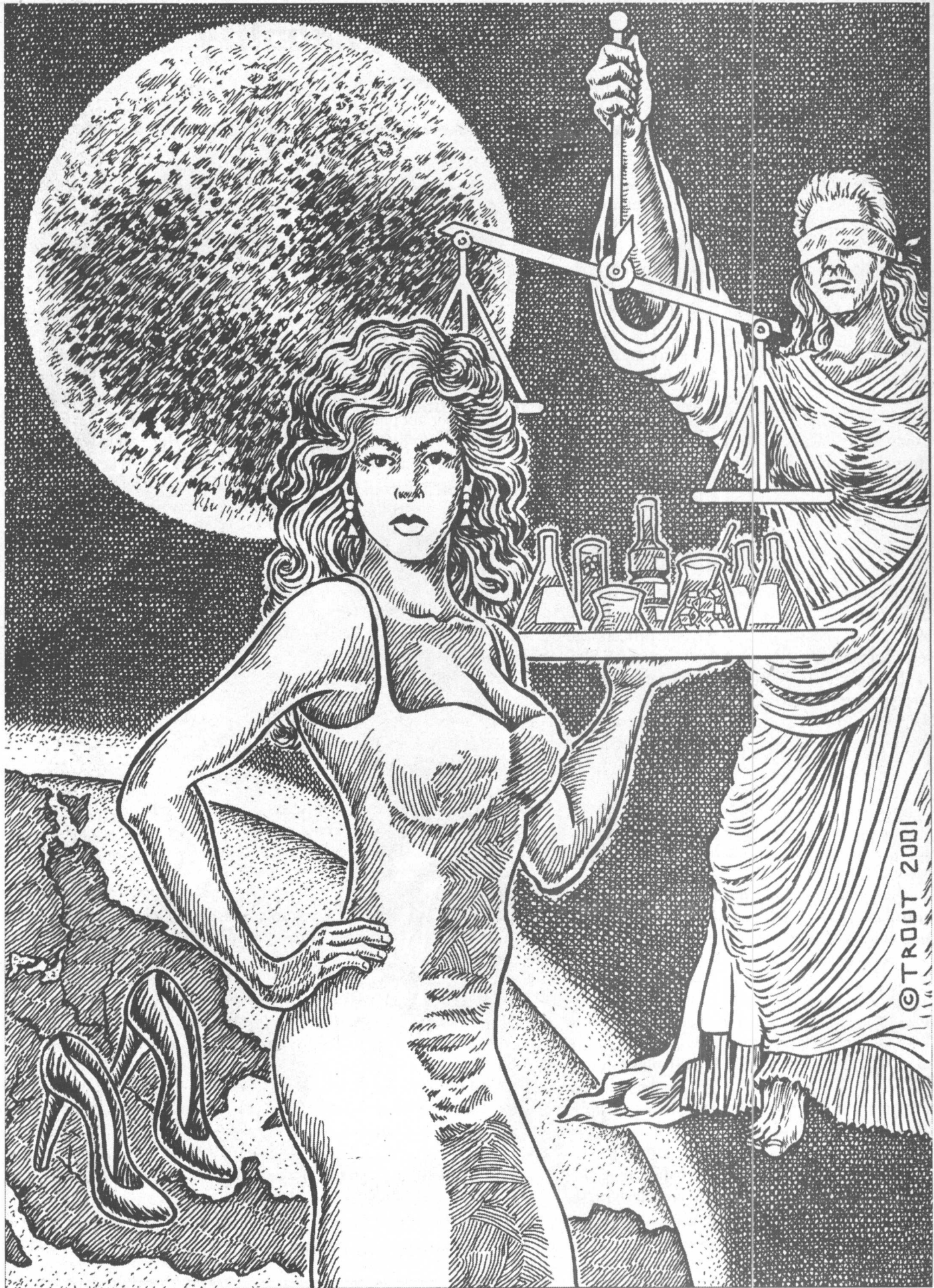
ADVERTISEMENTS

Ad guidelines and rate card are available upon request. Write to **DNA Publications, Inc.**, P.O. Box 2988, Radford VA 24143-2988 or visit our website or call 540-763-2925.

Absolute Magnitude, Issue #17/*Harsh Mistress* Issue #19, Autumn 2001 (ISSN 1070-6569). Published quarterly by **DNA Publications, Inc.**

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to **Absolute Magnitude**, P.O. Box 2988, Radford VA 24143-2988. Material from this publication may not be reprinted or used in any form without written permission from the Editor in Chief, except short passages and graphical representations used strictly for review purposes. Copyright © 2001 by **DNA Publications, Inc.**, and individually copyrighted by the authors and artists who have contributed to this issue.

Absolute Magnitude encourages freelance submissions, but cannot be responsible for unsolicited manuscripts or materials. All such submissions/correspondence must include SASE for response/return of materials. Send SASE for writers' guidelines.



©TROUT 2001

The Law, In Its Majestic Equality . . .

by Mary Catelli

Copyright © Mary Catelli 2001

Olive Mortimer, her dark face set in sullen lines, watched the mallet fall. Things fell differently on the Moon, of course, but the judge had mastered it. His voice boomed: "The law does not admit of exceptions; the defendant's plea for clemency is disallowed. For sleeping on public property, 50 credits."

Olive glared at him. Judge David Black did not even look at her as he registered the sentence. The two guards, in the back of the echoing white concrete room behind the rows of benches, were talking about the previous night's game, and the only other person in the courtroom, a young but highly respectable banker, stood against the wall nearby, with his hands in his pockets, waiting to continue the conversation Olive had so rudely interrupted by getting arrested.

Olive tossed back her black curls, drew a deep breath, sat down with a thump, and started to pull off her boots. The noise attracted Black's attention. He frowned. "Really, Ms. Mortimer, making a public spectacle of yourself will solve nothing. Just pay the fine, and we'll be done."

She dropped the worn gray boots on his desk. He flinched back from her. "In event," she said, her voice clipped, "the criminal does not have the money, the officers of the law may seize personal property adequate to cover it." She gestured at the boots. "I'm even sparing you the effort of seizing them. One pair, used boots, twenty credits."

The guards seemed to have noticed that something happened, and the young man was staring at her in cool perplexity. Olive reached for her pants and started to strip them off.

The hammer came down again. "Ms. Mortimer, you are to stop this nonsense at once! This—behavior may be acceptable on Earth, but we have some standards on the Moon."

Not to say, thought Olive, that you're prudes. Her voice turned into a purr. "Why, so you can seize them?" She arched an eyebrow. "Your guards might enjoy it, but really, don't you have any morals?" She sat down to finish pulling off her pants. The young man made a strange noise; she glanced at him and saw he was staring at her left knee. She looked at it herself; the bruises and swelling were noticeable, even after a few days. He was blushing, too, in spite of her sensible underwear. Black's face grew florid with fury. Olive glanced back and saw the guards were unabashedly staring; she sniffed: so much for standards. She rolled to her feet and dropped the pants into a dark rose pile beside boots. "There, that ought to do it."

Black choked. "David," asked the young man, looking resolutely away from Olive, "are you all right?"

"With this—trollop defying me like this, Jamie Gardener?" The words almost choked in Black's throat.

"By paying a fine?" asked Olive, acidly. She met the judge's eyes, and her gaze did not even flicker. Black winced. Good, she thought maliciously; someone else was sharing her misery. "Or is that inadequate?" She cast a practiced eye over her clothing. "I haunted used-clothing stores on Earth." In order, she thought, to save my passage to the Moon, but plowed on. "So I think that ought to cover it. But perhaps they go more cheaply on the Moon." Olive considered the pile for a minute. Black was too livid to speak. She started to unbutton her hot pink shirt. "This will definitely do it."

Both Olive's eyebrows went up. Her hands fell, leaving only one button fastened. She could feel Gardener's eyes appraising the curve of her breast beneath her bra.

One of the guards whistled at her, and she felt herself shrink. Up to the moment she had done it, she hadn't been sure she could manage it, and now she was certain she could not continue it.

Footsteps sounded across the floor. Olive's head moved in a jerk to see Gardener come towards her, his jacket in hand. He swept it over her shoulders.

That, thought Olive, is going to ruin it. Her voice took off without her consent. "I can't take this, you know. He—" she jerked her head at Judge Black, "will seize it for the fine."

Gardener, still beet red, said, "Then I'm not giving it to you. I'm a banker, and I'm lending it to you, and I expect it back."

"Besides," said the judge, "sentence is suspended." He dropped his mallet again. This time it fell like a lunar object, and the noise did not ring.

Olive tossed her head. "Today's yes, but what about tomorrow's?"

All about her, the spaceship bustled with the crew's business after landing, and Olive's stomach gave thanks. Her hands tightened on her bag until her knuckles were white; however safe she was, the real problems were still coming up. All those years saving, her parents' meager inheritance, scrimping on meals, buying second-hand clothes, sleeping alone partly because it was the cheapest form of birth control, had finally borne fruit.

Her parents had tried to succeed on Earth; might even have succeeded, had not the government realized that ninety percent of the people using educational programs worked, and so multiplied their price by ten. Only basic literacy and arithmetic continued affordable, and only because the constitution had set their price. The entertainment programs, for the welfare drones, had continued free. Margaret and John

Absolute Magnitude

Mortimer had tried to buy their education, realizing too late that their hoarded money was vanishing like water into a desert's sands.

The "Passengers Disembark" sign flashed on, and Olive staggered to her feet, clutching her satchel and her file of papers. Olive's parents had started saving for her to go to the Moon the day Margaret confirmed her pregnancy. "Even if you managed to work here, ninety percent of your work gets eaten by the proles. Go to the Moon, and have a chance."

A clinical voice interrupted her reverie. "Olive Mortimer, immigrant." Olive blinked and looked up at the official checking her paperwork. The woman handed her the papers back. "The job registry is right over there."

Olive looked as the woman pointed. "The double doors?" she said, eagerly.

The woman blinked at this unexpected enthusiasm. "Yes." Olive smiled smugly as she scrambled over. Probably the last test to see if they wanted you to immigrate: were you really willing to work?

She pushed open the double doors. A long empty room, set up with rows of long tables, spread before her. Olive frowned and glanced at the window set in the wall. A man sat behind it, his head bent over paperwork, but the only sign of life.

Diffidently, she approached. The man looked up, took one glance at the way she was walking, and said, his voice apathetic, "An immigrant?"

Olive nodded.

He shuffled through the papers to pull out a form. "Fill this out for your job search."

Olive glanced at it without taking it. "I already did," she said brightly. He blinked, lowering it and looking at her for the first time. Olive went on, "Before I came up here, I checked to see if there were jobs I could fill; the clerk said I didn't have to fill it out again, that they would hold it for me. . . ." She realized she was babbling and shut up.

The clerk looked at her with something like respect. "Your names?"

"Olive Mortimer."

The man turned to his computer, and Olive wiped her hands surreptitiously on her pants. A printer started to rattle, and Olive glanced up and down the hall.

"Here you go, Ms. Mortimer." There was almost respect in his voice. "It has your job listing, and the educational information you requested." She gratefully took the printout and gave it a quick glance; job listing, indeed, there was only one. "Welcome to the moon." He said it so awkwardly she knew he did not say it often. He glanced at the tables. "Please be quick with your inspection; we expect a group of newly graduated students to arrive."

Hence the tables, Olive realized. She thanked him quickly and sat down at one of the tables. It creaked a little, but she spread out the papers and began calculating the minimum cost of an education. She ran her fingers down the course listing, luxuriating over the titles and prices, but after a minute, she

drew herself back. It would take three lifetimes to take them all, and she had to eat. She flipped through the papers and found the minimal educations for future jobs. Programmer, she thought, noting that it took a specialist certificate, but also that the handful of jobs she could get with a generalist certificate paid little, and had the warning logos: "Few jobs of this category have been open in recent years" and "This job subject to automation."

Olive listed courses, noted minimum time to take, tallied the prices, added on living expenses, and contemplated the result. It was a good thing she had checked for a job, first, because this would eat up what little she had left in five minutes.

Turning to the job, waitressing, she winced at the wages. Still, it was higher than living expenses. She started to recalculate, glad for all the hours she had spent practicing her basic education lest she forget it. With a sigh of relief, she knew it would be possible.

She looked at the job again. "Waitressing at Jud's Bar, eight hours, 100 credits, uniform provided. Contact Jud Tuttle for in-person interview." Olive tapped herself on the lip with her pen. First she would beep the owner, tell him she wanted the interview, and then she would get herself lodging. There was no way she could turn up at the interview looking like she had just got off the boat; so much depended on this job.

In a narrow, hot back room at Jud's Bar, Olive picked up the shoe with one hand and contemplated it for a minute. "Do you have any larger shoes?" she said.

Jud Tuttle grunted. "Them's the shoes."

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eyes. The scarlet dress came only half way down her calves, had no sleeves, and was too low in the neck for her to wear a bra, but she could handle that; clothing was only a convention on the Moon anyway, and it wouldn't even have been shocking on Earth. The shoes, however, were important. "Leaving aside the issue of balancing the thing that looks like it is meant to be a heel, my toes won't fit. There isn't enough room for them." She swung it by the heel. "This sort of shoe could do permanent damage to my feet."

Tuttle grunted again. "Bar don't pay enough for a waitress without you showing off your legs. Men don't come in here to have some frump serve them drinks." He shrugged. "You don't want the job, Ol, you don't want the job."

Olive clamped her teeth in frustration. She could only collect unemployment if she held down a job first. Reasonable enough, to keep the drones down on Earth, but frustrating at the moment. She started to jam on the shoe. Tuttle stumped from the room without comment. She glared after him: pudgy, pasty-faced eyesore that he was, she could improve the looks in the place if she wore sackcloth and ashes and a bag over her head. She turned her attention back to the shoe; it was already rubbing against her toes. She could stand it for one night, and make her first course legal matters.

The Law, In Its Majestic Equality . . .

She glanced at herself in the room's tiny mirror and was pleased with the result. The scarlet of the dress normally would flatter her, but the tawdriness of the dress overwhelmed it; still, it did not overwhelm her glowing olive complexion, her attractive if not ravishing features, and her lustrous black curls. "And you think I need these toe-pinchers to avoid being a frump." She snorted. "Maybe you need them, Mr. Tuttle."

Table by the fireplace, Ol!" called Tuttle, slamming four beers down on the bar. Olive scrambled over and, pushing them on

her tray, gave a wary look at the route to the table. The foursome that occupied it were already half way to torpor, but all the tables were filled with half-drunk lunar miners, just in from the rocks and looking it; she had deduced from their talk that they were all just in, because any miner in the city for more than a week would be broke—or, perhaps, wise enough to avoid Jud's Bar. The favorite game in Jud's Bar seemed to be Get the Waitress to Spill the Drinks. Doubtless because she had to bend over to mop up the spill, giving them free looks up her skirt.

Her mouth set. If they found a challenge in looking at her underwear, she would give them a challenge all right. She swung the tray to her shoulder and started across the room.

The knock to her shoulder came just as she started to lower the tray. The beers tipped, and one spilled down the front of her dress as she balanced the tray.

"Poor Miss Ol," said a mocking voice behind her. "First day on the job and she already has to pay the cleaner."

Olive cast a malevolent glance behind her. The miner, three-quarters sober, smiled back, insolently and looked her up and down. The damp dress clung to her body, Olive realized in fury.

"Look better with it damped down, Miss Ol," he drawled, and leaned back. A handsome dark rogue, certain he could handle anything female. She looked away to serve the drinks and remembered hearing that he was a merchant firm's son, taking pride in being the black sheep. She put down the three beers.

"This one's spilled; I'll get you a full one," she said pleasantly to the fourth miner.

He looked at her with bleary eyes. "You do that," he grunted.

"Over here," Jud called, putting another beer on the bar, but Olive ignored him, turning to the man behind her with the fourth mug still in her hand. He sprawled insolently over his seat and smiled at her.

"By rights, you ought to pay it," she said sweetly. "You spilled the beer."

The rogue snorted. "You spilled the beer on yourself, you pay the

bill to clean up the mess." He shifted in his seat. "We ain't no bleeding heart Earthlings."

She cocked an eyebrow and threw the rest of the beer in his face. He sputtered viciousness at her, flailing at the air, and she stepped adroitly back. "You spilled beer on yourself, you pay the bill to clean up the mess."

For a long second, silence reigned. Then a guffaw shook the room, and the bar erupted into laughter. "Got you good, Darkie!" "Can't handle a girl, Darkie?"

The man's glare was undiluted malice, but he did not do more than wipe the beer from his face, splattering her. Olive met his eyes, her mouth set, and tried to put as much malice in her gaze.

She must have succeeded, for it was Darkie that turned away. Then the miner called behind her, "Hey, you can get my beer now, Ol," conversations broke out across the room, and the moment was gone. Olive started across the room to get the beer.

Olive stripped off her clothing in her new cubicle and inspected it. Tuttle had declared that she was indeed paying for the cleaning. She inspected the shirt. Beer had clung to her skin

Absolute Magnitude

and now clung, sticky, to the shirt. She sighed and went to wash it off in the sink.

Best to hoard her tiny savings from Earth for a rainy day, she decided. It would might slow her education down a little, but if that shirt became truly impossible to wear, she would still have to get to work.

Five minutes later, she finished squeezing out the shirt and hung it over the edge of the sink. Despite her sensible bra and the lock on the door, she rummaged through her satchel for a second shirt before she sat down at the terminal. She smiled wryly; in that, at least, she was a true Moon Man. Clothing was still the convention on Earth, but so many Earthlings had shocked Earth with nudity that it no longer shocked.

Olive sat on the bed, leaning back against the pillows, and turned on the terminal. The system flashed her account up for her, and she called up the outline for basic Moon law. It included employment. She punched in the request, watched her account drop, and started to study.

The Earth hung over the park, enormous and luminous, lighting it during the "night." Olive contemplated it, standing between two beds of sweet-scented white flowers. Maybe she should have learned more about the Moon before she immigrated. She started to wander down the path through a grove of trees with lush dark leaves. There were no safety regulations on the Moon; "any conditions the employee considers undesirable must be negotiated like any other part of the job the employee wishes to alter; the law does not intrude on the rights of individuals to enter contracts."

Her toes had stopped aching, but they had already been rubbed red. She wiggled them, glad that Moon etiquette did not insist on footwear. Even the four hours of algebra had not taken the taste of her discovery out of her mouth. The miners had raucously approved of Tuttle's hiring a new waitress, but she had gathered that most of the time he did not have one. It didn't leave her much room for negotiation.

The sound of water splashing came through the trees. She walked on, but slowly. She had only enough money for five hours of courses a night, which would give her plenty of free time to explore the Moon's one public place. Olive shivered, wishing they had at least a public library; but paper was a commodity up here, too expensive to let everyone handle it.

For a brief minute, she stood under the trees, dreaming of becoming a chemist instead, and discovering a way to make silicon paper. If it caught on, she would have enough money to open a public library.

As if the Moon Men would come to one. She wandered on, the white stones of the path lovely coolness under her feet, and saw a couple of young teenagers drinking at a pool filled by a waterfall. Earthlight caught the crest of its waves, and Olive stood for a long minute, watching it.

The girls laughed at each other and ran off. Olive felt loneliness twist her stomach. On Earth, it had been so hard to

find someone sympathetic to her goals that she had had to be a loner, or find her will power sapped away by the continual company of the drones. But she had not come to the Moon to be a loner; hadn't she promised her parents that their grandchildren would be Moon Men?

She walked slowly forward. A thick bank of moss spread around the pool, and Olive sank down on it to watch the water for a minute before she headed home to bed.

The computer flashed the "urgent message arrived" notice at her again. Olive groaned and hit the receive button. "Olive Mortimer: it has been three months and you have not recycled your course printout. Paper use on the Moon is limited to what we can recycle. Public services such as the job registry are only made possible by efforts to limit their expense."

Olive looked at the neat pile of paper by the bed, covered with calculations. Well, she thought, at least this time they had not lectured her on how the welfare classes drained the working classes on Earth, and how they could only avoid that by cutting off all public services, or by being responsible. That one had to be canned, because it never changed, no matter what response she sent.

She drew up a file, wrote her reply, noting that reuse was even more efficient, and prudently saved it before sending it off. "Paper's not the only thing I recycle," she muttered to herself.

Her feet ached. She contemplated them, grimly; the toenail on her smallest toes had been mangled beyond recognition. Her feet were swelling so badly that even her boots were begin to rub her toes raw.

The arm slid around her waist, and with the familiarity of long practice, Olive drove her elbow back. The miner yelped and fell back, nearly pulling her over. She whirled, and Tor Brun retreated from her glare. "Unfriendly bitch," he muttered.

"What's with you, Earthling?" snarled Dan Bracken. "Think you turned into a Moon Maid by immigrating, Ol?" A murmur of hostile agreement ran through the bar.

Olive, her head held high, picked up the next set of drinks and stalked off to serve them. They had admired her spirit the first night, but the admiration had quickly worn off when they discovered it extended to her reaction to passes. No female Earthling had the right to play keep-away.

Tuttle, of course, was happy with anything that kept them at Jud's Bar, including tormenting the waitress.

She made the rounds of the tables, clearing up the empty glasses, mopping up circles of condensation, and ignoring the leers and innuendos. Half way round, her tray full of glasses, someone shoved her, and the dregs of an empty glass spilled across the table. Olive snatched it up, dropped the tray on the table, and mopped, quickly. She cast a malevolent glance over her shoulder, but the perpetrator had learned something from

The Law, In Its Majestic Equality . . .

Darkie's misfortune; she could not have picked him out of the tables' half dozen.

She turned to pick up the tray, and a foot sneaked between hers, knocking her sprawling. A sickening crunching noise came from her knees. She lay speechless for a minute, the breath knocked out of her.

"Ol," hollered Tuttle, "I don't pay you to loll about."

She tried to rise and sank back, gasping with pain. "You tripped me!" she accused, her eyes running through the crowd.

A blond and large-boned miner shifted under her gaze. "Should be more careful, Ol," he intoned gravely.

She turned her hostility on Sven. "One of you tripped me!"

"Ol," said Tuttle, threatening, "I sure don't pay to argue with the customers. Get up."

Olive glared at him. "Sprout wings and fly," she told him.

"Name's Olive Mortimer," intoned a hollow voice over her head. Olive, sunk into daze since she had managed to get Tuttle to send for an ambulance, roused enough to realize she was in an ambulance. "Check her account; she's an immigrant, and I don't know if she has credit enough to pay the doctor."

Olive's stomach roiled; it wasn't *fair*, she shouldn't have to pay the doctor, she hadn't done anything. "He tripped me," she said.

"Good, you can get him to pay."

Olive tried to say no one would admit to it, but the doctor probed her knee, and she gasped instead.

"Nasty," the doctor said, coolly. His words blurred off into inaudibility as the pain engrossed her.

Minutes later, lying on a cold metal cot in the hospital, she felt someone wrenching off her shoes. "No wonder she fell if she was wearing these things." The shoes rattled on the floor. "If she keeps them on after, she's not going to walking after a month."

"Take a look at her ankles," said a second voice.

The first turned one of her feet; Olive gasped, and the man let his breath hiss between his teeth. "Take a pic of that before you do anything with it. Look like she can sue somebody's socks off."

The miners mostly don't wear socks, Olive thought forlornly, and passed out.

Tuttle shook his head. "Ain't taking you back unless you wear the uniform." He went on cleaning glasses.

Olive slapped both her hands down on the counter. "All I need is sensible shoes, and I just heard you complaining your head off that you can't run this place alone."

Tuttle snorted, slapping the dripping glasses on the rack. "You want the job, you wear the uniform, Ol."

Fifteen minutes later, Olive stormed from Jud's Bar. None of the Moon's advertising had said you had to be a silver-tongued skilled debater to negotiate the wonderful contracts they talked about. And she was only hours from her generalist certificate. It had taken a large chunk of her savings during her recuperation, but her lodgings were already doing that.

Her shoulders slumped. Well, back to the Job Registry. At least she had been working and could claim unemployment insurance.

"What do you mean, fired for cause!" Olive leaned over the window, glaring at the clerk, baring her teeth.

The clerk looked up from reciting the official line and retreated, mumbling, "Tuttle registered that you refused to wear the uniform that is a condition of employment."

"That stupid uniform could cripple me for life!"

"The Moon," recited the clerk from memory, "does not regulate the free contracts entered into by its inhabitants. We give you a free hand in negotiating the terms of your employment."

"Yes, and the terms of my employment are such that I can't work!" Olive drew a deep breath. "Tell me, what does it take to collect unemployment?" she spat.

The clerk retreated a little further. "Well, if your employer had gone out of business through no fault of yours, or if you were unable to work any longer."

"Fine," snapped Olive. "Put that one down. I am no longer capable of wearing the uniform."

"Really, Ms. Mortimer, the Moon will not subsidize your negotiations with your employer," said the clerk severely. "You are perfectly capable of wearing it." She pushed her glasses up. "Also, I did run your qualifications through the registry. You are not yet qualified for any other job."

Olive glared at her. That had only been a faint hope, but now she was stuck with it.

"You are," the clerk went on coolly, "perfectly free to sue the government to establish your inability to work."

"And how," inquired Olive, "am I to pay a lawyer to sue you?"

The clerk looked away.

"I dare say," Olive said, "that you never had to wait tables to go to school."

"Really," said the clerk, frigidly, "it's no business of yours that my parents educated me."

Olive limped from the Registry. Why, she wondered, did the doctor, after depleting her bank account, only warn her about those shoes? Even after two weeks bed rest, it still



Absolute Magnitude

ached whenever she spent too long on her feet. She hobbled down the corridors to her room.

“Don’t even bother going in.”

Olive blinked and turned around to look at her landlady.

The woman put her hands on her hips. “After the charge last night, you didn’t even have enough to pay this week’s rent.” The woman glared at her.

“But my satchel,” Olive protested.

“Seized in default of rent.” The woman turned and stalked off. Olive stared numbly after her.

Half an hour later, sitting beneath the full Earth by the waterfall, surrounded by blossoms, Olive wondered why she had not complained. Probably one too many shocks. And then she had tried to log on a public terminal, to find out what the charge had been, and found herself denied access: “Inadequate funds.”

Despite the soothing light and splashing, her hands clenched into fists. She slowly relaxed them but found her nails had already dug half-circles of red into her palms. She sighed and lay down. Tomorrow would be another day.

66 **A**nd that’s where the cop found me.” Olive smiled brightly. “So, you see, I will be sleeping in public again tonight.”

Black cleared his throat. “You could sue the customers for failure to disclose who tripped you. That’s obstruction of justice.”

Olive shook her head, letting her dark curls fall about her face.

“You don’t need a lawyer,” the judge added, hastily.

“Considering they’re all out in the rocks, mining, having spent all their money on their binges, I doubt I would get enough to cover my doctor’s bills,” Olive said sweetly. “Let alone back wages, which is what I need, anyway.”

“Sentence,” said the judge, “is suspended. Take your clothing back, Ms. Mortimer, and don’t sleep in the park again.” Olive glared at him. Judge Black drew a deep breath. “I am not responsible for you, Ms. Mortimer, and do not try to pretend that I am.”

“Oh, no,” Olive agreed. “No one is responsible for anything around here. I have had it,” she raised her hand over her head, and her blouse gaped, “up to here with the Moon Men not being responsible. I will file suit against the miners, but,” she lowered her hand, “you can hold those for the next fine— because I will take your warning to heart. I will not sleep in the park anymore.” Judge Black’s face twitched. “I will sleep on the doorstep of the courtroom. I’ll go do it now, since the policeman interrupted my sleep last night.”

The judge looked her up and down. “Like that?” he said, icily.

“Certainly,” Olive said. “Console yourself with the thought that you are not responsible.”

Black cleared his throat. “That,” he said, trying to sound authoritative, “is contempt of court.”

Olive put her hands on her hips. “That fine,” she said, sweetly, “I will pay with my underwear.”

Gardener flushed scarlet.

“And you will, in the end, have to give me a pauper’s funeral.” She tossed her hair over her shoulder and stalked towards the door.

“There was,” the judge declared, “that job that liberty to you work if you impose these costs on us.”

Olive looked over her shoulder.

“Make me,” she said.

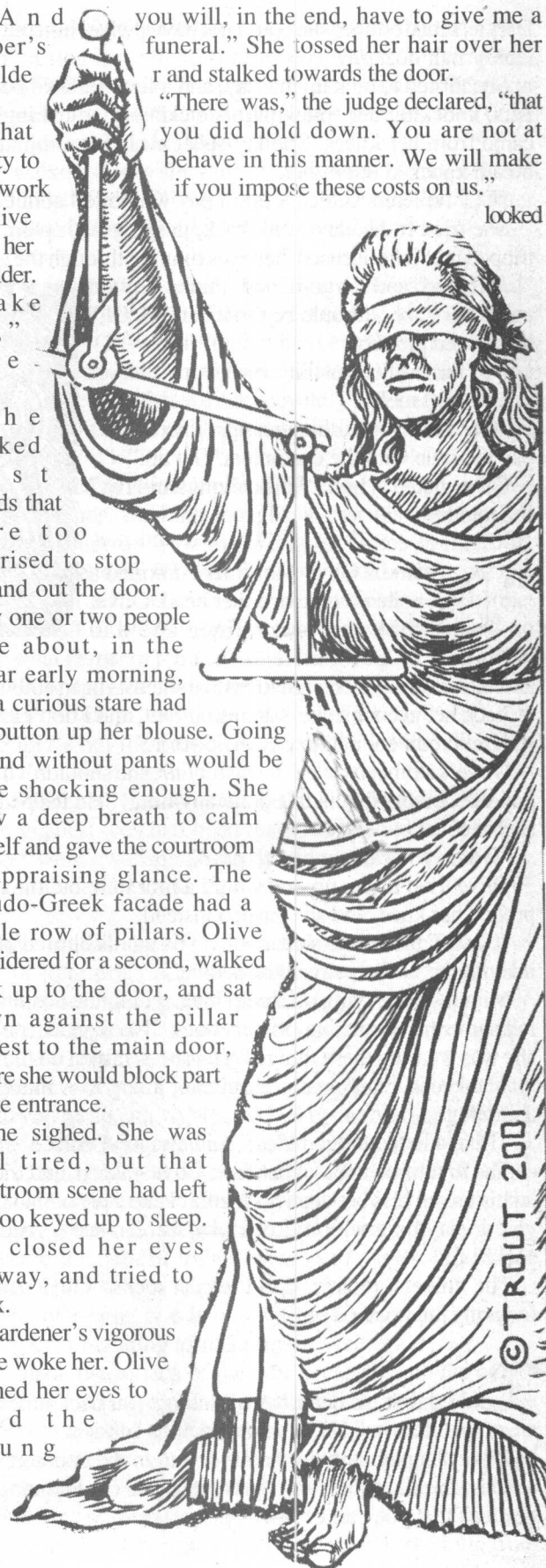
She stalked past guards that were too surprised to stop her and out the door.

Only one or two people were about, in the Lunar early morning, but a curious stare had her button up her blouse. Going around without pants would be quite shocking enough. She drew a deep breath to calm herself and gave the courtroom an appraising glance. The pseudo-Greek facade had a whole row of pillars. Olive considered for a second, walked back up to the door, and sat down against the pillar closest to the main door, where she would block part of the entrance.

She sighed. She was still tired, but that courtroom scene had left her too keyed up to sleep. She closed her eyes anyway, and tried to relax.

Gardener’s vigorous curse woke her. Olive opened her eyes to find the young man

gl



The Law, In Its Majestic Equality . . .

ring at her legs. She looked up and met Gardener's eyes. Her gaze turned baleful.

"Don't worry," she said, enunciating each word distinctly, "you can sue me for any medical expenses." She plucked at her blouse. "Think this will cover it?"

Gardener stared at her, shaking his head — the very model of a private citizen whose private affairs were being intruded on. "You can get the money from the miners." Olive lifted an eyebrow, and Gardener reared back. "Don't try to make me feel responsible."

Olive shrugged. "I am under no responsibility to not make you feel responsible. Don't feel responsible if you don't want to, but leave me out of it."

Gardener acquired a truculent expression. "You can get the miners to pay. I am certain of it."

Olive found herself remembering that this man was a banker. Her eyes narrowed. "How certain are you?"

"Absolutely." He raised his head.

Olive rose smoothly to her feet and met his eyes again. "Certain enough to lend me money on the strength of it?"

Gardener choked.

Olive's hands settled on her hips. "Well," she snapped, "are you or are you not certain?"

A long minute later, Gardener managed to meet her eyes. "I'm certain," he said, weakly, a reluctant respect dawning in his expression, even when his eyes were drifting down to her legs. "The judge would give you your clothing back," he said, "before we went to the bank."

Olive nodded, cheerful enough to concede just

about anything.

Olive fumbled with her key as the phone inside her apartment rang. She grimaced



as she pushed the door open and hoped the call would not take long. With course registration tomorrow, she had to decide whether she would go for programming, to get a higher-paying job, or go straight for chemistry. She dropped her bag on the floor and grabbed the phone.

Judge Black's florid face looked back at her from the terminal, an unusual expression of calm on his face. "Good evening, Judge," she said, dropping into her chair. No more legalese, she pled silently; I don't want to have to take another legal course to understand my own case.

"Good evening, Miss Mortimer." He folded his hands. "I have good news for you. Jack Blaine has decided to not contest the charges."

Olive's face slowly began to light up. "Did he?" she said. No wonder he looked calm, after having to tell her five times that delinquent miners would be held in contempt of court.

The judge nodded. "The damages he's paying—and penalties for failure to comply—have already been rolled over into your account." He hesitated. "Of course, James Gardener will be informed of this."

Olive made a dismissing gesture. "Don't bother." The judge blinked, and Olive grinned. "I paid back the loan already, once I earned enough to cover it."

The judge obviously suppressed an impulse to tell her that it was a good thing, after the shameless way she had played on Gardener. He bobbed his head. "Doubtlessly the settlement will be a relief to you."

"Thank you for letting me know." Her hand hovered over the cut-off switch. "Good night, Judge Black."

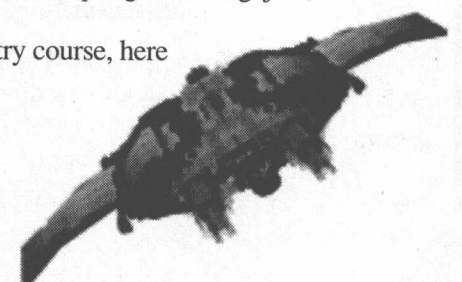
"Good night, Miss Mortimer."

Olive looked at the terminal a minute longer. She still had to make up her mind about the course-work. After all, computing would be a detour, and she would become a chemist later if she took it, but it would also be another job skill.

She decided to check her account first, and started to call up the deposit. The number flashed on her screen, and Olive sat, watching it, a minute. Then she carefully read the screen for directions on how to get that number broken down.

Two more numbers flashed on the screen, and Olive's eyebrows went up. More than three-quarters of the money was penalties for noncompliance. The Moon system did, after all, work some of the time, she thought. She calculated how many months' salary it was, even at a programming job, and grinned.

"Chemistry course, here I come."



$$f^{(n)}(x) = \frac{d^n f(x)}{dx^n} \quad x^{(n)} = x(x-1)$$

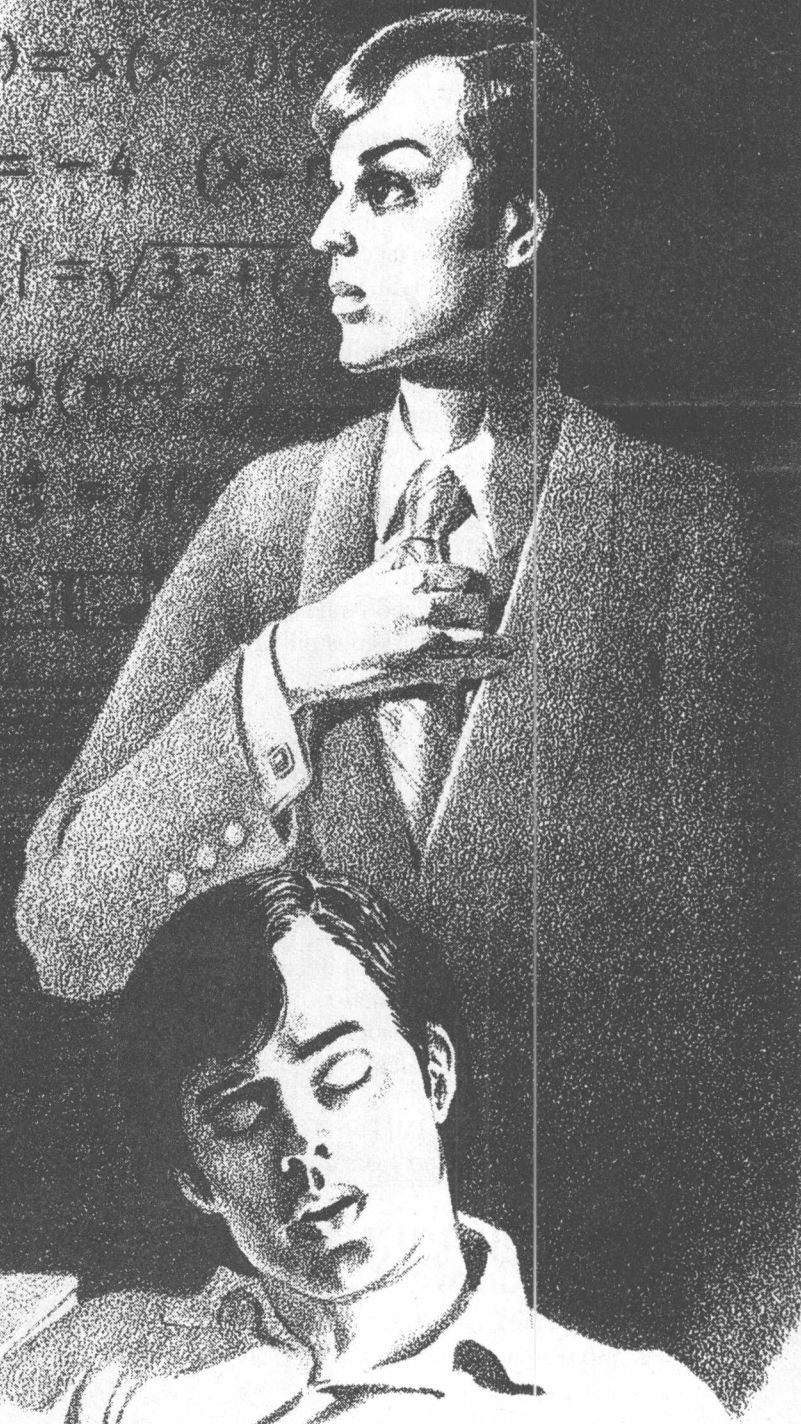
$$[\pi] = [3] = 3 \quad [-\pi] = -4 \quad (x-)$$

$$y^{(2)} = \frac{d^2 y}{dx^2} \quad |3-4| = \sqrt{3^2+4^2}$$

$$x+x \equiv 2x \quad 17 \equiv 3 \pmod{14}$$

$$f(x) \Big|_{\substack{x=4 \\ x=3}} = f(x) \Big|_{\substack{x=4 \\ x=3}}$$

$$f \frac{3}{4} \Big| \# \phi \psi \Big\} - \dots$$



Fridays

by Jamie Wild

Copyright © Jamie Wild 2001

Barry caressed the book of poetry that was hidden under his pillow. He was tempted to take it out, but Anne was late and he knew he shouldn't. She'd warned him not to let another nurse catch him with it. If someone else found out about it, it would be confiscated and he'd never read poetry again. Until Anne had given him the book his entire life had been polymers. Polymers were interesting, but poetry was magical, and so was Anne. She wasn't like the other nurses; she was younger and prettier, but it was more than that. She talked with him; even Dr. Barnes didn't talk to Barry as much as she did. Barry wished she worked more often. Only getting to see her on Fridays wasn't enough.

There was a knock on the door and Anne stepped inside. "Hi, Barry, did you miss me?" she asked, smiling.

"Of course!"

"Did you like the book?"

"I loved it."

"I knew you would, all those books about math and polymers have to be boring you to tears."

"They're not so bad. Polymers are okay, and if you really think about it, math isn't that different from poetry."

Anne wrinkled her nose. "I don't know about that."

"I've been thinking—"

"Yes," Anne said, as if she were out of breath.

"A lot of those poems talked about nature. I've never been outside. Do you think I could go outside?"

"I'm sorry, Barry, but you can't leave this room until it's time for you to take your exams."

"But, Anne, it's so boring here. All I do is study and sleep. Look at the size of my room." Barry gestured to the six-by-eight cubicle that was his home. A bed, a bookcase, and a clock were its only furnishings.

"If I let you out for a little while," Anne said, "you have to promise me something."

"Anything!"

"You have to promise me that you won't tell anyone else. That it'll be our secret."

"I promise!"

"Okay, let me draw you a map of the neighborhood. Don't go anywhere that isn't marked on this piece of paper. Here's my watch. Be back in an hour."

Barry took the watch and Anne led him out of the room. A moment later he was in the fresh night air. He took a deep breathe and savored it. So that was what fresh air tasted like. Then he walked up to a tree and plucked a leaf from it. Awestruck, he studied the delicate vein structure. He might have spent the entire hour looking at the leaf had he not heard the sound. It drifted to him on the night breeze and was like nothing he had ever heard or imagined. Entranced, he moved

towards its source.

Barry found a young man, no more than twenty, sitting on a porch of a nearby house strumming a guitar. He had hair that was longer than Anne's and it was streaked at least three different colors. He was dressed in black jeans and a black "Coed Naked Quidditch" t-shirt, whatever that was, and he wore four necklaces and three shining earrings. This was the first time that Barry had ever seen anyone that wasn't dressed in the Institute's whites. He couldn't figure out how the man breathed in such tight clothing.

The young man stopped playing when Barry approached him. "Let me guess," he said, with a snarl, "it's too loud."

"No, it's wonderful."

"Cool," he said, with a puzzled expression.

"I'm Barry."

"That's nice, and I'm Jasper, so what?"

"Could I see that for a moment?" Barry asked, motioning to Jasper's guitar.

"My guitar?"

"If that's what it's called."

"Dude, do you even know how to play one of these?"

Barry thought about how to answer that question. He'd never actually played a guitar, but he remember everything he'd ever read or seen, so maybe he could. And it seemed pretty clear that if he said no Jasper wasn't going to let him try it. "Yes," he said finally.

With some reluctance Jasper handed him the guitar and Barry recalled the motions that Jasper had made and duplicated them.

"Holy shit! That's my song, there's no way you could know that. You picked it up listening to me."

"Yes."

"Dude, you're the answer to my prayers."

"I am?"

"Yeah, my rhythm guitarist just quit, his girlfriend didn't like all the attention he was getting from the groupies. Anyway, we can't find anyone else who can handle the licks. How long have you been playing?"

Barry hesitated, afraid that if he answered truthfully he'd expose his earlier lie. Finally he said, "I just started."

"Damn, give me the guitar." Barry handed it over and Jasper began playing a much more intricate rhythmic pattern. "Play that," he said when he was done, handing the guitar over to Barry.

Barry did as requested.

"This is unreal. I've been auditioning some of the hottest players around and they can't play that riff. You come along looking like an escaped mental patient, and nail it the first time. Interested in joining a band?"

Absolute Magnitude

"What's a band?"

Jasper laughed. "Man, you must have been born yesterday. A musical group. You know, we get together and play music."

"I'd love to, but I don't own an instrument."

"I've got an extra amp and a guitar that you can borrow. Do you read music?"

"I don't think so, but if you have a book on it, I can learn real fast."

"I bet you could," Jasper said. "Hold on, I'll be right back." Jasper went into the house and returned a short time later with two text books and a notebook. "Here's one book on basic theory and another one on advanced theory. If you get through that, the notebook has the music to all of my songs. Learn what you can and we'll give you an audition."

"Sounds great."

"What's your number?"

"Number?"

"Your phone number?"

"I don't have one."

Jasper shook his head. "That figures. It's such a pain dealing with people who don't have phones. That reminds me of a joke. What do you call a musician who just broke up with his girlfriend?"

"I don't know."

"Homeless," Jasper said, laughing.

"I don't understand."

Jasper stopped laughing. "Don't worry about it. When can you show up for the audition?"

"I don't know. Maybe next Friday, at about this time?"

"Great, guess I'll see you then."

Barry turned and went back to the Institute. As soon as he knocked on the door Anne let him in. "You're back early," she said.

"I wanted to come back and study these," Barry said showing Anne the books as she walked him back to his room.

"What are those?"

"Books on musical theory."

"Barry, where did you get them?"

"From my new friend Jasper. I need them to audition for his band."

"I don't think you should go out again," Anne said as they entered his room. She seemed afraid.

"But, Anne, I want to audition for his band next Friday."

"You *what*?"

"I want—"

"I heard you, I just can't believe that you said it. You can't do it."

Barry was crushed. He started to cry and threw his arms around Anne the way a child would its mother. "Please let me, please . . ."

Anne put her arms around him for what seemed a long time. Finally she said "I can't say no to you. We'll have to be very careful."

"Thank you, Anne."

"You're welcome." She kissed him on the forehead.

It didn't take Barry long to memorize all of the material that Jasper had given him. Really it was quite simple. Music was based on numbers and Barry understood numbers. The only challenge he could foresee would be in the actual application. Technique might not be as simple to learn as theory. But he had played Jasper's guitar without any difficulty so he wasn't particularly worried.

After the longest week of Barry's life, Friday finally arrived. Anne told him he could have two hours this time. Barry gave her a quick hug. He wouldn't have understood the look of passion in her eyes even if he'd noticed it.

Jasper was waiting on the porch for him. "Cool, dude, you made it," Jasper said, looking relieved. "The rest of the band's in the garage, follow me." Barry followed Jasper to the garage. "Welcome to Babylon," Jasper said as he rolled the garage door up and they entered a world more bizarre than anything Barry could have imagined.

A huge, double bass drum kit dominated the room. Behind the drums was a wall of speakers. A multitude of posters decorated the other three walls of the room. They depicted, Barry could only assume, other musical groups; and women wearing almost no clothing. To one side of the room was a large overstuffed couch and several chairs. Two men and four women were lounging about there. They were all dressed similarly to Jasper.

One of the women looked up and said, "Oh my God, he's beautiful."

"Look, Steph, you can't have him," Jasper said. "We haven't even auditioned him yet, so put your claws away."

"I don't care if he gets into the band or not, I'm going to eat that boy alive."

Barry didn't like where this conversation was headed. "Eat him alive?" Why would she want to do that?

"And if she doesn't," one of the other women said, "I will."

Barry thought about turning around and running away, but Jasper laughed and said, "Okay, okay, at least let *us* audition him first."

"All right," yet another woman said, "We'll let *you* audition him *first*."

Still laughing, Jasper introduced Barry to everyone and they got started. Barry watched the band play through the first song and then he played it with them. As he suspected, the actual playing didn't give him any problems. Really it was fun. Jasper clowned around a lot and everyone seemed to be having a good time. Barry realized that he'd never seen people enjoying themselves this much before. No one at the Institute, except Anne, ever seemed to smile. And none of the nurses had ever danced, and if they had, Barry was certain it wouldn't have looked anything like this. Suddenly, Barry realized that he didn't want to go back. This was where he belonged, this was what being alive was.

"Okay," Jasper said, after a few songs, "you've got the chops, and unless anyone else has a problem with you, you're

in." Jasper looked around, but it was clear that this was his band and no one was going to object. "Great, let's see what else you can do. We'll play 'Free Agent' again, this time you play a solo."

"Solo?"

Jasper shook his head. "Yeah, remember where you played the rhythm and I played something else. That was the solo. You get to improvise, that's where all the real magic is."

Barry nodded and they started the song. Jasper's voice was raspy, but strong and melodic.

*Always there when I needed a friend.
You'll be there at the bitter end.
I'll never understand what you see in me.
'Cause I'm the one who's got to be free.*

*Yeah, I'm a free agent—that's the way it's got to be.
I'm a free agent—no one gets a hold of me.*

*You may not believe it's true.
But I really am in love with you.
I'll never find the right words to say.
And I'll probably never stay*

*Cause I'm a free agent—that's the way it's got to be.
I'm a free agent—no one gets a hold of me.*

Then it was time for Barry to solo. He closed his eyes and tried to play. At first nothing came to him. He could mimic anything, but create something that he'd never heard before? He didn't think he could do that. Then it hit him, playing a solo was like combining math and poetry. The musical notes were numbers and the way that they made you feel was poetry. He let the numbers from the music fuse into the poetry that he felt and his fingers played. It was a strange experience. It felt as if his fingers were playing and he was just listening, caught up in the experience but not really a part of it. When Barry finished the solo and came back to the rhythm, he realized that everyone else had stopped playing. They were all staring at him in silence with unreadable expressions on their faces.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"Something wrong? No, that was incredible," Jasper said. "I've never heard anything like it. I don't know what to say."

Later that night, Barry told Anne all about the experience. She seemed concerned. "Barry, you *have* to be careful, this could get us both into a lot of trouble."

"I'll be careful, Anne, I promise."

"Promise me something else. Promise me that you won't have anything to do with the women that hang out with the band."

"If you don't want me to, I won't."

"Good. It's very important that you stay away from them. They're not the kind of women that you want to get involved with."

Barry didn't understand, but if Anne said it was so, then it was so.

In the next four months Barry learned all forty of the band's songs and did everything he could to avoid Steph and her friends. Steph didn't make it easy, but Barry trusted Anne's advice and steered clear of her. Steph made it plain that she liked the way he looked, but that didn't make any sense to Barry. Maybe what she really liked was the way that he played guitar. Either way, it was a mystery to him. Jasper

$$f^{(n)}(x) = \frac{d^n f(x)}{dx^n} \quad x(n)$$

$$[\pi] = [3] = 3 \quad [-\pi] =$$

$$y^{(2)} = \frac{d^2 y}{dx^2} \quad | 3 = 4$$

$$x + x \equiv 2x \quad | 7 \equiv$$

$$f(x) \Big|_{\substack{x=4 \\ x=3}} = f(x) \Big|$$

$$f \frac{3}{4} | \# \circ \circ \{ - - -$$



Absolute Magnitude

started to pressure him into playing out. When Barry understood what playing out was, he asked Anne if he could. She told him to put the band off until after his finals. They didn't like that much. The tone of their practices became more subdued and Barry couldn't figure out why.

Finally the day of his last exam came. Barry had a hard time focusing on the test. All he could think about was playing out with the band. After the exams, Barry returned to his room. Someone had taken everything out of it. His desk, his bed, his books, everything. What had he done? Why were the people at the Institute being so cruel to him?

Not knowing what else to do, Barry sat down on the bare floor of his room and cried. Would Anne come, or had she been taken away too? What would he do without her? She'd been his first friend, and aside from Jasper and the guys in the band, she was his only friend. I hope she still comes, he thought.

He was still crying when Anne arrived. "Barry, what's wrong? Where are your things?"

"I don't know. When I came back from my exams everything was gone."

"God, that was cold. You would think that they might leave you with something to occupy yourself with until the assimilation. Just because they had a scheduling problem is no reason to treat you like this."

"I don't understand."

"You should have taken your exams two days ago. The Institute is really cutting it close with your assimilation."

"My what?"

"Assimilation. Don't worry about it. You'll understand soon enough."

Barry nodded, trusting Anne. "How come you're the only person that ever let me out?"

Anne smiled and ran her fingers through his blond hair. "You really don't know, do you?"

"No."

"It has something to do with those eyes," she said, gazing into them. "And after you've been assimilated, you might remember that a certain nurse was nice to you."

"I'll never forget how nice you've been."

"Never?"

"Never!"

"Good, there's something else I want you to remember. My phone number, it's 555-4687. Can you remember that?"

"Sure, 555-4687. But why do you want me to remember that?"

"Once you've been assimilated you'll understand."

"Anne, can I leave for practice now?"

"I'm sorry, Barry. Not tonight. Your assimilation is in four hours."

"I just have to. I can't stay here, not after this," he said, motioning to the empty room.

"I can't say no to you. But you can't be late tonight, not tonight."

"Thanks," Barry said, leaving the room.

When Barry got to Jasper's, Jasper was the only one there. "Where are the rest of the guys?"

"Barry, we've got to talk."

"What is it?"

"Look, man, we can't wait anymore. We're going to book some gigs. Either you play out or you're gone. I don't have a choice. The guys forced it to a vote. You've also got to show up for more practices. You might want to think about letting your hair grow out, too."

"Okay, I understand. I took my exams today. I'm ready to play out. You want me here on what, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday?"

Jasper smiled. "I knew you'd see the light. We're going to make some noise!"

That made up Barry's mind. He wasn't going back to the Institute. He had no life there. Study, sleep, study, sleep. That was all the Institute had offered him. Now it didn't even offer him that. To hell with it!

After leaving Jasper's he wandered about for several hours trying to decide where to go. The truth was, the practice space and the Institute were all that he had ever known. With no where else to go, he started back towards Jasper's.

That was when a police car pulled up next to him. "That's him," he heard Dr. Barnes voice say. Barry looked at the police car. Dr. Barnes was in it with a police officer.

"Barry, we're here to take you back to the Institute," the officer said, as he started to get out of the car.

Barry wasn't going back. He slammed the door hard into the officer and ran. Barry didn't know where he was running to; he just ran. He ran until he couldn't run any farther. Slowly he became aware of his surroundings. He was in a well lit residential neighborhood. It was late and the street was deserted. As quietly as he could, Barry walked into a garage that had its door open. Maybe he could hide in it for the night. When morning came, he could try and find his way back to Jasper's. Jasper would know what to do. He always knew what to do.

Looking up, Barry saw a police car drive slowly by. He tried to hide behind a trash barrel, but only succeeded in tipping it over. The police car stopped and shined a light into the garage. Barry tried harder to hide. The cruiser's blue lights came on. "Come out of that garage, Barry," a voice said over the police car's P.A. system.

"I'm not going back," Barry shouted.

Dr. Barnes got out of the cruiser. "Barry, calm down. All this excitement isn't good for you. We need to get you to a hospital right away."

"No," Barry shouted, "I'm not going back."

"Barry, can I come in there and talk to you? I won't force you to do anything you don't want to do. That wouldn't be good for you right now, anyway. We need to talk."

"Okay, I'll talk with you, but I'm not going back."

Dr. Barnes walked into the garage. "Barry, you really do have to come back with me to the Institute."

"I'm not going back. I hate it there. They took all my books."

"I'm sorry about that, Barry. You were supposed to be assimilated two days ago, but we postponed the process due to scheduling problems. I realize now, that that isn't much of an excuse."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"If I explain everything to you, will you come back with me?"

"I'd have to hear your explanation before I could decide."

"Fair enough. You see, Barry, you're a clone. Your owner paid to have you go to college for him. Now that you're finished with your degree, we have to record your memories and download them into his memory. You were designed to live only long enough to get your degree."

"I don't believe you."

"What's your last name, Barry? Everyone has a last name."

"I don't know," Barry stammered.

"What's your mother's name? Everyone has a mother. Do you remember your mother?"

He thought about it. The doctor was confusing him. Now he was starting to feel sick. "I don't know, I don't know. Why are you confusing me?"

"Barry, we need to get you to a hospital. Your physical condition will be deteriorating rapidly from now on. You weren't designed to take this kind of stress."

Barry didn't know what to do. Should he trust the doctor? Then something happened that made his mind up. An expensive sports car pulled up and a well dressed man got out. Barry's jaw dropped in astonishment. "That's me," he whispered.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you, Barry. You're a clone. We forced your growth so that you could go to college for your owner. You need to come with me right now, otherwise there's no hope of preserving your memories. Whether or not you come with me, you're going to die, but if you do come with me, at least your memories will live on."

Numbly, Barry allowed himself to be led away.

Barry Chambers walked into Dr. Barnes' office and sat down across from the doctor's desk.

"How are you feeling?"

"I feel fine," Barry said.

"Are you adjusting to your new memories?"

"It was a bit rough, at first, what with all the fear and anxiety that my clone had undergone. It wasn't anything at all like my two previous degrees. But everything's fine now. I've got all the information I need for the job, and I'm quite satisfied."

"Good, I'm glad to hear that. By the way, the Institute will be waiving the usual downloading fee. Considering what you've been through, I think that's the least we can do. It's really too bad that memories are chemical. You see, if

memories weren't chemical, then we wouldn't have to worry about the body rejecting implanted memories, and we could give everyone the same degree. Nothing like this would ever happen again."

Barry nodded.

"There's just one more thing, Mr. Chambers."

"Yes?"

"Do you remember how your clone got out of the Institute? We'd like to make sure that this doesn't happen again."

Barry shook his head. "You know, I can't really remember anything that the clone went through after the exams. It's all just a blur."

"I was afraid of that. If you start to have any problems due to the late transference, don't hesitate to call."

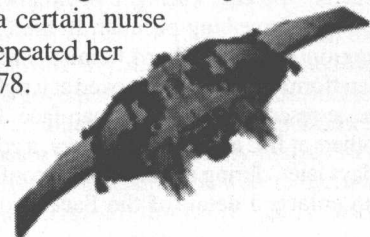
"Of course," Barry said, getting up and shaking the doctor's hand.

Once out of the room, Barry breathed a sigh of relief. The meeting with the doctor had worried him. He was afraid that the doctor might have figured out that he wasn't Barry Chambers, he was Barry the clone.

He was definitely in Barry Chambers' body, no mistaking that. Barry Chambers spent two hours a day at a health club. Barry's cloned body had never had this much muscle mass, and Chambers' hair was just a bit longer than Barry's had been. He even had Chambers' memories, but he didn't have his personality. And thank God for that. Barry Chambers had not been a nice person. He'd been fully aware of how good looking he was and had used a lot of women, especially the women at the health club. One of the first things Barry had done was change health clubs. He didn't want to deal with that legacy. Despite all of his money and charm, Barry Chambers had not been well liked. The funny thing was, paging through his memories, Barry realized that Chambers hadn't even suspected how much people had disliked him. He'd been very impressed with himself and he hadn't noticed the obvious signs that others thought less of him because of it. Chambers had been a conceited, stuck-up prig. People were going to see a very different Barry Chambers from now on.

Since waking up in the new body, Barry had read everything he could get his hands on about assimilation. According to what he had read, the clone's personality, being weak, was always destroyed at assimilation. Apparently, Barry's situation was unique. He owed his existence, it would seem, to his unusual adventures. Barry didn't know if there was some process that might bring Chambers back, but he was damned if he was going to find out.

Barry left the Institute and got into his car. He headed for a music store. It was time he bought his own guitar. And after that, there was a certain nurse that he had to call. Barry repeated her number to himself: 555-4678.



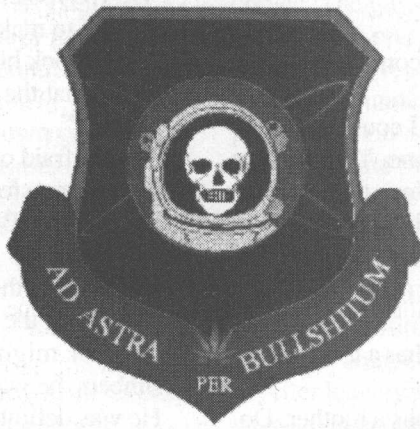
Primary Ignition: Facing Mars by Allen Steele

(Note: the following was written as an afterword for the upcoming Italian translation of the author's novel *Labyrinth of Night*, which was originally published in 1992.—AMS)

I've been writing science fiction as a professional for about thirteen years now. During this period, I've published eight novels (with the ninth, *Chronospace*, due out next May) and forty-five works of short fiction, along three unproduced screenplays, an audioplay, and a couple of dozen essays, articles, book reviews, and miscellanea. It's a large volume of work, representing well over a million words, yet I feel as if I'm only getting started. When I measure my literary career against those of the living fantasists I admire most—Sir Arthur Clarke, Harlan Ellison, Robert Silverberg, Stephen King, Joe Haldeman, and Frederik Pohl, to name just a few—then it becomes very clear that I'm still something of a novice.

On occasion, I'm asked which of my novels or stories are my personal favorites. This is a difficult question, because I like everything I've written, otherwise I wouldn't have finished it. Oh, there's some which could have been better, and a few which would have been different if I had written them today rather than five or ten years ago, and even two or three which have been forgotten and probably should be left that way. Yet of the two or three novels which I consider to be among my best work, *Labyrinth of Night* is one of them. Without a doubt, it's certainly the single most difficult book I've written. Here's why. . . .

On July 23, 1976, a member of the Viking Imaging Team at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory was using a magnifying glass to examine a mosaic-photo recently made of the Martian surface by the Viking 1 orbiter when he noticed something peculiar. In the Cydonia region of the northern hemisphere was a landform which, if you looked at it right, bore eerie resemblance to a human face. He told others at JPL about his discovery; a couple of days later, during a routine press conference, an enlarged detail of the Face photo was



shown to reporters . . . not as evidence of extraterrestrial intelligence, but as a curiosity. A trick of light and shadow. Nothing more, nothing less.

The photo made its way into a few newspapers. I was a high school senior then, and I recall being mildly interested in the picture. However, although I had been avidly following the Viking missions, I was more interested in learning the final analysis of the experiments made at the two landing sites, hopeful that microbiological life would be discovered on Mars. Even though I had already begun to write science fiction, the Face didn't inspire any stories. Indeed, no one else seemed to pay much attention; the Face was quickly forgotten, at least for several more years.

Flash forward to 1986. By now I was a staff reporter for a weekly alternative newspaper in Worcester, Massachusetts, and not very happy with what I was doing. When I wasn't covering city council meetings or chasing fire trucks, though, I was writing science fiction. I still hadn't sold any of my stories, but several months earlier I had made something of a breakthrough; a senior editor at Berkley/Ace had read the first few chapters of the novel I had been working on for the last couple of years and had written to express interest in seeing the rest of the book once it was finished. So I was spending my evenings writing *Orbital Decay* in hopes that it may be sold and that I'd earn enough from the advance to consider quitting my day job.

It was during this time I read an article was published in the November 1986 issue of *Analog*: "The Curious Case of the Humanoid Face . . . On Mars," by Richard Hoagland, a freelance science writer who attended at the JPL briefing ten years earlier. Hoagland not only postulated that the Face was an alien construct, but went on to extrapolate that a nearby cluster of hills and a large mountain might actually be the remains of a city and an enormous five-sided pyramid.

A strange article, even by *Analog* standards. After all, this was the same magazine which once touted Dianetics and the Dean drive, and even published an article using statistics to prove that cigarettes prevent lung cancer. I didn't accept Hoagland's premise then, and I still don't today, but it sparked my imagination all the same.

What if the Face was real? That is, what if it wasn't just light and shadow, or the result of our anthropocentric tendency to perceive the human visage in natural landforms, but indeed something deliberately constructed on the surface of Mars? Why was it built? When was it built? And if you accept that notion, then why would it resemble a human face and not that of . . . oh, say, an enormous frog, or whatever else you might image its creators looking like? For what reason was it built on Mars and not on Earth, or even on the Moon?

And furthermore . . . what might happen if, sometime in the not-too-distant future, we sent a manned expedition to Cydonia and discovered that the Face really existed? What if the spacefaring global superpowers—or at least those which existed in 1986, namely the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.—were to go to the brink of war over the Face and the City? And what if they were to find that the aliens were still there, at least in the form of robots they'd left behind?

What if, what if, what if . . . this is the game SF writers play. It doesn't mean you necessarily believe your own concept. Many writers don't think time travel is possible, for instance, but it doesn't prevent them from playing with its ramifications. In theory, SF allows a writer one—and preferably, only one—implausible premise, which he or she can freely draw upon to create a credible story. The Face may have been flat-out

Primary Ignition

nonsense, but until someone proved it was nonsense, it was fair game for a science fiction novel.

For the next year or so I played with my Face on Mars story—which now had the working title of *L.G.M.*, short for “Little Green Men,” a slang term used by SETI radioastronomers to denote inexplicable, nonrepeating cosmic emissions—believing that it would be the novel I’d write once *Orbital Decay* was finished. For a time, the novel was unique: not only was the Face still largely unknown except by *Analog* readers and a relative handful of space buffs, but there hadn’t been any major novels about Mars exploration in nearly twenty years, or at least not since Gordon R. Dickson’s *The Far Call* was published in 1978. Although the Face was the springboard for the story, my main intent was to write a near-future novel about Mars colonization, with first-contact as the plot driver.

I finished *Orbital Decay* and sent it to Ace, then turned my attention to planning my wedding and coping with my newspaper job, which had lately become a joyless burden since I was now working nearly sixty hours a week for poverty wages. I continued to research and develop *L.G.M.*, but *Orbital Decay* had taken three years to complete and I wasn’t ready to write another novel just yet.

Ace bought *Orbital Decay* in early ’87. The advance was in the low four-figures, but that was enough enable me to settle my debts and quit my job at Worcester Magazine to become a freelance writer. Between features for various general-interest and business magazines, I also began writing short fiction. One of those stories was “Live From The Mars Hotel,” in which I introduced Arsia Station, the Mars base I had developed for *L.G.M.* I loosely linked this story to *Orbital Decay*, thereby forming the basis of what would eventually become a future history; although I didn’t realize it at the time, the “Near Space” series would eventually include five novels and fifteen stories of various lengths. A few months later, after my new bride and I returned from our honeymoon trip to England, we moved to New Hampshire, where we rented a lakeside log cabin. One autumn afternoon, I sat down at my desk and, at long last, commenced work on *L.G.M.*

Despite all my research and preparation, though, *L.G.M.* refused to let itself be written. Every evening, once I was through with my latest feature piece, I picked up the novel where I had left off the night before and struggled with it a little more, yet it was like punching sand; the novel felt flat and lifeless.

After six weeks, I read the first few chapters and came to the harsh realization that what I had written was boring. I didn’t want to write a boring novel, so I shoved the manuscript in an envelope and hid it my file cabinet. No loss; *Asimov’s Science Fiction* had just purchased “Live From the Mars Hotel,” and the check I received for that 6,000-word story was twice as much as what I was earning for the 3,000-word feature articles with which I was paying the rent, so I decided to concentrate on short fiction.

Ace wanted another novel from me, though, so in early 1988 I began work on *Clarke County, Space*, the book which would become my second novel instead of *L.G.M.* I thought the Mars novel was dead.

Then, in the summer of 1988, I went to a Grateful Dead concert in Lewiston, Maine.

I love the Grateful Dead. While Jerry Garcia was alive and the band was touring, I attended every concert I could, sometimes driving hundreds of miles just to see a show; after the Dead broke up, I took count of the number of shows I’d seen and realized I had attended fifty-six concerts over the course of sixteen years. Besides the fact that the Dead delivered the best live performances money could buy, I’d learned that, for reasons I barely understood, I came up with my best ideas during their shows. Everyone else might be dancing or swaying back and forth or smoking pot or whatever, and I’d be simply standing there in a transcendental state, utterly sober yet more stoned than the acidheads all around me. So I always went to Dead concerts with a notebook and pen in my pocket, ready to jot down whatever thoughts occurred to me during the show.

That warm summer night, during their second set, the Dead performed one of their spookiest numbers: “The Other One.” I’d heard this piece many times before, but something about this particular rendition lit a spark. Indeed, it was as if a movie screen lowered itself in front of my eyes; suddenly, the bits and pieces of my abandoned novel effortlessly fell together, and I began to see how it could be done. I pulled out my pad and pen and, while my wife held a cigarette lighter above me so I could see what I was doing, began making notes. By the time the show was over, I had the novel figured out. And, as a bonus, it had now a new title; instead of *L.G.M.*, it was going to be called *Labyrinth of Night*.

(After the novel was published, one reviewer observed that *Labyrinth of Night*

bore some similarity to Algis Budrys’ classic novel *Rogue Moon*. He was correct; I was thinking about *Rogue Moon* when I came up with *Labyrinth of Night*. Several years later, I happened to have a conversation with Algis, during which I told him that his work inspired my own. When I revealed the circumstances during which I brainstormed the plot, Algis told me something rather eerie; when he wrote *Rogue Moon*, it was while hearing a high school marching band rehearsing in a football field a short distance from his home. And what does a high school band and the Grateful Dead have in common? Drums. We were both listening to drums while we came up with our respective stories, nearly a quarter-century apart.)

At the time, though, I was halfway through *Clarke County, Space*, and it would have been dumb to abandon one novel to write another. Not only that, but I had also signed a two-book contract with Ace for both *Clarke County, Space* and an indirect sequel to *Orbital Decay*, tentatively titled *Moondog Blues* and later retitled *Lunar Descent*. So *Labyrinth of Night* had to go on the back burner until those novels were done. Yet I wanted to do something with the idea while it was still fresh, so I during the autumn of ’88 I took a short break from *Clarke County, Space*, pulled out part of the novel that I thought could stand by itself, and wrote it as a novella.

Under the title “Red Planet Blues,” the novella appeared in the September 1989 issue of *Asimov’s*, about two months before *Orbital Decay* was published. By then I had completed *Clarke County, Space* and was almost halfway through *Lunar Descent*. By the time *Lunar Descent* was finished in the summer of 1990, I had signed a contract with Ace for *Labyrinth of Night*, using “Red Planet Blues” as the sample chapters that accompanied a detail plot synopsis. I had just begun work on the novel when Linda and I moved from New Hampshire to St. Louis; I dictated notes into a pocket tape recorder while I drove my second-hand Jeep across the country.

Yet “Red Planet Blues” was already obsolete, or at least in terms of its political background. The U.S.S.R. still existed when the novella was published, but by the time I sat down to expand it to book length, the Communist Party no longer controlled the Russian government and most of the former Soviet republics had declared independence. This meant I had to drastically revise “Red Planet Blues”; indeed, if you were to find and read the original story—it’s only been

Absolute Magnitude

published once, and hasn't been reprinted since—you'd see how many changes were made between the version that appeared in *Asimov's* and the version that became Part One of *Labyrinth of Night*.

Another new problem was in depicting the Face itself. When I first began work on *L.G.M.* three years earlier, the Face was still relatively obscure; by 1990, though, it had left the fringe and become part of the pop-culture mainstream. Richard Hoagland's *The Monuments of Mars*, which I had read in its original small-press edition, had become a cult bestseller in the U.S.; he had since produced a couple of video documentaries which were now cropping up here and there (I found mine, of all places, at auto show in St. Louis). Supermarket tabloids like *Weekly World News* now regularly featured the original Viking photo on their covers, along with wild stories about them beaming messages to fictional Russian space probes. I had even received my first crank letter, from some guy in Austria who had read "Red Planet Blues" and wrote to accuse me (and Hoagland as well) of stealing the idea from an article he had published in Germany (despite the fact that my story saw print first, or that I hadn't yet learned how to read German).

I didn't want to contribute to pseudoscientific lore; on the other hand, neither did I want to abandon my novel. Therefore I took the middle road; I deliberately ignored the more outlandish claims involving the Face and concentrated on the principal idea. The Face, along with the nearby City, was an extraterrestrial artifact, and that was all anyone knew.

However, I still felt as if I was doing something unique: the first major novel about Mars in nearly two decades. This was important, because I had recently been scooped; although my novella "Trembling Earth" had been published in the November 1990 issue of *Asimov's*, only six weeks later Michael Crichton published *Jurassic Park*. My story, which also dealt with dinosaur cloning, came out first, but Crichton's novel got all the attention. Ah, well, so it goes; at least no one would beat me to Mars. . . .

Yet I was already in another race, and I didn't even know it.

I finished the novel in early summer of 1991, and turned in the copyedited final draft a couple of weeks before Christmas. When *Labyrinth of Night* was published in the autumn of 1992, it was one of four major

SF novels about Mars published that year: the other three were Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars*, Ben Bova's *Mars*, and Frederik Pohl's *Mining the Oort*. Jack Williamson's *Beachhead* came out a few months later; within the next year or so several more Mars novels would follow. The Martian Land Rush had begun.

All four novels were very different from one another, yet a careful reader might perceive certain similarities; both *Red Mars* and *Labyrinth of Night*, for instance, featured dirigibles as a means of aerial transportation, something which hadn't been done before. This was no coincidence; everyone who was seriously researching Mars colonization relied upon much the same source material, most notably the published proceedings of the Case for Mars conferences held at the University of Colorado during the late '80s. However, it is coincidental that these four novels all appeared within the same year. That's sometimes the case in science fiction; two or more authors get a brainstorm at roughly the same time, and even if they're working without any knowledge of what the other guy is doing, nonetheless they produce novels or stories that echo each other's work. That's what happened with the crossover between "Trembling Earth" and *Jurassic Park*, and the same thing occurred during the Martian Land Rush.

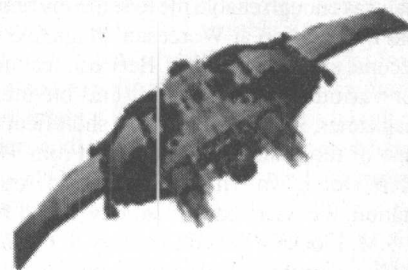
A couple of critics, perhaps trying to incite controversy, attempted to compare one novel to another; one fanzine reviewer went so far as to insinuate that Ace, upon hearing that Robinson was writing *Red Mars* for Bantam, had hired me to bash out *Labyrinth of Night*. Yet most reviewers were mature enough to realize that these books were written independently and that one writer hadn't tried to imitate the other another. *Red Mars* is doubtless the outstanding work of this period, but all four novels sold well and received favorable notice. Indeed, when Stan and I saw each other at a SF convention in Texas later that year, we compared notes over a tequila-soaked game of billiards and got a chuckle over how we had both started at the same place and ended up going in different directions. No hard feelings; we're still friends.

Red Mars received a Nebula Award and Ben Bova's *Mars* was a bestseller, but *Labyrinth of Night* held its own, and has remained in print for the past eight years. During this time, I've received letters from people asserting that the Face does indeed exist. However, recent photos obtained by

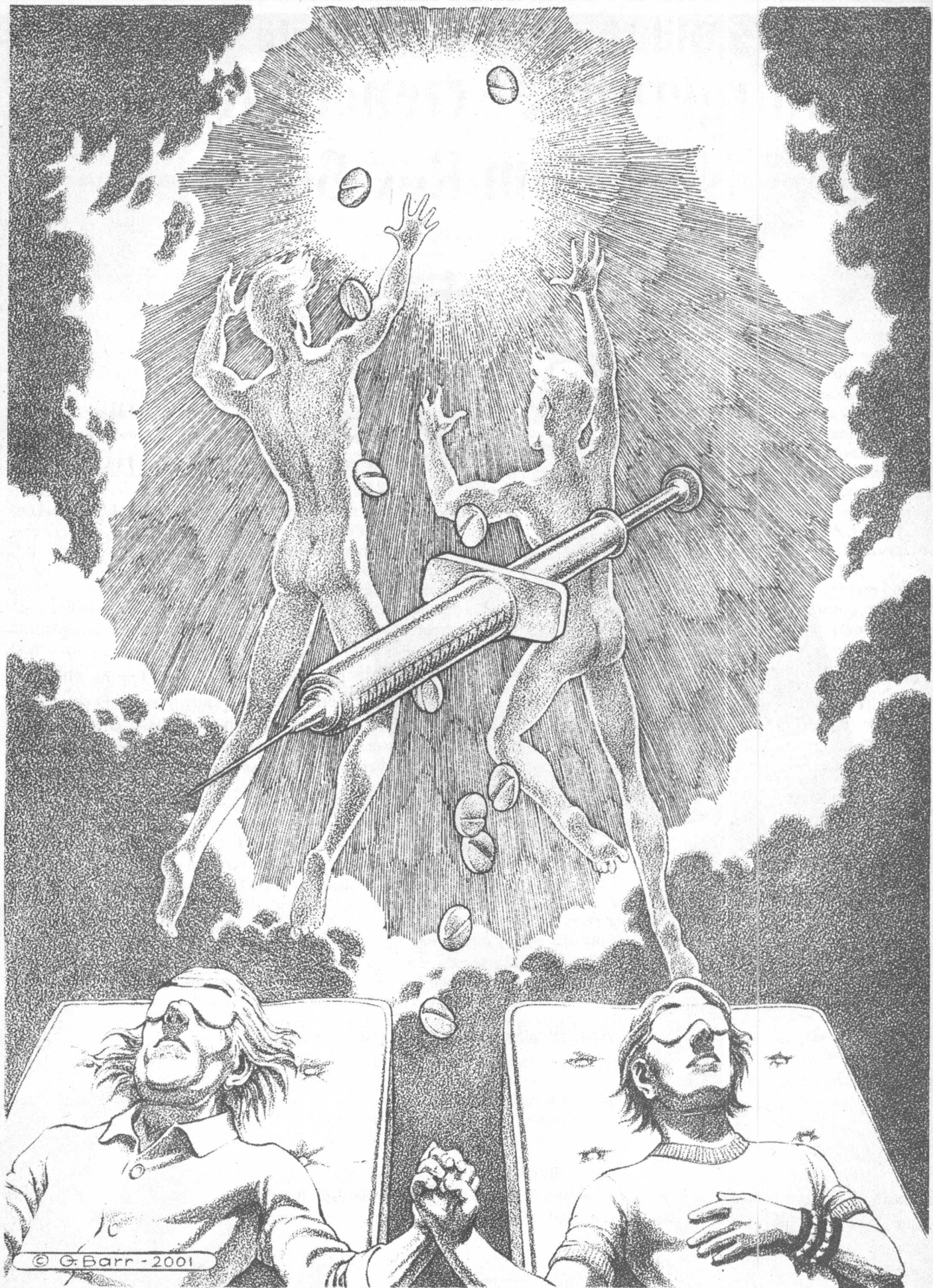
Mars Global Observer reveal that the Face has disappeared since 1976; only a wind-eroded scar in the Cydonia highlands remains where there was once something that briefly resembled the human face. To be honest, I expected this; never once did I seriously believe that the Face was real, any more than I now believe the conspiracy theories that NASA doctored those photos. If the Face did indeed exist, why would NASA want to hide it? If anything, photographic evidence that aliens have left enormous artifacts on Mars would give NASA all the ammunition it needs to push Congress into funding a manned expedition.

Although I wrote more about my Mars colonies within the Near Space series, I never again alluded to the Face except when absolutely necessary. There's no reference to it in my Hugo-nominated novella "Zwarte Piet's Tale" even though Arsia Station is a major setting in that story. Many readers have demanded a sequel, but it simply won't happen. I'm done with Cydonia. If I ever write another Mars novel, the Face won't be mentioned. Been there, done that. . . .

Fifteen years after its inception I like to think of *Labyrinth of Night* as a good, solid adventure story. So be it. I hope readers enjoy it in that spirit.



Worlds of Wonder
ORIGINAL ART
SF/Fantasy Illustration
44 page Color Catalog
\$10 postpaid
P.O. Box 814-AM, McLean VA 22101
703.847.4251 ▲ 703.790.9519 fax
www.wow-art.com



He Did the Flatline Boogie and He Boogied on down the Line

by William Sanders

Copyright © William Sanders 2001

The dude is sitting at this table way in the back of this little bar. The light is bad and at first I'm not even sure he's the right one, but then he looks up and waves a couple of fingers at me. When I get back to his table he sticks out a hand and says, "Hi. You're the guy they call Dead Henry?"

I don't do anything about the hand. I just look at him and say, "I hear you've been looking for me.

"Right," he says, "sit down. Want a drink?"

I shake my head. "I don't do booze," I tell him, and he makes this little face like that's what he expected and picks up his glass, while I slide into the seat across from him. Man, I don't see how anybody can drink that shit. I mean, look how it fucked up my parents.

While he sucks on his drink I check him out. He doesn't look like a cop, not that that means anything since the ones you have to worry about never do, but I'm not really sweating that anyway. The Feds don't give a major shit about street dealers like me, not enough to send an undercover man looking for me, and the local cops already know where to find me. And do, every month at collection time.

"An old dude, really wasted looking." That was what the street kids said, when they told me this guy nobody had seen before was asking around about where he could find Dead Henry the main neck man. Looking him over now, I figure they had him pretty well nailed. Oh, he's not like *old* old, but he's getting up there. Maybe somewhere in his forties, maybe even a little more, I can't really tell after they get double my age.

The punks were sure as hell right about the wasted part. The dude is taller than me, six feet at least, but I bet I've got twenty pounds on him. His hands are all big and bony like a Halloween skeleton, and you can see the shape of his skull under the skin of his face, which is a very bad kind of greenish white. His eyes are big and dark with lots of red around the edges and humongous bags underneath. His hair and his shirt collar, which meet in back, are the same dirty gray, and he needs a shave.

All in all he looks more or less like most of my customers, except for being so much older. But I keep getting the feeling I've seen him before, and it's eating

at me. Remembering faces is very important in my business.

He puts down his glass and says, "They tell me you're the main Necrodone connection around here."

Well, he doesn't fuck around, does he? "Maybe," I say. "How much did you have in mind?"

I mean, it's not like you never get these old freaks coming around wanting to try the new stuff. It's not real often they want neck, though. Most of your dopers in that age bracket go for the various uppers and downers, or coke or crack if you can get it, and now and then some grandpa type asks if you've got acid. And of course they all smoke weed—though mostly they grow their own nowadays, or know somebody who does, so it's not worth a serious dealer's trouble handling that bulky shit—but you hardly ever see a Necrodone user over thirty or so. Maybe they figure they're getting close enough to the real thing, you know what I'm saying?

So I guess this one is probably some small-town dealer in the city to make a buy, not big enough to do business with a main connection, and I am trying to think where I can put together a quantity batch of neck. But he is giving me a funny look and now he says, "Oh, I get it. No, I'm not looking to score," and hearing his voice again makes the light finally kick on in my head and I know who he is.

"Shit," I say, feeling my face go all stupid-looking. "You're Jerry Duane Austin."

He leans back in his seat and smiles, not a feelgood smile but more like the bottom half of his face is cracking open. "Son of a bitch," he says after a minute. "Didn't think anybody under forty ever heard of me. What, your daddy used to play my CD's?"

My old man's idea of music was the sound of his hand upside my head or Mom's, but I don't want to go there right now. "Old guy I used to know," I say instead, "taught me guitar, he made me listen to everything you ever recorded. Said you were the best since Stevie Ray."

"Huh," he says, and rubs his face with one hand. "Son of a bitch," he says again.

Jerry Duane Austin was, no shit, the best blues guitar man to come out of the late Nineties, just about the only one from those days that I could ever stand to listen to.

Absolute Magnitude

I nearly wore my fingers down to the knuckles trying to copy some of his riffs—looking at the size of his hands now, I can see why I never even got close—and the first half a dozen pieces I learned to play were songs he wrote. I still have all his stuff in my collection, some of it so old it's even on tape. That's going back to around the time I was born, nearly.

"Never mind that," he says, doing a little brushing-away number with his fingers, which I notice are shaking. "Listen," he says, "I'm looking for a girl."

My face goes all hot and prickly. "Wrong man, dude," I say, feeling like punching him and maybe about to do it. "I deal, okay? I'm not a fucking pimp."

"No, no." He's shaking his head and waving both hands. "I mean there's a particular girl I'm trying to find. Or woman, I guess I ought to say, but she's so young. . . ."

He puts his head down in his hands like he's praying. Maybe he is. While he gets it together I look around the place. I've never been in here before, even though I must have passed right by the door about a million times while working the street. I stay out of bars, partly because I don't drink but also because there's no action for me in a place where half of my regular customers aren't even old enough to get in. This one is dark and dirty, lots of cigarette smoke which I really hate, and all the customers are older guys wearing work clothes or cheap suits. The juke box is playing some whiny-ass ancient thing, the Eagles I think—my mom used to listen to them—and you can smell the toilet clear across the room.

"Sorry," Jerry Duane says, sitting up straight and reaching for his drink again. "Like I was saying, I'm looking for this girl. I thought you might be able to help."

"She's a neck-head?" I figure I already know the answer.

"Last I heard." His voice is very tight, like he wants to scream but isn't letting himself do it. "At least some people I know ran into her a few weeks back, here in the city, and they said from the way she talked she was getting heavily into the Necrodone scene."

I wonder if he knows what a standard number that is around here. They show up all the time along the street, daddies and uncles and brothers and sometimes even the numbnuts hometown boyfriends, looking for the dear sweet little angel who disappeared in the big bad city. Now and then they even hire some jackoff PI who takes their money, comes around and asks a few questions just to make it look like he's doing something, and finally

tells them the facts of life that they could have got for free from any cop.

Everybody on the street has picked up walking change off dudes like this, giving them bullshit information that never does them any good because, face it, nobody gets found in the city unless they want to and if the poor silly little bitch wanted to talk to them she'd have used the fucking phone or the public email down at the bus station. Usually she's doing just fine turning tricks or dealing street dope—or both—and the last thing she wants to see is anybody or anything from the past. Why do they think she left in the first place?

Any minute, I think, this one is going to pull out a picture and show it to me. And, sure enough, he does.

"Her name's Jane Ann," he says, passing it across the table. "Recognize her?"

The photo is a small Polaroid holo, shot from too close up with too much flash, so the girl in it looks like an albino. Long curly blond hair, kind of a round face, big soft-looking lips done in that purple lipstick they were all wearing last year. Goofy little grin, please-don't-hit-me eyes. I say, "No."

This is of course bullshit. Sure I recognize her, how could I *not* recognize her when I see her every day, been seeing her every day for fucking years, on the street or riding the bus or the subway, lying on beds in neck houses or getting into cars with uptown tricks, every so often being loaded into an ambulance or spread out inside a chalk outline on some bloody piece of sidewalk. Fuck knows how many of her there are, or where they all come from.

But the look on Jerry Duane Austin's face tells me he is not ready to hear any of this. Whoever this Jane Ann was, he thinks she's the only one there's ever been. And that's sad, man, but because he's who *he* is—or was—I keep what I'm thinking to myself.

Anyway, I told him straight enough: I don't recognize this particular one.

I say, "What's she, your daughter?"

He looks down into his drink and makes a little dry hacking sound that I guess is as close to a laugh as he can do right now. "Well," he says, "when you think about it, I *am* old enough—"

He takes the picture back. "It was August of last year," he says, "and I was playing this gig in San Antone." Looking at my face, he does that weird laugh again. "Oh, sure, I'm still working. Haven't recorded anything in years, no major tours, but I still get plenty of appearances. My agent's trying to set up a comeback, says people are ready for my sound again."

He Did the Flatline Boogie and He Boogied on down the Line

Right now I wonder if this dude could play with himself with both hands. I mean, anybody can see he's got himself seriously fucked up. Seeing how he's looking at that stupid Polaroid, I have a pretty good idea why.

"She showed up backstage," he says in this soft voice, "don't know how she got in but they don't check ID very close in small clubs like that. And yeah, we had your basic all-night fun and games, just like you're thinking, just like I'd done more nights in more towns than you could add up on that fancy computer sticking out of your shirt pocket. Hell, it's not like I didn't get my share in my day, not to mention being married three times—one of them even got a book and a TV movie out of how bad she said I treated her—so you wouldn't think I'd lose it, would you, over some underage Texas groupie?"

He lets out this sigh. "Only," he says, "it turned into something else . . ."

"And now she's taken off?" I ask him.

"We were together almost a year," he says, so low I can barely hear him over the bar noise. "She lived with me, went on tour with me, we did it all. She made me feel so God-damned good, you know? She never made me feel old."

He puts the holo back in his pocket, very carefully. "She disappeared a couple of months ago," he says, "just like that, no fights, no big scenes, no warnings, one day she just wasn't there any more."

"She a doper?" I ask, and he shrugs his shoulders.

"She did a little," he tells me, "like everybody else on the music scene. If that's her problem then I guess I'm to blame, because I was the one got her started. But she wasn't doing anything heavy, didn't have a habit."

His mouth twists to one side. "All I can think of, her father died this spring and she got real bent about it. Went on this big trip about death, talked on and on about it, read books, saw priests and suchlike, real morbid. Maybe, I don't know, I didn't give her enough support or something. Maybe," he says, "that's why she got interested in Necrodone, huh? Wanted to see what it's like?"

Could be. People do neck for lots of different reasons. There's even a half-assed church that uses it, claims near-death is a sacred experience, though I think most of the people who join are just lookin' for an excuse to dope without feeling like dopers. The way they keep getting busted, the law must figure the same way.

Me, I've never done neck for anything but straight laughs. I mean, I like the feeling of being on the edge—

and man, there's just *no* edge like the edge of that old dude's sickle, know what I'm saying?

Jerry Duane says, "I'll pay you to help me look for her. I've got plenty of bread, because they used that song of mine in that movie. Find Jane Ann for me, you can name your price."

"No," I say without having to stop and think, because I have already seen this coming. "No, I don't want your money. I'll help you look for her, no charge" He opens his mouth but I keep on: "If we do find her, though, I want your axe."

"My axe?" he says, surprised like. "You mean the guitar I use on stage?"

"The one you used to play," I say, "that old Les Paul Gibson, that you used in the first couple of videos. You still got it?"

"Yeah, sure. It's pretty old, may need some work, I haven't played it in years," he says, "but you find Jane Ann, sure, it's yours. Why not?"

"Come on, then," I say, getting up. "May as well get started."

"Where are we going?" he wants to know.

"Up front," I tell him, "we're going to see my partner."

Fat Slim looks at the holo and says exactly what I already knew he was going to say. "Don't recognize her," he says to Jerry Duane, "but that doesn't mean a thing. These kids come through here all the time, and there's no way I could remember their faces even if I had any reason to."

We are standing on the front steps of the neck house, which is an old two-story brownstone that probably used to be somebody's home they couldn't afford. It is the middle of the afternoon but the sky is cloudy and everything along the street looks dark and gray. Through the open door behind Fat Slim I can hear the steady *eeeeeeee* of the eek boxes. Sounds like business is good today.

Fat Slim hands the picture back to Jerry Duane. "I don't really look at them," he explains, "except just enough to size them up, spot the obvious flipouts and trouble freaks or the ones who look like they might not be able to handle it physically, like they're having trouble breathing or something. Your babe didn't have anything like that wrong with her, did she?"

Jerry Duane shakes his head. "Then," Fat Slim says, "she could be in there right now and I wouldn't necessarily know it. I don't think she is, but—" He jerks

his thumb toward the doorway. "Want to go in and have a look?"

Jerry Duane looks at me. "Go ahead," I say. We have this basic rule in the partnership: I deal the shit on the street and keep the supply coming, and Fat Slim runs the neck house. We don't second-guess each other. He wants to let Jerry Duane in, it's cool with me.

The light inside is strong, brighter than outside in fact, and I get out my shades and put them on. Most neck houses are pretty dim—I've been in some where you had to practically feel your way around—but Fat Slim likes to be able to see what he's doing. The other places, he'll tell you, it doesn't matter since they don't *know* what they're doing, but Fat Slim was a Navy med tech for thirteen years before they busted him out and he runs the place like a regular clinic. Costs a bit more, but we've never yet lost a customer, which is why we stay in business and the cops are reasonable to deal with. I mean, you lose just one of these freaks and there's going to be all kind of shit come down, I don't care who you think you paid off, know what I'm saying?

The people who had the place before us knocked out a lot of walls—I think they had a dance school—so the downstairs is mostly one big room. We've got eighteen beds in there, could have more but Fat Slim says he can't do a proper job on more than that, and then there are the private rooms upstairs for the customers with serious money. Real beds, too, not mattresses on the floor like in the cheap neck houses. You can get them for nearly nothing at Goodwill and this way Fat Slim and his helpers don't hurt their backs bending over to help the customers.

Right now, because it's early, only about half of the beds are in use, plus one more customer is on his way out the back door. "Check it out," Fat Slim tells Jerry Duane. "Who knows, maybe you'll get lucky."

I follow Jerry Duane as he walks slowly along the aisle between the two rows of beds. The customers are all flatted out, lying there on their backs with their eyes hidden by the little cloth sleep masks—that's another class touch we provide—and their faces pale and slack. Beside each bed the eek box is showing a green line straight as an E string and singing its one-note song.

Jerry Duane says almost in a whisper, "They look . . . dead."

"They are," I remind him. "That's, like, the point, you know?"

"Yeah, but—" Jerry Duane licks his lips. Damn, he's got a long tongue. Must have been fun for Jane Ann. "I mean," he said, "they look *really* dead."

"And as my esteemed partner just told you," Fat Slim says, "that's exactly what they are. Really, clinically fucking dead. Just not permanently."

He waves a big black hand at the bodies on the beds. "Oh, the correct term is supposed to be 'near-death' or 'para-terminal'—you read the literature, there's even a few precious assholes like to say 'thanatomimetic,' for Christ sake." Fat Slim reads a lot, even real books, not just net stuff. "But I guaran-fucking-tee you, every one of these fools is deader than shit, by any reasonable medical definition. Look at the EKGs. Flat as piss on a plate."

Jerry Duane is looking at the customers, one by one. Only four of them are women and it is easy to see by his face that none of them is Jane Ann.

"Interesting shit, Necrodone," Fat Slim says. "Developed accidentally, like most of the major head drugs. Way I heard it, this guy was working on an antidote for nerve gas, something that wouldn't have the side effects of atropine. Came up with this stuff, thought at first he'd really blown it big, had himself a new poison instead. Only then his lab animals started coming back to life after an hour or so." He grins, showing us his steel teeth. "Wonder how they got any human test subjects, to start."

"Hell, that's never hard," I tell him. "Any kind of shit you want to mix up, I can walk down the street and say, 'Here, try this,' and there's plenty of assholes ready to—"

All of a sudden there is a loud *woop-woop-woop* coming from beside the bed down at the far end. Fat Slim says, "Fuck," and takes off very fast. Jerry Duane says, "What?"

"Overtime alarm," I explain. "See, a neck trip's only supposed to last about an hour, then the stuff wears off and your heart starts pumping again and you're okay." And nobody in the world knows, even after all the studies, why you're not a total vegetable from going that long with no blood to your brain, but then there are plenty of things nobody understands about Necrodone. "Only now and then somebody gets stuck, and needs a little help getting back."

Fat Slim has shut off the alarm and is loading the big syringe. Jerry Duane watches, face getting greener than ever, as he shoves the spike into the stiff's arm and thumbs the plunger down.

"Actually," I say, "that one probably wasn't in any danger. Most people can go a bit over an hour with no problems—last I heard, the record's up past an hour and a half—but we always wake them up after an hour, if

He Did the Flatline Boogie and He Boogied on down the Line

they're still under. Fat Slim likes to leave a safety margin."

The line on the customer's eek box has begun to kink and bounce and the *eeeeeee* has changed to a steady *eek, eek, eek*. Fat Slim slaps the customer gently on both cheeks and pulls off his eye mask. "Welcome back," he says, "and thank you for flying with us. Come on, now, kid, sit up."

When the customer is sitting on the edge of the bed, shaking his head, Fat Slim comes back down the aisle toward us. "God," Jerry Duane says, "I hate to think of Jane Ann in a place like this."

"You better hope she *did* go to a place like this," Fat Slim growls. "And there aren't many. Most of the cheap neck houses, they just shoot the poor bastards up and give them a place to flop. Here, we charge more but we take care of our stiffs. We even provide EKG monitoring, which nobody else does."

A certain street gang ripped off the eek boxes from a hospital warehouse, looking for dope, and sold them to us for practically free because they didn't know what they were. I don't really understand what good they do, but they look cool and impress the shit out of the university kids—who have way more money than the street punks, and don't mind paying it out for some extra protection.

"The worst, though," Fat Slim goes on, "is doing neck alone. I can't believe how many idiots do that, nobody around to time them and bring them back if they get in trouble." He holds up the works he has just used. "Never know when you may need the old resurrection cocktail."

He's got that right. I'd guess more than half of the neck users around here shoot up alone—or with somebody else who's necked out too, which comes to the same thing—and now and then they get found permanently flatlined, usually when somebody notices the smell.

It's kind of depressing sometimes, dealing to these street punks and knowing what they're going to do, but hey, business is business. I don't see how I'm supposed to be responsible for what some geek does with what I sell him. They piss and moan that they don't have the money to use a good safe neck house like ours, but fuck that. Let them get off their lazy butts and make something of themselves, like I did. This is America, man.

Fat Slim shitcans the used spike, being very careful not to nick himself. Jerry Duane says, "What's that, that you gave that boy?"

"Private formula," Fat Slim tells him, "mostly Lidocaine, little meth, some other odds and ends. Maybe I ought to patent it, huh?"

That afternoon we hit all the regular neck houses, even a couple that almost nobody knows about. Jane Ann isn't at any of them and nobody recognizes her face from the photo. We walk back along the street, stopping now and then while I show the holo to people I know.

Jerry Duane is pretty quiet. He has seen a lot of very bad sights in the last couple of hours. The lowest class of neck houses are not fun scenes. It was even starting to get to me, toward the end. That last one, with all those wasted stiffs lying there on those moldy mattresses and the smell so bad you could hardly breathe, Jesus! Some people have no standards at all.

But now, as we are passing the bar where I met him, he speaks up. "Listen," he says. "I want to try it."

"Try what?" I say, and then I get it. I should have expected it. "Neck? You want to try a neck trip?"

He nods. "I want to find out what it's like. Maybe it'll help me understand what's happened to Jane Ann. And maybe it'll be easier for us to talk, when I do find her, if I've done it too."

I look at him for a minute or two. It is getting late and the lights are coming on along the street, but even in the dim light I can see that his eyes have kind of a desperate expression. This is a dude who is ready to try anything because he doesn't feel like he has anything left to lose.

Well, I think, why not? I don't see how it's going to help him, but I don't see how it can hurt, either.

"All right," I say. "Let's go back to the house."

A little while later, filling a throwaway works, Fat Slim says, "Okay, the thing you want to do is just relax and go with it. You're going to feel a little scared when it first starts to hit you, but don't let yourself panic. If you start to freak, I'll have to bring you out."

Lying on the bed, one sleeve rolled up, Jerry Duane says, "Okay." His voice is kind of scratchy, like his throat is dry. "I'm cool with it," he says.

Fat Slim looks at me and shakes his head and grins. We are in one of the upstairs rooms, just the three of us. Jerry Duane is already hooked up to the eek box and it is eeking away, faster than it would be doing if he was quite as cool with it as he says.

Absolute Magnitude

Seeing me rolling up my own sleeve, Fat Slim says, "You going to neck out too? Little early for you, isn't it?"

I stretch out on the other bed, next to Jerry Duane. "Thought I'd better go along," I say. "First time, he might want some company." I look at Jerry Duane. "If that's all right with you."

"You can do that?" he asks. "Go with me? How's that possible?"

"Just another unexplained phenomenon," Fat Slim says, loading up a second disposable, "in the wonderful fucking world of Necrodone. Most of the best scientific minds agree that it's *not* possible, that it's only dooper folklore based on the occasional shared hallucination, but you'll see. Not everyone can do it, but Dead Henry here is one of the best."

"How about you?" Jerry Duane asks him, and Fat Slim gives a big loud snort.

"The hell, man," he says, "I don't do this shit." Which is true. Fat Slim doesn't even smoke weed, or drink anything but beer. "Hey," he says to Jerry Duane, "do you want some dooper doing this to you?"

While Fat Slim is hooking up my eek box I reach across the space between the two beds. "Take my hand," I tell Jerry Duane. "It helps if we hold hands to start with. Don't ask me why."

He gives me a funny look. "Christ," I say, "just take it, what do you think, I'm not queer or anything." Actually I am but that is none of his business. "And pull the mask down so it covers your eyes. They tend to open when you go under and you'll go damn near blind from staring at the light, if you don't use the mask."

I pull down my own with my free hand and take a couple of deep breaths. Jerry Duane's hand is sweaty and cold. I hear him say, "Shit!" and figure Fat Slim has

stuck him. A couple of minutes later I feel the sting of the spike in my own arm. Like the nurse always tells you, it doesn't hurt a bit.

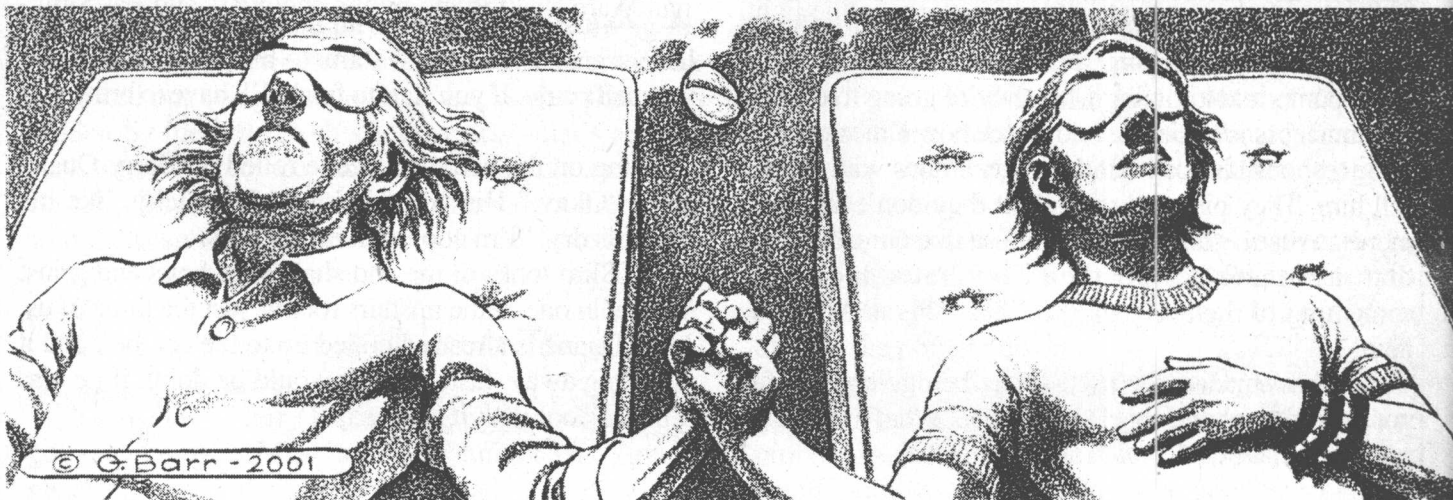
Fat Slim is right about trying not to panic. All the same, I'll tell you something a lot of neck-heads won't admit: *everybody* freaks, at least a little, when the Necrodone starts to hit. I don't care how many times you've been there and done it, you can't help having at least a second or two of blind shitless fear, as the messages start coming in from all over your body: *hey, asshole, you're dying!*

Then the dark comes down, and it's darker than any other dark you ever saw, it's like you can't even remember what light looks like, and there's no feeling in your hands and feet and then in your arms and legs and then no feeling anywhere, and the last thing you hear is the *eeeeeee* of the eek box registering flatline and it's the loudest thing in the world but then it's gone too, everything's gone, *you're gone, you're just . . . not*, any more, you never were.

And then—it's probably less than a second later in real time, nobody knows because nobody's ever figured out a way to measure neck-trip time—you fall up.

That's the only way I can describe it: you fall straight up, right out of your body, till you're hanging there like in some kind of magic act, above the bed. You can see again, now, you can even look down and check out your own stiff if you want to, though I hardly ever do that any more. I mean, I don't need neck to look at myself, that's why they make mirrors, right? But a lot of people, specially first-timers, get real hung up on that part. I can feel Jerry Duane beside me and I know that's what he's doing right now.

Understand, that's the only way I can pick him up. I



He Did the Flatline Boogie and He Boogied on down the Line

can't see him or hear him—even if he could talk, which he can't, because there are no words beyond flatline, you don't even know what words are or what they're for—and I don't know his name any more because that's a word too, I don't know mine either. But I can feel he's there, and I know he can feel me too.

And now comes the light.

I guess everybody has heard about the light, it's something they all talk about, and out of all the stupid shit that has been written and told about the neck experience, this is the one thing you can absolutely believe. Nobody has ever really told it the way it is—and don't even get me started on how they tried to show it in that fucking movie—but I don't think anybody can, because there's no words that cover it. Like I say, it happens in a place where words don't mean anything.

There's this incredible white light, you never knew anything could be so clean and white, coming down from somewhere above and filling the room till you can't see anything but the light. And you start falling up again, faster and faster, falling up into the light, it's getting brighter all the time, if you looked at a light like that while you were in your body I think it would blind you for life but this doesn't hurt at all, it feels good. It's like the light is cleaning away all the bullshit and the hangups and you're, like, *free*, you know what I'm saying?

Falling up into the light, I can still feel this somebody beside me, only now we're both becoming part of the light, sort of dissolving in it, like meth crystals in a speed-freak's spoon.

You know how during a really great come, there's a moment when everything goes away and it's like you're everywhere and nowhere at the same time? That's the closest thing I can think of, but this is a million times more intense and it goes on and on.

Some people say they see these patterns in the light, and now and then somebody even claims he saw a face, but I've never seen anything like that. I guess it has something to do with how your head happens to be wired up, or maybe what you're expecting. Like I keep saying, there's a lot about neck that nobody understands.

But some people also hear music, and now for the first time ever, even though I must have done a couple hundred neck trips or more, I start to hear it too. It's not like any music I ever heard before, maybe a little like somebody on a really fantastic keyboard setup but with more texture, maybe somewhere between a sitar and a pipe organ, here I am again with no words for what I'm trying to tell about.

And the tune, I swear, is Jerry Duane Austin's great single from '99, the one that goes:

*“Death come walking
No use talking
Death come riding
No use hiding
There ain't nowhere
Nowhere he can't find
And that Hanging Man
Hanging Man stays on my mind.”*

Only of course there are no lyrics, just the tune over and over, with chords and harmony lines that I don't think you could write down on any kind of staff or play on any instrument ever made. There was a time years ago, when I still wanted to be a musician, that I thought Jerry Duane Austin was God. Maybe this is how his music would sound if he was.

And the music is part of the light and I'm, we're, part of it, oh, fuck this. Words words words, listen, it's all bullshit. If you've been there and done it you already know what it's like and if you haven't then all the words in all the languages in the world can't tell you about it.

All this time the clock is running, down in the live world—I don't know why but I always think of it as “down”—and Fat Slim is laying out the spikes and the resurrection cocktail just in case, and the one-hour mark is coming up on the timer, but there's not even the idea of time there in the light.

But of course, since this is after all just a neck trip and not something like a heart attack or a bullet through the head, finally there comes a point where the light starts to fade and I'm falling back down out of the light and into the big black hole, and I hate it and try to fight it but the pull is too strong and next thing I know a couple of big hands are shaking me by the shoulders and Fat Slim's voice is saying, “All right, partner, you're back. How are things in scenic Croak City?”

I pull up the mask and see that Jerry Duane is already sitting on the edge of his bed, watching me. So he beat me down. That's not unusual with first-timers. Most of them don't even last half an hour.

“Far out,” he says, which I haven't heard anybody say since my grandpa died.

I sit up and begin kicking my feet and slapping my hands together, getting the blood flowing again. That's one of the downsides of doing neck, your feet and hands sort of go to sleep and it hurts like a son of a bitch when

Absolute Magnitude

the circulation starts to come back. "You okay?" I ask Jerry Duane.

"I'm fine," he says. "Man, what a trip. Thought I'd been around some, but I never been anywhere like that."

I get to my feet and stomp around a little, feeling the blood tingling in my toes. Jerry Duane says, "Uh, look—what you did, going with me? I mean, thanks, I could feel you there and all, it made everything a lot less scary. Only—" He hunches his shoulders, like he's about to try to pick up something heavy. "Man, does anybody ever, you know, *meet* somebody . . . over there?"

I know what he's asking. There's been a lot of argument about it, among the neck-heads and the researchers too. "Tough question," I tell him. "I wish I knew the answer. It's never happened to me, or to anybody I knew well enough to be sure they weren't hosing me, but you do hear stories. People who claim they had some kind of encounter with somebody else who happened to be necked out somewhere else at the same time, or even somebody they knew who was no-shit dead."

Since I know damn well where he's trying to go with this, I go on: "One thing for sure, it's extremely rare—if it happens at all—and it's not anything anybody knows how to control. There's no way, that anybody's come up with so far, to actually go looking for somebody over the line."

"Whatever claims some weasels make," Fat Slim puts in, "to separate the stupid from their money. Spirits of the dead contacted while you wait, and all that. Neck's done wonders to revive certain very old scams."

Jerry Duane stands up and starts to move toward the door. "What do I owe you guys?" he asks.

"On the house," I say before Fat Slim can speak. "We're, like, honored."

He reaches in his pocket and at first I think he is going to insist on paying, but then I see he is getting out that picture of Jane Ann. "You better keep this," he says, "in case you need it to help you find her. I've got plenty more." He takes out a pen and writes something on the back. "Call this number if you learn anything. Anything at all."

When he is gone I say, "Christ, he's really jammed up over this girl," and Fat Slim does another of his snorts.

"Yeah," he says. "Poor bastard."

"I can't imagine," I say, "needing anybody like that."

"I know," Fat Slim says. "Which poor bastard did you think I meant?"

It takes me till the middle of next week to find Jane Ann. And I know what I said, but a lot of things get more possible when you know who to ask and can pay for the answers. Especially if, like me, you can pay with something people want even more than money.

The room is on the top floor of a scabby old apartment building down near the park. Nobody answers when I knock. After I decide nobody is going to, I get out a couple of special little tools and have a talk with the piece-of-shit lock, and less than a minute later the door opens.

The first breath I take, I start to wish I'd left it closed.

But I step back into the hallway, which luckily is still deserted, and fill my lungs—one interesting side effect of being a neck user, you get so you can hold your breath for a long time—and go in. It takes only one quick glance around the little room to find her.

I'd just as soon not tell you what she looks like. Later, I hear they figure she's been lying there at least two weeks, maybe more. They say it's hard to be sure because neck does funny things to the decomp process. All I know, she looks like hell and smells worse.

She doesn't look much like the picture any more, that's for sure. But I can still tell who she is. Or was.

Naturally I get my ass out of there as fast as I can move it, with the rest of me following along very close. I make a couple of calls, one to the cops and one to Jerry Duane's answering machine, from a pay phone at the Port Authority. Then I get on the train—flying leaves too many tracks—and take a long vacation up in Toronto, where I have friends and business acquaintances who do not go in for asking questions or giving out answers.

I mean, you can't be too careful. Even if nobody saw me going into her place or coming out—and you can't ever assume that—I have been asking about this babe and even showing her picture all over this end of town. And I have a record of dope busts, even if they never got a conviction, and this is a dope death.

Which, nowadays, is all they need to pull me in on suspicion, like maybe I was the one who sold her the shit she went out on. As long as some cop's prepared to swear that there's a reasonable probability of a drug angle, they can keep me just about as long as they like, never mind charges or hearings, all legal as hell according to the U.S. Supreme fucking Court—dope being a clear and present danger, and all that.

And even if they never do charge me with anything, they can take everything I've got, right down to my

He Did the Flatline Boogie and He Boogied on down the Line

spare pair of jock shorts, and keep it unless I can prove I didn't buy it with dope profits. I've got most of my money stashed in a lot of blind-bogus bank accounts and I don't think they could find them all, but with all the electronic shit they've got now, they can fix it so I don't dare go near a nickel of it. Not to mention if I can't show a legit means of support they can stick me in a labor camp—pardon me all to hell, Work Education Center—for six to a year of compulsory rehab, and they'll do it, too.

So it is no time to be taking chances, and I stay up north for the rest of the summer, which is too hot to spend in the city anyway. But I may be worrying about nothing, because from the stories in the U.S. newspapers at the stand down near where I'm staying, Jane Ann's case is not exactly getting the high-profile treatment. Just another tragic teenage drug death, is how they're playing it, which is fine with me.

I am still in Toronto when I hear about Jerry Duane.

NINETIES POP STAR DEAD IN DRUG OVERDOSE. That's what one of the headlines says, and it is pretty typical. About the only thing they get right is the dead part.

A lot later, after I finally come home, Fat Slim gives me the story.

"I got the details," he tells me, "from the good Detective Sergeant Carmody, when he came around for the monthly donation to the Carmody Children's Education Fund. Which, by the way, has now undergone a definite increase, indexed the Sergeant says to overall inflation rates, so now you're back you might want to put in a little overtime to help make up the deficit. Like there's this warehouse up in the District, they want to set up a supply line, have the stuff on hand for certain well-off customers who want to try the necrophilia thing without actually . . ."

"Yeah," I say. "Takes all kinds."

"Well," he says, "you might go up there and have a talk with the management. Like I say,



we're developing a cash flow problem."

He sits down on the nearest bed. As it happens we are in the upstairs room where Jerry Duane and I took our neck trip. The masks are still lying on the pillows. I think about taking Jerry Duane's, sort of like to remember him by, but that would be a little too weird even for me.

"There's no doubt about it," Fat Slim says. "It was deliberate. He had enough Necrodone in him to kill a water buffalo. And he had all these pictures of Jane Ann, even clippings from the stories when she died, lined up on the bed beside him. He'd fixed himself up, too, shaved and cleaned up and put on one of his stage suits. Dude was going out in style."

"He leave a note?"

"According to Carmody, there was a sheet of hotel stationery with the words HOLD ON, BABY, I'M COMING. Which," Fat Slim says with one of his snorts, "mysteriously disappeared later, and there is no reference to it in any of the reports or the news stories."

"Why the broom job?"

"Carmody didn't know, just that word came down that this was to be treated as an accidental overdose and no mention of the S-word. Rumor has it that his agent and the recording-company executives figured this was the best way to play it, in terms of the big re-release package that's already in the works. Puts him in the tradition of Janis and Jimi and Elvis and the others, you know? Only writers get to commit suicide. Anyway," Fat Slim says, "I don't suppose much pull had to be exerted to get the right ruling. After all, it's not as if anybody gave a shit."

"So he thought he could go after her," I say, thinking out loud. "Like if he went out the same way, maybe he'd hook up with her in the next world."

"Or the neck world," Fat Slim says, and we both laugh. I mean, I feel bad the dude did it, but Jesus *Christ*, what a dumb idea. Fucking Texans, I swear.

About a month later I hear once again that somebody is asking around on the street, looking for me. I wonder if maybe I came back from Canada too soon, but when I go to check it out I meet this very straight-looking young dude in a really neat suit, who hands me a card that says he is from some law firm. "Mr., ah, Henry," he says. "I have something for you."

He takes me to where his car is parked and opens the trunk and there inside, no shit and swear to God, is a cream-finish Les Paul Gibson guitar with a leather strap that says JERRY DUANE AUSTIN.

"Just before his, ah, demise," the suit says, "Mr. Austin added a codicil to his will, leaving this instrument to you. I must say it's taken some doing to find you."

He hands me an envelope. "This was to be given to you as well," he says. "It has not been opened."

Inside the envelope is a sheet of paper with some writing in pen and ink. It is not easy to read but I finally make it out:

Dead Henry my man—

If you are reading this it means I am now music history. Don't let it bum you out, little bro. This is the first time this century that I know what I'm doing.

I promised you this axe if you found Jane Ann, and you found her. Not the way I had in mind, but a deal is a deal. Anyway, it's not like I've got any use for it any more.

Enjoyed our little trip together. See you, maybe—

The signature is just a big tangly scrawl but I know what it says. Probably some autograph freak would pay good money for it but fuck that. I wad it up and throw it on the sidewalk and pick up the Gibson and start walking, while the suit stands there looking at me like he's wondering where I stash my horns and tail.

And, no matter what bullshit you may have heard or read, that's the true story of what happened to Jerry Duane Austin. But you didn't hear it from me.

I think about him sometimes, specially evenings when I sit around playing that old Gibson and trying to get the changes right on "Hanging Man Blues" or whatever. As a musician he's still my number one hero, but man, he was one weird mother.

Do I think he found Jane Ann and they're together now, somewhere inside the big light? Oh, hell, no.

Look, man. Whatever games your head plays when it thinks it's time to go, there's nothing out there. Dead is dead, and everybody does it alone.

Know what I'm saying?



Book Reviews

Reviews by Mike Jones

***The Best Military Science Fiction of the 20th Century* edited by Harry Turtledove with Martin H. Greenberg**
Del Rey, 542 pages, \$18.00
ISBN 0-345-43989-9

Maybe it's the fact that some of the very first science fiction books I read were Joe Haldeman's *Forever War*, and Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, courtesy of my military father, but I've always had something of a fascination for well-done military-style SF. It's not one of my favorite genres, but the stories that stand out in it are some of the best I've ever seen. In the heat of combat, the stress of life-and-death situations, the true measure of a man, whether he be hero or coward, is brought to light. And in the thirteen stories contained in this collection, we indeed see the true measure of some widely varied men, women, and children.

For me, the most recognizable story had to be "Ender's Game" by Orson Scott Card, the story which was later expanded into a novel, and has since been followed by three sequels and two companions. There's just something about watching an eight-year-old boy pushed to the absolute limit, beyond the breaking point, and unknowingly serving as the herald of victory for one race and the angel of death for another that's always resonated with me. However, it's in fine company, most of which I'd never read before.

From the curious almost-fantasy selection of Anne McCaffrey's "Dragonrider" to the apocalyptic visions of George R.R. Martin's "The Night of the Vampyres" and Phillip K. Dick's "Second Variety," we get a taste for what the genre can offer us. Arthur C. Clarke's "Superiority," on the other hand, is a bemusing fable of how too much reliance upon superior firepower can actually lead to defeat.

Joe Haldeman's "Herc," which was the seed for the aforementioned *Forever War*, is likewise included, showing the bizarre and all-too-dismaying effects of a war that spans centuries in realtime, but mere months for those fighting it. From Paul Anderson we get

"Among Thieves," and from Gregory Benford, "To The Storming Gulf." To round out this motley pantheon of writers, we have C.J. Cherryh, David Drake, Cordwainer Smith, Walter Jon Williams, and Harry Turtledove, who also edited the anthology and wrote an informative, telling introduction that further explores the fascination we have with military SF.

Are these thirteen stories *the* best military science fiction of the 20th century? It's not for me to say. Certainly, they represent some of the best published after 1950, nothing from before 1951 or after 1987. There's any number of runners-up that might have served just as well or better. But in terms of providing a wide range, and accessing the potential of such stories, they serve quite suitably. If military science fiction, in whatever shape or form, appeals to you, there's bound to be something to your liking in this collection.

***In the Company of Others*, by Julie E. Czernada**
Daw, 565 pages, \$6.99
ISBN 0-88677-999-5

There are two ways of dealing with living in space. In one, there's always enough room for everyone, supplies are plentiful, and gravity is a constant. We've all seen that sort in *Star Wars*, or *Star Trek*. In the other way, space is cramped, claustrophobic, incestuously tight, and supplies are at a premium. With *In the Company of Others*, we have a case of the latter. Julie Czernada's latest book tells a story of a human expansion aborted at the last minute by an alien encounter gone so horribly wrong that the newly terraformed planets were placed off-limits, the Earth system prohibited to incoming traffic, and the thousands of colonists already enroute stranded on space stations far too small to handle them all.

Years later, the situation has only gotten worse, with the crowding on places such as Thromberg Station so bad that people live, work, and sleep in shifts to accommodate the lack of resources, and tensions are always at a fever pitch. But Thromberg holds a secret. Aaron Pardell, perhaps the only human to

ever visit one of the Quill-infested planets, planets which kill any human who sets foot on them, lives a secretive life. Unable to touch anyone because of his unique medical condition, he represents the most claustrophobic aspect of the living arrangements, someone surrounded on all sides by people he can't touch, lest they, or he, die. But while his life isn't perfect, at least it's his to live.

That is, until Earth scientist Gail Smith comes to Thromberg seeking him, in the hopes that by studying Aaron, she might cure what is now called "The Quill Effect" and reopen all those planets to colonization. In doing so, she'll tear Aaron and his friends away from the only home they've known for years, reveal long-lost secrets about his parentage, and discover the astonishing secrets of the Quill, a formerly harmless race who somehow turned deadly.

There are plots within plots, as everyone has his own agenda. Aaron, his best friend Malley, the old spacer Rosalind Fournier, Gail Smith, the crew of the experimental starship *Seeker*, they all have their goals, and in far too many cases, what they want is going to come in violent conflict with what they get. The fates of the *Seeker's* crew, Aaron, Gail, Malley, the thousands of colonists, and the Quill are all tied together in the secrets buried in the soil of the forgotten planet called Pardell's World, named for Aaron's lost family.

In the Company of Others is a rich and believable book, with extremely strong characterization, and a tense plot that wouldn't let me go. Without a doubt, this is Julie Czernada's best work to date, and a good sign for the future. I could feel the cramped, claustrophobic corridors and rundown nature of Thromberg Station, as well as the combination of promise and terror held by Pardell's World, and the nifty-keen technology of the *Seeker* and its crew. This is what science fiction is all about: the characterization, plot, setting, and technology play off of each other in a well-balanced manner. It's definitely worth checking out.

***First Contract* by Greg Costikyan**
Tor, 287 pages, \$6.99

Absolute Magnitude

ISBN 0-812-54549-4

When the aliens finally come, it's not going to be to kill us, mate with our women, enslave us, destroy us, or enlighten us. No, it's going to be to open up new trade routes, and do to the Earth what McDonalds, WalMart, and Starbucks have done to every town in America. Who ever would have thought that the aliens would be such merciless capitalists?

First Contract is the riches to rags story of Johnson Mukerjii, CEO of a small but profitable company in Silicon Valley. A fast-talking wheeler-dealer, he's inches away from bust or boom, if only his company can get their new product working. He's rich, powerful, a personal friend of the President, married to a gorgeous woman, and on top of the world. Then the aliens arrive. Far from being ambassadors of peace, these are hucksters, traveling salesmen who buy Jupiter in exchange for their equivalent of \$24 worth of geegaws and technology. That's just the beginning. As the tech market crashes, and alien technology becomes more and more prevalent, Mukerjii's personal life heads down the drain. His wife drains the bank account, sells the house, and leaves. Banks refuse to return his phone calls. Ultimately, he's out on the street with a bottle of Sterno to keep him company. From there, the only way he can go is back up. And that's just what he'll do, no matter who he has to bribe, con, or cajole, or what laws he has to bend.

Even if he can figure out a way to beat the aliens at their own game, will he beat the IRS, and survive the interstellar version of a trade conference?

First Contract is a fast read, but a biting satire that mixes humor, business, and science fiction to paint a refreshingly different picture of first contact. These aliens land at the White House because our media says it's traditional. NASA turns a bigger profit by transforming their facilities into a shopping mall than they ever could as a spacefaring agency. Johnson Mukerjii, one of those dot.com entrepreneurs, is Earth's best, last, and only hope. The book is genuinely funny, and all too plausible given the most logical reasons for traveling thousands of lightyears. Why go to say hi, when you can go to make a profit off of the gullible natives?

Not the sort of book that will revolutionize the industry or change the world, *First Contract* is still enjoyable,

intelligent, and just warped enough to make one chuckle a few times, and go away thinking about boning up on a few economics classes. Just in case.

***Heart of Gold* by Sharon Shinn**
Ace, 341 pages, \$6.99
ISBN 0-441-00821-6

Sharon Shinn's latest novel delves deep into the nature of love and racism, setting the age-old concepts on a world where three separate races must manage to coexist without letting their underlying distrust of each other destroy them all. For the caste-driven matriarchal indigos, it's a question of keeping everyone else in their place, the males of their own race most assuredly second-class citizens. For the hot-tempered patriarchal guldenfolk, it's the women whose place is in the home. And balancing them out, the intelligent and relatively peaceful albinos mind their own business. But in one particular city, all three of them mingle freely, though always one step away from violence and hatred.

Nolan is an indigo, a scientist whose fiancée and family are sure he'll get over his silly little notion of having his own job and independence, and will settle down soon enough. Uncomfortable with the ways of his race, increasingly more comfortable with the interracial spirit of unity that he finds at the Biolab in which he works, he finds himself heading straight into a moral and ethical dilemma that could cost him everything.

Kit, a higher-caste indigo woman, has her own problems. Her lover, one of the guldenfolk, is under arrest for his terrorist activities. Her grandmother terrorizes her, and she too is increasingly dissatisfied with the ways of her race. She will soon be forced to choose between love, duty, and what is right. The wrong choice could doom an entire race.

Their paths collide violently one day when Nolan uncovers a deadly secret. His research, and that of the others in the Biolab, has been co-opted by a coworker, and twisted to create a virus that could kill millions. Unless he turns against his friends, and enlists the unwilling aid of Kit to invade the very heart of the guldenfolk territory, the fragile peace will be destroyed. But the guldenfolk have no reason to like him, and even less to trust him. Only with Kit's aid can he prevail. But will she side with the guldenfolk, one of whom she loves?

Heart of Gold is a story that never forgets it's about people first and technology second. Even the setting takes a backseat, as I can't even remember the main city in which the action takes place being called anything other than 'the city.' No, the narrative focuses squarely upon Nolan and Kit, and their friends, and the growing tensions between indigo and guldenfolk which edge ever closer towards full-blown hostility and genocide. The blue-skinned indigos are portrayed quite believably as a matriarchal society, where the women have all the power and prestige, and the men have little responsibility. The gold-skinned guldenfolk are their exact opposites, portraying a fierce, proud, highly independent society where adult males have all the power, and those under the age of twelve might not even exist for all they matter. Is it any wonder that these two cultures clash so often and so messily? Their skin colors only make it all the easier to draw lines between them.

All in all, I greatly enjoyed *Heart of Gold*, primarily for the way it told the story, and conveyed a message without dropping into heavy-handed lecturing. The characters had genuine choices to make, and authentic reactions. What's more, the setting could likely lend itself to future revisiting.

***Redgunk Tales* by William R. Eakin**
Invisible Cities Press, 290 pages, \$14.95
ISBN 0-9679683-4-8

Redgunk Tales is subtitled "Apocalypse and Kudzu from Redgunk, Mississippi," and that's about as accurate a description of this unusual collection as any. Because where else are you going to find aliens, ghosts, swamp gas, a dime store mummy, a yellow dog with black smelly lips, and four hundred-odd (and I do mean odd!) people, all in one place?

It's like someone took your average Southern small town, doped up the inhabitants on pulped William Burroughs and Hunter S. Thompson, spiced the result with essence of *Weekly World News*, and served what was left with a twist of gamma-irradiated lime. Thirteen stories, ten of which have appeared before in publications such as *Realms of Fantasy*, *Science Fiction Age*, and *Amazing Stories*, three of which are brand-new, pull back the curtains and expose the truly irrational and unusual nature of a small Mississippi town home to weirdness and the unexpected.

It's impossible to read these stories all in one sitting. One at a time, with a day or two

Book Reviews

to recover in between assaults upon your rational side, that's the way to take it. Savor them, mull them over, reflect upon the ghost of the last living Druid, condemned to forever mow a certain patch of land. Contemplate the woman who discovers that the perfect man for her is utterly and absolutely alien, and can be kept in a jar. Ponder a dragon conjured out of the subconscious and into the sewers. Meditate upon Orange Decker, abducted by aliens. Ask yourself what the Secret of the Mummy's Brain is.

Describing the contents of *Redgunk Tales* is like trying to smell music. Some things can only be experienced, and that's the case with William Eakin's particular and peculiar prose, some of which is so lyrical and whimsical as to transcend the normal mode of storytelling. I'd love to hear these stories read out loud, as I suspect they'd adapt themselves to an oral format better than most. While *Redgunk Tales* isn't normally the sort of thing I'd gravitate towards, I can certainly recommend it for making me think outside the box.

***Revelation Space* by Alastair Reynolds**
Ace Books, 476 pages, \$23.95
ISBN 0-441-00835-8

More than five hundred years from now, mankind has finally left Earth behind, re-creating itself in a hundred different ways to deal with the rigors of space, the inhospitality of alien planets, the dissatisfaction with their original form. As immense starships called lighthuggers ply their trade between planets, traveling at the speed of light so that even a short journey might cover decades, as the colonists of Yellowstone continue to recover from the Melding Plague which joined flesh and machine with disastrous results, and as people enter the planetary oceans of the Pattern Jugglers to have the inconceivably alien micro-organisms rearrange their minds to achieve new levels of thinking, a billion-year old secret is about to be uncovered at long last. And we'll finally know just why we're all alone in the universe. Why our calculations, postulating the existence of other spacefaring races, have been wrong.

Revelation Space is a complex space opera, taking place on truly mindboggling levels, the narrative itself spanning decades, the overall story covering billions of years. While it starts off with the relatively small quest of archaeologist Dan Sylveste as he attempts to unravel the secrets of the

Amaratin civilization, dead for over nine hundred thousand years, it soon expands to reveal a far greater complexity and scope. Sylveste's quest takes on Ahab-like proportions as he pursues the answers to his questions at any expense. Joining him are mercenary-turned-assassin Ana Khouri, caught up in the enigmatic manipulations of a woman known only as The Mademoiselle, and Ilya Volyva, part of the cyborg crew of the lighthugger *Nostalgia For Infinity*. Their separate quests start decades and planets apart, and all come together over the planet Resurgam, once home of the avian-descended Amaratin. Battling betrayal from within and without, facing off against the Mademoiselle's scheme to have Sylveste assassinated, the bizarre transformation afflicting the captain of the *Nostalgia For Infinity*, the malevolent and legendary Sun Stealer, these unlikely heroes will journey light-years to discover the awful truth behind the Amaratin annihilation, a truth just waiting to destroy us as well.

Planet-destroying weapons. Brain-altering micro-organisms. Murderous alien artifacts. Gigantic starships suffering from disuse and neglect. A billion-year-old war between the stars. Transformations on the micro and macro levels for humanity. Thinking absolutely nothing of traveling for decades to reach a destination. Aliens who truly think in ways we can't begin to comprehend. These are just some of the trappings of this densely plotted, multi-layered novel, which more than lives up to the potential of the genre, and breathes new life into it to boot. While it may be hard to see how it all fits together in the beginning, the full picture lies revealed at the end, the threads woven together seamlessly. No easy read, but a book worth taking your time in reading, *Revelation Space* provokes thought, offering up a future where anything is possible, and our own imagination guides our potential. From bombs smaller than a speck of dust to planet-sized computers, it doesn't pull its punches. And the closer it gets to the end, the more urgent the story becomes, the stakes as high as they can get on a personal level for the characters, and on a racial level for humanity as a whole.

This book comes with my highest recommendations. I was up late for several nights in a row, constantly looking for a good stopping point, constantly wanting "just a few more pages." And if this is Alastair Reynold's first novel, then the genre is in for a real treat with his next work. Don't miss *Revelation Space*.

***Stark's Command* by John G. Hemry**
Ace Books, 267 pages, \$5.99
ISBN 0-441-00822-4

There's the old saying, "If you want to do something right, you have to do it yourself." There's also the one about "putting your money where your mouth is." Both of these sayings have just become quite relevant for Sergeant Ethan Stark, late of the United States military in the not so distant future. In the debut novel by John Hemry, *Stark's War*, we watched as criminal stupidity, ineptitude, and negligence nearly annihilated a good part of the US military in a misguided attempt to seize the Moon's resources for American interests. The end result of this ill-advised, disastrous campaign was a full-scale mutiny of the troops against their leaders, with Ethan Stark, the catalyst, being elected as leader pro tem of the newly independent forces. And as we start *Stark's Command*, we find our erstwhile hero struggling with the new and unwanted responsibilities. There are enemy forces to deal with, a civilian population on the Moon to negotiate with, and the inevitable retaliation from the American military. If one side doesn't shoot him, the other'll court martial and then shoot him. What's an honest soldier to do?

Luckily, the soldier in question is Stark, and he's more than capable of holding his own against all comers, even when they strike at those closest to him, and the attacks take on a myriad of forms. He has to secure his authority before his people can be torn apart, without repeating the same mistakes that lead to the insurrection in the first place. He has to cope with watching people continue to fight and die for no good reason, and to make an effective hierarchy out of low-ranking officers. It's a challenge, but nothing he can't handle, right? Well, if he can't, things'll be over before they've even started.

Once again, we're treated to a fascinating, complex look at the military mindset. Hemry goes light on the science and heavy on the characterization, combat, and military procedure as he delivers the second installment in this exciting fable about the near future. We may have reached the Moon, but we're no more mature for it. Nationalism is strong, bureaucracy still a stumbling block, and we're our own worst enemies. And if that's not believable, what is?

Stark's Command is a good book. Not quite as good as *Stark's War*, but it also seems to suffer from "middle book

Absolute Magnitude

syndrome." It's painfully obvious that this is "to be continued," and in that regard, it ends on a frustrating cliffhanger. It can't be read as a standalone very well, not with the questions left dangling. But as the middle book of a trilogy, it serves its purpose and tells a damn fine story. For those who like military SF, this book more than serves the purpose, clearly claiming Henry's place at the Round Table of military SF writers. I'll be looking forward to see how he resolves the story, and what else he has up his sleeve.

***Thunder Rift* by Matthew Farrell**
Avon/Eos, 394 pages, \$6.99
ISBN 0-380-79915-4

In 2061, the world was forever changed when a massive alien artifact simply appeared near Jupiter, bringing with it an electromagnetic storm that disrupted and corrupted much of Earth's technological progress. Named Thunder, both for its heralding of the storm and the "noise" it generated along the spectrum, this enigmatic object remained there, patient and inscrutable for decades. Thirty years after Thunder's appearance, we've finally developed technology capable of withstanding the static, and are ready, at long last, to explore the secrets it holds and represents. For Thunder is nothing less than an artificial wormhole, a portal leading to another section of the galaxy, maybe even the universe, altogether. A door has been opened, and it's time for humanity to step through.

Taria Spears is an anthropologist obsessed with Thunder and what lies beyond. She's secured herself a much-coveted spot on the *Lightbringer*, the ship which will seek out the origin of Thunder, at the expense of her relationships and much to the dismay of the military personnel on board who distrust all civilians. Come what may, she'll pursue her destiny, no matter what it takes her or what it makes of her.

Much to their surprise, the crew of the *Lightbringer* indeed find an intelligent race on the other side of the wormhole. Superstitious, complex, living in complete silence and incapable of speech as we know it, they're nowhere near sophisticated enough to have created Thunder. The search for the "Builders" must continue. But Taria feels differently, and ultimately ends up alone among the Blues, who call themselves the Children-of-She-Who-Spoke-the-World. As she delves deeper into the mysteries of their faith and history, she'll come face to face

with her insecurities, her flaws, and her reason for living. Will she be the only person capable of making peace between the humans of the *Lightbringer*, the Children, and the other, unfathomably powerful, inhabitants of this alien world? And what sacrifices will she make along the way?

Thunder Rift is a superb example of a first contact novel where the aliens are truly alien, yet constructed along logical lines. Taria is flawed but sympathetic, the sort of person who's always looking for something and never sure she's found it. My only complaint would have to be the gradual change in tone of the story from science and exploration to an almost metaphysical transcendence. Whatever's going on near the end isn't playing by any rules I'm familiar with, and in some ways, it made me uncomfortable, but in a good way. I was reminded, however briefly, of the 2001 saga, and the left turns that took along the way. However, after being immersed in the exotic culture of the Blues, I found the ending of the story to be somewhat disconcerting in its execution. That flaw aside, *Thunder Rift* is a good start, and it's a sure thing we'll be seeing more from Matthew Farrell.

***Venus* by Ben Bova**
Tor, 405 pages, \$7.99
ISBN 0-812-57940-2

After taking us beyond Earth's orbit, to the Moon, and then to Mars, Ben Bova is back with yet another extraordinary exploration of our near neighbors. This time, it's a journey to the inhospitable greenhouse of Venus, a place he describes as "the most hellish place in our solar system." Bova spends several pages telling us just how impossible it would be to survive on a planet whose atmosphere is poisonous, whose surface could melt aluminum, whose air pressure can crush spacecraft landers, and whose overall nature is so foreboding that "by comparison, the Moon is easy and Mars is a picnic."

Now that we understand just how foolish and inadvisable it would be to try and set foot on Venus, if at all possible to begin with, the true adventure can begin. Once upon a time, Alex Humphries, beloved elder son of the billionaire Martin Humphries, was part of the initial exploration of Venus. He died, the expedition lost somewhere in the hellish environment of the planet. Now his father is offering a reward of ten billion dollars to the first team to journey to Venus and bring back Alex's remains. Who steps up to the plate?

Van Humphries, younger son, as despised by his father as Alex was loved. Sickly and something of a wastrel, Van is a most unlikely choice for a hero or an adventurer. Nevertheless, he takes the challenge, as much to defy his father's expectations as to make something of himself. He'll join the crew of the airship *Hesperos* as they attempt to survive one of the most hostile places alive. He'll deal with crew members who hate him, one of whom is a spy for his father, overcome his own insecurities, and come face to face with his mortality more than once.

And just when things can't get any worse, Van and the crew will discover why the previous expedition failed, and just what sort of life can survive on Venus. The knowledge may just kill them all. Only a deadly, distrusting alliance with his father's worst enemy, Van's rival for the ten billion dollar prize, will enable anyone at all to escape alive. From the dangers of Venus' atmosphere to the threat of mutiny within, from the failure of his own body, to the man who hates him, Van will be forced to master his own destiny and potential if he wants to see home again.

I love Ben Bova's writing for two main qualities. The first is the rich and enjoyable characterization. His characters are intensely human, full of flaws and foibles and goals, capable of anything, and as realistic as anyone you'll meet on the street. The second is his intimidating scientific knowledge of the mechanics of space travel, exploration, and what it'll take to conquer and survive those environments. Venus delivers on both counts, and doesn't disappoint in the least. Like any new Bova novel, I couldn't stop reading *Venus* until the last page, and it left me wanting more. If we could only put him in charge of our space exploration program, we'd be mining asteroids and living on the Moon in no time at all. Ben Bova is a must-read for anyone who likes their SF hard and complex, and all-too-possible.

Reviews by John Deakins

***Colonization: Aftershocks* by Harry Turtledove**
Del Rey/Ballantine, 488 pages, \$26.50
ISBN: 0-345-43021-2

If you're a Turtledove fan, this book is a "must" for you. If you are not already a Turtledove fan, this book won't make you one. Harry Turtledove is the master of "alternate history" SF. Along the way, he has

Book Reviews

become the master of the SF epic. Put 'em together and you get book series that sail past the million-word level without breaking stride. The trouble is that, if you weren't one of the Turtledove aficionados who got in on, say, the first quarter-million words, the sequels now being released are almost meaningless to you.

This is the seventh *big* book of the "Worldwar Saga" series. Many characters who came on-stage in Book 1 are still alive and kicking. It requires eighty pages just to catch up on where each subplot is currently headed. As a crazed Turtledove fan, those subplots make perfect sense to me. (I've read the other six books.) Otherwise, be prepared for interesting strangers to waltz on-stage, perform puzzling actions, and trot offstage toward the next sequel.

Turtledove resolves one large mystery and a few smaller ones. Knots of personal character are unraveled. An American city is nuked, with our permission, because of one man's conscience. (See? You really have to be there to understand why, and then you may not find his actions plausible.) The Americans create a terror weapon in the Asteroid Belt. The Jews lose the bomb. Those players who enter in pages 1 through 80, leave again at page 488, having lived and experienced, but not having resolved as much as you would expect from 160,000 or more words.

Welcome back, fans, to another massive chunk of Turtledove saga. The end of the road for this series is not yet in sight. For everybody else, look up *Worldwar: In the Balance* in the used paperback store and start there. By the time you catch up with the rest of us, Turtledove will have out Number 8 (and you'll know why we love to read what he writes).

Deepsix by Jack McDevitt
EOS/HarperCollins, 432 pages, \$25.00
ISBN: 0-06105124-1

No one is going to pan Jack McDevitt for writing slow-paced books. *Deepsix* action will remind the reader of the boulder-chasing Indiana Jones.

In 2204, a rogue gas-giant planet is about to obliterate the life-bearing planet Deepsix. That planet should have been more thoroughly studied, but first explorers were almost exterminated by hostile life-forms. Now (too late) scientific expeditions, on hand for the big event, discover traces of civilization.

Archaeologist Randall Nightingale, one of the few Deepsix survivors, is diverted to study the ruins, in the few days remaining. The landing crew, led by pilot Priscilla Hutchins, becomes stranded when all landers are swallowed by a quake. The survivors, including iconoclastic editor Gregory MacAllister, must fight their way across a hostile planet to the failed expedition's lander, left twenty years before. Maybe it will fly; maybe not.

Meanwhile, the orbiting ships discover the remains of a planet-to-orbit "skyhook," whose miracle materials can be used to create a dangling "catcher" for the crippled lander. Those organizing the rescue effort must train space tourists for extended EVAs, while fighting the bureaucracy of distant Earth.

McDevitt writes a continual cliffhanger. When there's a quarter-inch of text remaining, there's still time for one more crisis. He will keep you riveted. Some characters, believably, die; some make it. (I can reveal that much, since McDevitt repeatedly hints at that himself.) His characters are well developed. Any romance among the gender-mixed survivors remains a side issue.

My only complaint is that McDevitt is not keeping up with technical science. His 23rd century ships seem to discover less about the Deepsix surface than a spy-satellite can right now. In his world of handheld laser-cutters and AI's, his ship-to-surface communications are horse-and-buggy. His super, do-everything e-suits smack more of convenient "author's magic" than of projected technology. What a lucky break! Totally alien polymers can be "welded" to human ships. On a planet of DNA-based life, his characters are oblivious to potential pathogens. No problem: when the action is hot, you'll never have time to think about it.

If you like fast-paced, futuristic action, you will love this book.

Fox on the Rhine by Douglas Niles and Michael Dobson
Forge Books, 397 pages, \$27.95
ISBN: 0-312-86894-4

Award-winning game designers Niles and Dobson are hardly the first with a fictional alternate ending to World War II. Because they begin at Germany's eleventh hour, their premise has to be stretched pretty thin. Late in the summer of 1944, German conspirators

just missed Adolf Hitler with a bomb. If they hadn't missed...

Truthfully, little would have been changed. Goehring would have become Furher, and he might have sued for a separate peace with the West. In the east, the Russians juggernaut continued its advance. Germany's few remaining aircraft couldn't slow the heartland bombing campaigns or stop Allied tactical attack bombers. Defeat was inevitable.

The authors add a successful coup by arch-Nazi Himmler, whose twisted intellect had not burned out as Hitler's had. Himmler reinstates the wounded Erwin Rommel, the Desert Fox, to command the Western Front. He makes temporary peace with Stalin, greedy for territory and German military secrets. He gives jet fighter production highest priority. Whew! Now *that's* a premise.

An unfettered Rommel stings the advancing Allies and sets up a major counteroffensive. (Think "Battle of the Bulge.") Will Rommel smash through to Antwerp and force the West into an armistice? Will Stalin again turn on Germany, before they can stalemate the West? Will the jet-lightning of the Luftwaffe sweep Allied bombers from the skies?

After that monster of a set-up premise, Niles and Dobson perform superbly, sweeping the novel to an exciting, believable finish. Their omniscient, multiple-protagonist, multiple-subplot methods will remind the reader of Harry Turtledove, but if this novel is imitative, it is one fine imitation. Their personal viewpoint for tank battles is the best I've ever read. They don't hesitate to kill off POV characters, even major historical figures, the same way that both the deserving and the undeserving die in a real war.

I strongly recommend this book to any alternate history buff or any student of World War II's history.

The Mystic Rose by Stephen R. Lawhead
EOS/HarperCollins, 432 pages, \$25.00
ISBN: 0-06-105031-8

Lawhead fans need no introduction to his fantasies. His twenty-plus books, however, mine an area of historical romance/religious mythology unfamiliar to the average reader.

To locate Lawhead's religious roots, look outside the New Testament. Furthermore, they are only tenuously connected to romanticized Catholic mythology, such as the King Arthur legends.

Absolute Magnitude

Historically, at the end of the Crusades, the Templars were forced to return to Europe, but they returned with great political power (and a mountain of rumors). Supposedly, they hid great, secret treasures: perhaps the Holy Grail; the Black Rood (a piece of the True Cross); (impossibly) the body of Jesus; or tons of gold and jewels. They also supposedly knew the identities of the (unlikely) physical descendents of Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

A fearful French king had the Templars exterminated, but (despite torture) their secrets never surfaced. The order's branch in Edinburgh, Scotland, survived, but their power was broken. Lawhead stretches for a connection to Celtic Christianity, a non-Roman catholicism prevalent in Gaelic-speaking Britain into modern times.

This is the base the author has chosen in book after book. His universe is to Christianity what ESP is to Science: too far beyond the fringe to be included; too many adherents to dismiss. Lawhead's fans are mostly American charismatics, like those who bought the "Left Behind" series.

In the first two books of "The Celtic Crusades," Lawhead introduced the "Sanctus Clarus," a secret Celtic religious order preserving powerful religious relics against the coming AntiChrist. (Think of them as the Jedi and the Templars as the Dark Side of the Force.) His protagonists have recovered the lance that pierced Jesus and the Black Rood, returning them to safekeeping in Scotland. In this third book, the granddaughter of the original Crusader acquires a letter that will lead her to the "Mystic Rose"—the Holy Grail.

The high quality of Lawhead's writing carried me halfway through the book before it began to bog down in inconsistencies. He should have researched his Moslems better. They are a little too noble; a little too given to wine. In one instance, they raise pigs. His Catholic clergy seem either to be sanctified to perfection, or totally corrupt. He embraces Roman Catholic worship of empowered icons, but none of his religious characters suggest turning over the Mystic Rose to the Pope, the head of medieval Christendom.

His female Crusader's internal wrestlings, as she seeks revenge on her father's killer, are thin and inconsistent. His heroine seems to have an inexhaustible supply of cash. Violence is mostly off-stage, only to have a nun graphically cut the villain's throat at the climax. The flash-forwards to the Sanctus

Clarus "author" in modern times add nothing to the book.

If you're a Lawhead fan, you will be delighted with another offering. If you aren't, this book is superficially well written. It is not, however, for the either the deeply religious or the deeply logical.

***A Matter of Profit* by Hilari Bell
Hyperion/HarperCollins, \$15.95, 288 pages
ISBN: 0-06-029513-9**

Before beginning, we need to categorize Hilari Bell's work. Is *A Matter of Profit* "clean" adult science fiction or juvenile SF? After all, Hyperion published several works by Diana Wynne Jones for the juvenile market, only to have Ms. Jones' clean style "discovered" by adult readers. She now has a number of works circulating in the adult market. Has lightning struck twice?

Ms. Bell's planet is peopled with quirky aliens that would be at home in the "Star Wars" universe. There is even one who will remind you strongly of Yoda. The conquering humans sound little like any logically projected science-oriented human future. Faster-than-light linked to swordsmanship and sneering aristocrats? "Secrets" that experienced SF readers will have little trouble solving? Underplayed romance and no sex?

Juvenile. No doubt about it.

In that case, is this *good* juvenile SF, or just another wannabee, dishing out bad writing because adolescents won't know the difference?

Good news: Ms. Bell has turned out an entertaining novel. Her protagonist, Ahvren, has returned to a world of many conquered alien races; natives who seem undisturbed by their new masters. The locals are more interested in artful manipulation of their "stock market" than in instigating rebellion. There is, in fact, a rebellion brewing, but from within the repressed female half of Vivitare humanity.

The warrior/hero must try to prevent an assassination and save his sister from a hated coming marriage, while struggling against his own mystifying internal changes—an anti-violence bent and the necessity of always speaking truthfully. (Ahvren's "curse" could have been more interesting; it was poorly handled.)

Though the characters are a just a wee bit bigger than life, the action is interesting. Although jaded old SF reviewers might

figure out the aliens' "secret" long before the last page, teen-aged readers should be challenged just enough to really enjoy the book. I recommend it for younger readers.

***To Visit the Queen* by Diane Duane
Warner Aspect Books, 354 pages, \$6.50
ISBN: 0446-60855-6**

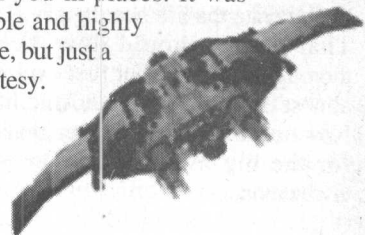
Diane Duane is a frustrating author to read. Unlike many fantasy authors, who sneak around the real problems of the physical universe using anything-goes "magic," her science fiction roots show through. On the other hand, she still succumbs to the temptation to "magic" her characters' out of knotty problems. (This is fantasy, after all.)

Her themes are treated too seriously to get away with labeling this "juvenile" fiction, as if adolescents are too dumb to spot *deus ex machina*.

Still, she isn't afraid to launch into SF domains that are both different and difficult. In this sequel to *The Book of Night and Moon*, the reader once again sees the world through the eyes of cats who are also wizards. Those wizards guard the stability of all things good against advancing chaos. Their adversary is a satanic personification of entropy: a destructive cat-deity. The evil Lone One has contaminated the past with modern knowledge, creating an alternate universe. That universe and our own will plunge entirely into chaos if one last thread snaps: the life of Queen Victoria.

Two uncooperative teams of cat-wizards must stop the assassination with the help of an intelligent dinosaur magician, a juvenile Arthur Conan Doyle, ravens who "see" everything, a fragmentary Egyptian spell, thousands of composted cat mummies, and lots of elaborate magic at the "gates" to everywhere.

Reading the first book of the series would have been helpful, but not essential (the mark of a good sequel). You can't knock Diane Duane for lack of ambition in this project, and she is excellent at peering out through the eyes of a cat-magician. If you are not a member of the Cats Are Really Little People Club, however, the whole book may wear thin on you in places. It was enjoyable and highly readable, but just a little cutesy.





Bellotto
©2001

Incoming

by Bart Kemper

Copyright © Bart Kemper 2001

"The House Sub-Committee on Foreign Affairs will be wrapping up its report on the current conflict tomorrow. It is expected the House will vote on continued funding by the end of the week. Our latest poll shows public support is wavering ..."

“Incoming!”

A mortar shell lobbed in, smashing just the other side of the sand-bagged revetment. The blast rang in her ears and thumped into her chest. The dying light filtered through the dust, hinting at the slow chill the night would bring.

“I like it. You have the feed.”

The reporter nodded, responding his producer’s voice from his earbud. Camouflaged and dirty, he crouched behind the kneeling cameraman.

“Good action . . . keep it rolling. . . . they’re veterans, they know what to do. . . .”

Staff Sergeant Rae Gallegos was crouched down over an old wireline handset. Their allegedly secure sat-link was floating in disinformation again. She was tired, the scarred hands and weathered face showing her six wars instead of her 26 years.

This particular war was at Week 9, and its ratings were dipping. Something had to happen one way or the other. She was calling around, trying to find out which way the brass was going.

What she wouldn’t give for a good vidset and a cold beer.

“Tighten in on her . . . she’ll be getting the message soon. . . .”

The sergeant’s face tightened. Her jaw clenched as she spoke reflexively, acknowledging the orders. Finally she hung up the handset, then took off her helmet to run her fingers through her close-cropped brown hair. The grit, dirt, and sweat made it hard to tell grime from the camouflage paint. She pulled her helmet back on and keyed the platoon freq.

“OK, boys and girls, let’s get it moving. Finish your chow, hit the cat holes, and top off those canteens. We have a new lieutenant inbound and he’ll be here in 10 mikes with our orders. Squad leaders, police the area of contraband. Cooper, get someone to the LZ to guide him in. And somebody wake Jonesie—his snoring will keep their gunners awake all night.”

It was the first bird she’d seen in over a week. Even their wounded was going out by ground now. The tilt-wing craft came in fast and low, flaring out as its wash swept the landing zone clear. It crouched behind a cut in the hill, easing underneath the overhead cover even before a few reflexive shells crashed down.

She turned away from the view slit and took a knee, reviewing the map on the ground in front of her. Time enough for everyone to see the cherry when he gets here. She heard the footsteps and saw the entourage out of the corner of her eye.

“Ten-shun!”

To her surprise, he looked at her expectantly, waiting. Sure thing, sir, she thought, sniper check. She snapped to attention and rendered a crisp salute. The camera crew was behind her, framing the new officer against her backlit frame, her ragged uniform and dirty webgear with bulging pouches a sharp contrast to his starched uniform and single sidearm suspended from a pristine pistol belt.

“Welcome to Second Platoon, Bravo Company, sir. Staff Sergeant Gallegos, acting platoon sergeant, reporting.”

Second Lieutenant James Frasier returned her salute and surveyed his new domain. Piercing blue eyes peered over a strong roman nose, flanked by chiseled cheekbones. His buzz cut blonde hair was topped by a maroon beret, but Gallegos noticed he didn’t have wings on his chest. She snorted as she went back to her knee.

This certainly wasn’t an eee-lite unit, she thought, just grunts in the wrong place again. As he turned she noticed some fine, thin scars behind his jaw. Unconsciously, she rubbed the scars on her face, far less subtle than the officer’s. Maybe he’s already been in it, she thought.

His eyes surveyed the four-by-four-meter sandbag-lined hole within the trenchline serving as the command bunker. He finally noticed he was the only one standing and took a knee. Gallegos motioned one of the soldiers forward.

“This is Specialist James, sir, runs our commo. She has earbuds for you and the new troops higher said you were bringing. Once we get you set up and into your combat gear, sir, I’ll orient you to our situation. Cooper, police up the new guys and get them in their squads. They’re already assigned, so don’t let Rashid take them all.”

A tall black soldier, wiry under the loose camouflage uniform, slid past the platoon sergeant and led the new soldiers back down the trenchline. Frasier got up and strode across to a gap in the sandbag on the enemy side of the pit, but the sergeant pulled him down.

“Sir, we need to get you into your battle gear. When will you give the operations order?”

Frasier looked startled, as if he had forgotten something. He glanced over to the two-man camera crew, but they were ignoring the exchange, tinkering with the camera instead of broadcasting. Gallegos turned and motioned Cooper over.

“Get the lieutenant set up. We’ll brief the platoon in place using the links. We’ll be moving out, right, sir?” Frasier

Absolute Magnitude

nodded. "I'll get the word to the squad leaders to prep, sir. We'll be ready when you are."

Cooper reached down and grabbed the officer's duffel. "C'mon sir, let me get you to your new home."

The sun was fading, the warm sunset painting the lieutenant in warm highlights while the rest of the platoon instinctively hid in the shadows. Weapons gleamed with fresh oil. Camouflage paint covered what uniforms, body armor, helmets, and targeting monocles did not. Along the trenchline the new soldiers, with pristine equipment, were nervously glancing over to their impassive squad mates. The scuffed and dirty body armor, savage non-regulation knives, extra ammunition bandoleers, and rigged satchel charges made the poster-ready lieutenant and other fresh troops seem surreally out of place.

"Squad leaders, report in."

"First squad. Wilkinson here."

"Rashid for second."

"Third is up. Ford reporting."

Each squad leader was in their firing position, speaking over their links. Their squads were receiving only. The frequency hopping and encryption theoretically kept their communications secure, but too many transmissions from a general location triggers an artillery barrage.

"Sir, they're all yours."

"Listen up, troops. We are losing ground along both fronts. We're going to take some of that back, starting with a key outpost they're using to laze in smart munitions within this sector. We will move out at 0130 and be in position to attack at 0520 after a full air and arty prep."

"Here's the operation order: Situation—"

Frasier crisply delivered the plan with textbook precision. While he could only directly address his platoon sergeant and commo chief, the camera framed the lieutenant as if the entire platoon was assembled in front of him. Every detailed was covered. Gallegos was grudgingly impressed. Maybe they're teaching something in Infantry Officer Basic these days.

As Frasier finished, a voice broke into the commlink. "What time did the lieutenant say? First light is at 0510. And we're moving in during stand-to? Who does he—"

"Secure that noise." Gallegos's voice cracked in everyone's ear. "And when was the last time you were awake during stand-to? If the other side is like you, Johnson, that's when I'd attack, too."

"We can't shift the air and artillery prep," Frasier cut in. "Any other questions? No? Squad leaders, take charge."

Frasier and Gallegos cut their transmitters. Specialist James read Gallegos' face and left for the safety of her firing position. The cameraman glanced over at the correspondent, who shrugged and gestured to keep rolling. They weren't the current feed, he reasoned, but you never know what will be valuable footage later on.

Gallegos turned to face her commander. "Sir, who the hell came up with that time table? Or that target—it's pretty well guarded. Even with air cover—"

"At ease, Sergeant." He took a step closer. "I was told you were a good platoon sergeant. I was told you could follow orders. We all have to follow orders, right?"

She bit her tongue, knowing the camera was still there. "Yes sir." Frasier looked her dead in the eye, waiting for another argument. Finally, he said, "Dismissed." This time she saluted, now only slightly surprised he returned the salute while she waited for a sniper's round that never came.

The cameraman turned off the camera after he dropped his salute. She turned to leave to check on the platoon, then stopped and asked, "Just what are they teaching you lieutenants at Fort Benning, sir?"

Frasier's stern face cracked in confusion. "Benning?"

"Fort Benning, Georgia. Home of the Infantry. Airborne school. Ranger school. Where all of us grunts go to learn the fine art of marching in a straight line and breaking stuff. Where you earned your beret. Didn't you train there?"

Frasier shook his head. "No sergeant, I trained in California."

Gallegos paused, then left without comment. She went through trenchline, spot checking troops as she backbriefed the squad leaders. There's no telling what bases back home are open or closed now, she thought, or who's training where. Base closures change almost as fast as the new construction projects for wars over before the new billets can be occupied. Maybe it's some sort of new "90-day wonder" program, she mused, "instant officer—just add shit."

She couldn't recall his commissioning source and his personnel file didn't come in with the rest of the new troops' data. She made a mental note to track down his file. She didn't want to have to live with her new boss bitching when he lost a pay step because of missing records.

Eventually she was satisfied everyone would be ready. The camera crew was already bagged out in their hidey-hole. She trudged back to Frasier, partly to report and partly to check on him. She found him sitting on his ruck, ready to go, every item exactly as it should be. They reviewed the plan. He traced their route out on his map. She couldn't have picked a better route herself.

"Not bad, sir. Any FRAGO's?"

"Any whats?" Another lost look on his recruiting poster face.

She sighed. Just when she thought she had a half-way squared away lieutenant . . .

"A fragmentary order. Army for 'changes' In case you've found a better approach, a new maneuver, maybe a lucky rabbit's foot . . . any changes, sir?"

He gathered his composure. "There won't be any changes, sergeant. Dismissed."

Incoming

Gallegos left the lieutenant for her own hole to get a few hours sleep. He'll learn, she thought. No plan survives first contact.

Her fingers and toes were numb from the wet, penetrating cold. Hand and arm signals flashed up and down the platoon's patrol column with only essential intel passing through the comm sets. They had traveled about 8 kilometers according to their GPS readout, but their actual travel through gulleys, craters, old trenches, and the odd ravine was probably closer to twice that. It was the familiar feeling of fighting your gut and your nerves, taking each step quietly, carefully while pushing yourself to move faster than your enemy thinks you will.

The weather helped their thermal gear spoof enemy

detection measures, keeping their outermost layer at ambient conditions, which was about the same as a well-digger's ass. They could be picked up at close range, of course, but by then they would be well within weapons range.

Gallegos' right foot was numb thanks to a cut in the side of her boot, allowing water to soak in. Icy drops wormed their way down her neck. She was far too scared to care. They were in "injun country" as soon as they left though their barbed wire and mine-infested forward lines. She stroked her fear, keeping it calm as it kept her alert, always checking the next step, the next turn, the next rock for something or someone.

Her weapon tracked from cover to cover, ready to shred any movement but always checking, holding back for split-seconds to make sure it was human and hostile. Shooting too soon can get everyone just as dead as shooting too late. Dead



Absolute Magnitude

is dead.

She mentally kept track of the entire patrol's status and position as they moved into their last check point. She checked her pace count against the GPS reading. They were ahead of schedule and had to wait to make final movement. She had to be ready to take over for the lieutenant, or assign a new squad leader, or react to artillery, or any of the infinite number of things that could happen short of her death. As long as she was alive, each and every troop was her personal problem, including the lieutenant. She didn't want to have to learn any new names this week.

She kept an eye on the camera crew. This pair had been with them since their deployment, before the media started numbering the weeks. They were vets in their own way, keeping out of her platoon's internal business while still staying with the story. She didn't know if any of her guys would dive on a grenade for the pair, but at least those two didn't endanger her platoon. They knew how to move and how to stay out of the way. They even sometimes shared their goodies the network sent in.

The reporter was subvocalizing to his producer. She envied news teams' communications. It always seemed to be three steps above their own latest and greatest. Fortunately for her, the network's freq was close to their platoon band. Her hot-wired bud picked up the relay from the reporter to the cameraman.

"We have nothing going on anywhere, Pete. Are you sure your guys are going to attack and not just wander around all night?" Gallegos recognized the producer's voice. Gallegos estimated up to eight teams reported to that raspy, New England accented woman's voice. "Your guys look miserable, by the way, even with the night vision lens. Great stuff if anything good happens."

Gallegos winced. "Good" had opposite meanings for herself and the producer.

Soldiers were making one last check on their equipment, grabbing a quick bite of food, taking a piss, offering a fervent prayer, or catching a 30 second nap, whatever it took to get themselves ready. They knew once they moved out, some weren't coming back. The younger ones still felt invulnerable. She was feeling old.

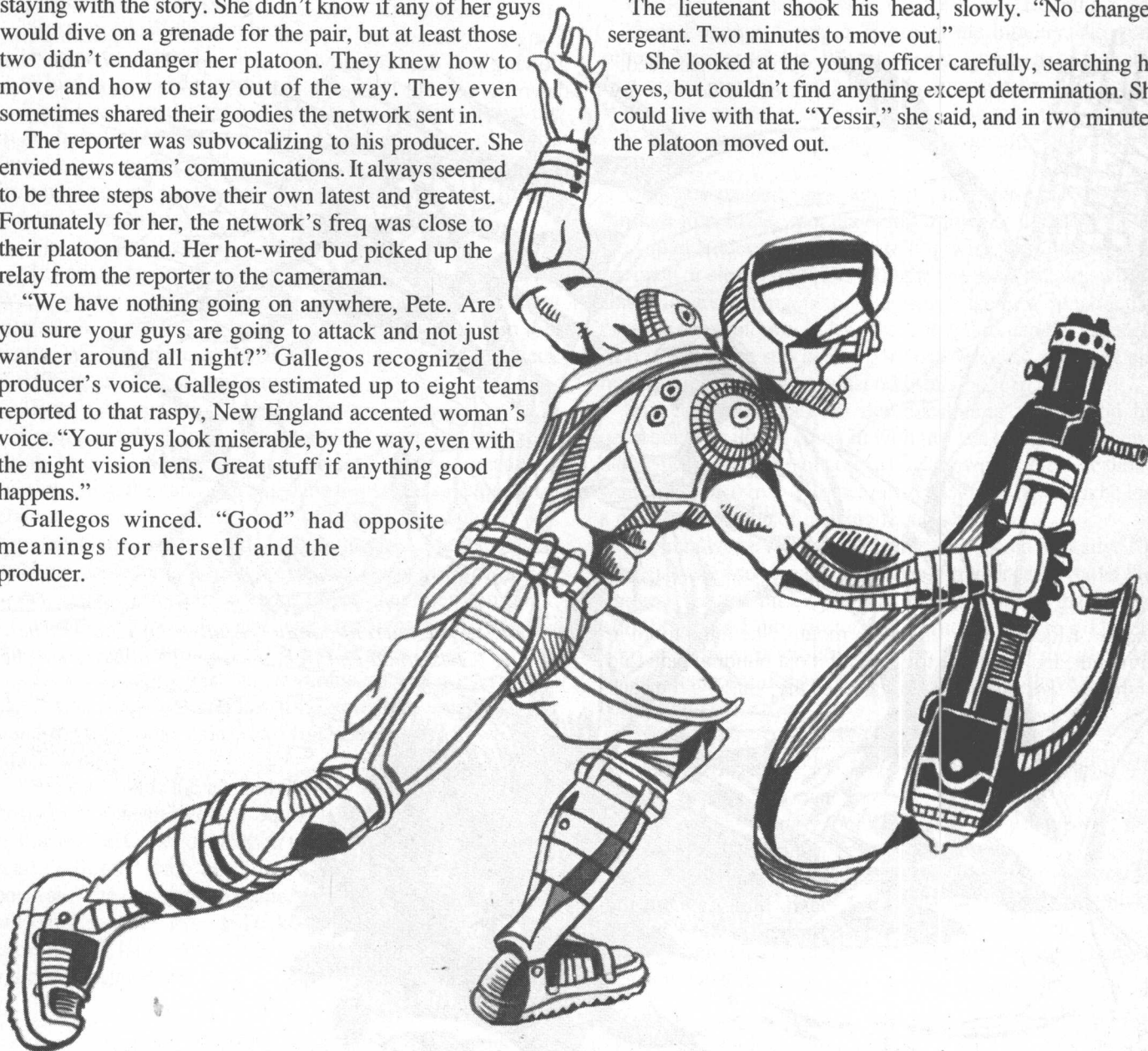
Gallegos saw the squad leaders were getting the troops ready. She went to check on her lieutenant. He was right where she left him.

He didn't look scared. He didn't look fired up. He was just sitting there on a log, lost in thought, staring at his muddy boots. She sat down next to him. She paused, wiggling her numb toes inside her wet boot. He didn't even look up when she finally spoke.

"We're ready, sir. Any orders, any changes?"

The lieutenant shook his head, slowly. "No changes, sergeant. Two minutes to move out."

She looked at the young officer carefully, searching his eyes, but couldn't find anything except determination. She could live with that. "Yessir," she said, and in two minutes, the platoon moved out.



Incoming

Her monocle showed the dawn sky crisscrossing with infrared lasers. Ignoring her own targeting laser, she estimated the location of a particularly large spoke of lasers, keyed in the coordinates, and sent a millisecond burst over the net. She waited for confirmation.

"Splash, out," came the computer-generated message from fire control.

Thirty seconds later bunker-busting time delay rounds crashed into the small hillside, followed by huge "thuds" a half-heartbeat later, the underground explosions kicking her chest from the lungs out. Secondary explosions confirmed enemy munitions. Who needs one-meter precision, she thought, when even "smart" arty works in 100 meter increments. She looked out again, scanning her sector of the sky for telltale beams before risking looking back around the rocks she was using for cover.

"Damn close, sarge," Johnson said, shouting over the ringing in both their ears. "Looks like we're the main feed," gesturing over to newscrew. Gallegos gestured down a dry creek with her weapon.

"Keep your eyes open for dismounts, not on the newsies. That's where they could be coming. Where's Frasier?"

"Right where he's supposed to be. How's that for a first?"

She checked her chrono. Three minutes until final movement onto the objective. Artillery and close air was giving the enemy hell, but it wasn't enough. She made it to his position with less than a minute to go. She found Frasier in an old shell crater gouged into creek bank. The grey pre-dawn light dappled shadows over his camouflage, giving him a ghostly look. His held his rifle loosely, his eyes fixed on his chrono.

Glancing over the bank, she said, "Sir, we need to wait a bit. Once we get full light we can direct our fire better. We're going to be in the open, any way you look at it. A few minutes won't make a lick of difference. We need to take out..."

Frasier had been walking towards Gallegos, nodding his head in agreement when he smashed the rifle butt up into her jaw. She dropped to the ground, mentally and physically shocked. Blood and dirt filled her mouth. She felt a tooth in her mouth, and when she tried to spit it out blinding pain told her the jaw was shattered. He slammed the butt onto the back of her helmet, driving her face into the dirt.

"Insubordination will not be tolerated, sergeant. I have my orders." He yanked out her earbud as she struggled to all fours. "Second Platoon, this is Lieutenant Frasier. Move out."

The platoon rose from the cracks and shadows in the ground, moving towards the distant outpost. Each soldier bounded from cover to cover, taking momentary shelter from the withering fire. The red, warm dawn light covered the blood and overpowered the muzzle flashes and shellbursts. The newsteam moved forward, the sun to their back and the whole scene lit as if by a Hollywood crew.

"Sir, Wilkinson is hit."

"Sgt. Reis, you have 1st squad. Continue mission. Final fires in 30 seconds."

The newsteam was following Frasier, his painted profile standing out in sharp relief as he barked orders, crisply gesturing his knife-edge hand to soldiers who were too far away, too low to the ground, or otherwise too occupied to look in his direction as long as the earbuds worked. Tracers cut through the air, providing a backdrop for the camera. Frasier crouched down further behind a large blown off stump.

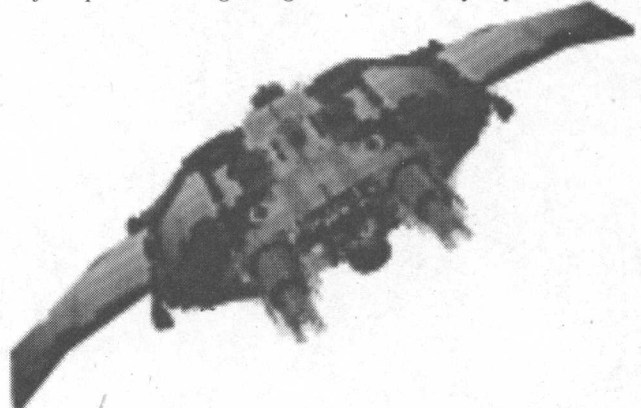
Fire control sent one word. "Incoming."

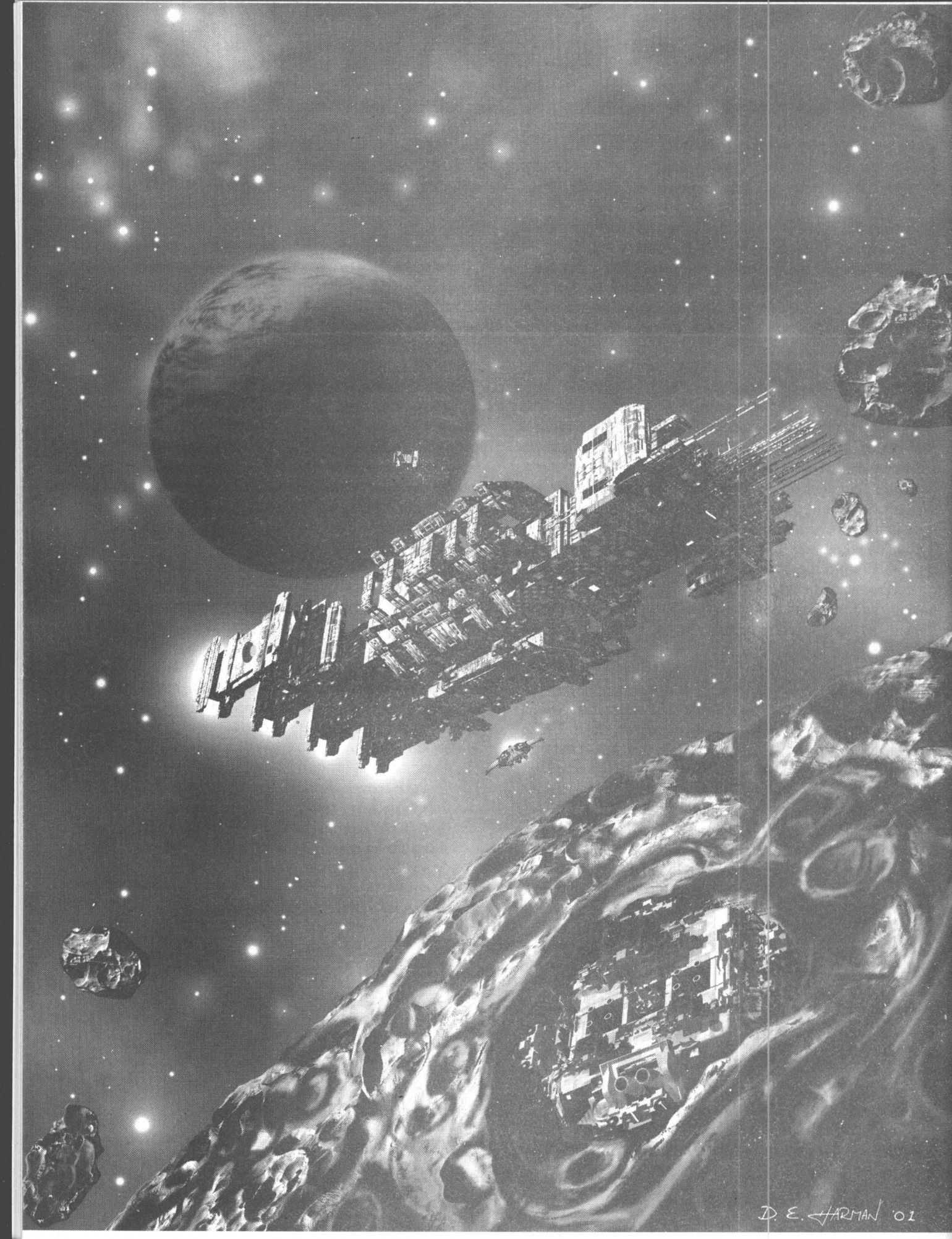
The platoon tried to collectively crawl into their helmets as dangerously close artillery shells whistled in, crumpled, and filled the air with shards of rocks, metal, and hopefully enemy body parts. Gasping for air from concussion waves, the soldiers of Second Platoon got up and moved forward as the smoke rounds blanketed their objective.

Frasier looked back. He saw his soldiers moving forward, firing into the smoke. He saw the newscrew, panning the glowing red, dust-filled Mars landscape. He stood up. The dawn light sidelit Frasier, highlighting his helmeted profile. The camera locked onto him. Holding his rifle with his right hand, he waved forward with his left, commanding in a clear parade-ground voice, "Follow me." Frasier went over the hill, his soldiers dutifully following as enemy tracers probed through the smoke and dust.

The camera captured it all, transmitting it to the producer. The action and color grabbed the producer's attention. She keyed it up as her main feed to the network, which went worldwide. The original live feed was later edited and rerun, boosting ratings and inflaming public opinion. A still image of the heroic lieutenant beckoning forward was used as the lead graphic. Clips were used as three-second bumpers for the conflict's coverage, including a general pinning medals on Gallegos and the three other platoon survivors while they lay in a field hospital.

"The Senate has overwhelming approved a dramatic increase in military funding, reflecting the recent shift in public opinion. Tonight's on-line poll shows 74 percent of the public supporting the current conflict. Analysts predict the new funding levels could end fighting soon. In other news, the military continues to recruit in the Hollywood/Los Angeles area for special acting assignments. Variety reports..."





D. E. HARMAN '01

The Stars Too Near

by Chris Bunch

Copyright © Chris Bunch 2001

The K-boat clung to the spinning mass of rock that barely qualified as a moon. It'd been hidden with great care, its outer skin, already radar- and IR-resistant anodized in shades of gray and black, like a poisonous sea toad waiting for its prey, next to an igneous outcropping that'd conceal it from more sophisticated searches.

The moon rotated half an AU off a Federal Systems planet that fairly pulsed with potential prey. But so far, no convoy or even a single ship had lifted to become the silver fish that would be the toad's prey.

Aboard ship, three soldiers of the Alliance waited. The new crewman, Leut Goffa Dadie, weaponeer/communications, had watched the other two, learning the habits of the ambusher, as the E-days dragged past.

She'd noted conversations were brief, figuring, correctly, her shipmates had already heard and told all the war stories, twice, and further repetition could only bring irritation. At least each crewman had a private cabin, less a measure of luxury than an attempt to keep the homicide level down on the Killer-class starships.

This boat, the *Bel III*, was deep in the Federal dominions, Earth between the raider and its homeworlds, waiting to attack anything that came within range.

Three years ago, when it looked as if the Alliance was winning the war, there might have been ten or more K-boats waiting, half a Wing, together with destroyers with prize crews, perhaps even one or two of the Alliance's prized cruisers.

Now one ship, its five chin tubes only half-full of shipkillers, countermissile tubes a quarter armed. Only its single, and generally useless, chaingun had a full basic load of CU rounds.

The bridge occupied the nose of the *Bel III*. Pilot's section was across the front, weapons to port, the com/navigation station to starboard. The cabins and fresher were off a passageway running back to the primary and secondary drive control station. The passageway, at meal time and for any rec purposes, became the wardroom, with a table lifting from the deck, and seats sliding out from the bulkheads.

"Dinner," the engineer and unofficial ship's cook, Salvatore Bernari, announced, after thoughtfully rubbing the four-day stubble he always threatened to let grow into a beard, "will be spaghet and, oh, a tube of fish paste. And we've got a couple tubes of bread still uncorked. Tomato sauce we've a-plenty."

Bernari was an oddity—he was one of the scattering of Federals who'd found their way to one of the Alliance worlds and enlisted, leaving his wife and four children on Mars. He hadn't seen them in six years, seldom spoke of them, except

once or twice when he proudly bragged that he'd been able to kite a message through, in some mysterious fashion. He had various reasons for why he was on the "wrong" side, ranging from boredom to an agreement with the basic Alliance position that no one ought to have to pay taxes without getting any visible benefits to really liking the colors of the gaudy, now almost-worthless Alliance currency.

The ship commander, Haapt Merriwether Yeats, grinned slightly. "We have a choice, Sally?"

"Not really," Bernari said. "Unless you feel like wrasslin' the rats."

"I'll live with spaghetti," Yeats said. "You, Goffa?"

"Fine with me. I'm junior member of the team, remember?"

"I like this woman's attitude," Bernari said. "She, unlike some other people I can think of, respects the noncommissioned tradition of the Alliance, always leading, even when we don't know where we're going."

Yeats snorted.

"You and me, we're going to get along fine, Goffa, even if you outrank me," Bernari said. "Flat majority against the skipper."

"Wrong," Yeats said. "Two bars beat one bar and a tomato stain all day long."

"Hey, hey," Bernari said. "Have respect for my rank."

"I do," Yeats said. "It's just that I have very little of it."

"You know, cooks have been known to piss in the spaghetti sauce," Bernari said. "Be warned."

"Might improve it some."

Bernari hmphed, Yeats went back to his book.

It was Proust's *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Dadie had seen Yeats reading it from time to time during the outpassage, asked him if it was any good.

"The dullest book I've ever read."

"Then why—"

"Because," Yeats had explained, "it makes everything else about these raids seem interesting."

Bernari had seemed to find this hilarious, and had chortled merrily, although Yeats hadn't smiled at all.

The Haapt was just as strange, Dadie thought, as she'd been warned at the replacement depot. But she'd volunteered for his crew anyway. It didn't hurt that he was the only original survivor of the twenty pilots who'd originally made up the 873rd Penetration Wing when the war started, almost six E-years ago. He was as bemedalled as any Alliance officer, yet had always refused to take over command of the Wing, only grudgingly leading a flight as the Alliance resources trickled down.

Absolute Magnitude

Yeats was tall, almost two meters, slender, only about 80 kilos. There was a half-visible scar down one cheek, disappearing into his hairline and becoming a streak of gray in the black. He was only 28 years old, but his seamed face made him look ten years older. He walked with a limp, plus having rebuilt his left femur after a grinding crash that destroyed *Bel II*.

He smiled often, as frequently at the unknown as at a joke, laughed seldom, but when he did had a booming bass that filled the cramped space of the K-boat. His voice was quiet, controlled, wry. Dadie thought of the Laughing Warrior, a legendary fighter of her ancient people, the Oulof. His eyes were gray, direct, and Dadie thought they were cold.

Another one of Yeats's peculiarities was that he seldom swore. Dadie had heard him use the word damn once, nothing worse.

Bernari had been with Yeats since the *Bel II* crash that had killed his other two crewmen; Dadie was on her second raid with him. On the first, the *Bel III*, teamed with another K-boat, had made their first jump from their forward base, intending to do a hit-and-run on an armed planetoid. But Federal destroyers had intercepted them, by means no one knew, whether treason at the Alliance base or some new, unknown detector. The two Alliance ships had split up. The other K-boat never returned; the *Bel III* fired two missiles on separate interception orbits at the pursuing destroyer and jumped back into hyperspace with missile launch warnings clanging across the board.

They'd only had a few days to recuperate before Alliance Intelligence had given the 873rd the mission alert. The *Bel III* was the only undamaged K-boat. The others in the Wing were either limping ruins, red-Xed for parts that never appeared, or hangar queens only carried on the books to make the Alliance fleet leaders feel that they still had something resembling a navy.

"With a clear shot, one missile is as good as a hundred," Yeats had said, and they'd gone out once more.

As they lifted above the field, Dadie saw the cracked tarmac, the empty revetments where other K-boats should have been parked, the rusty hulls of the Alliance shop craft and the battered hangars, tried not to think about the war, only her war.

On the outpassage, Yeats had read his Proust, other thick and battered real books. Bernari seemed to have a seemingly endless collection of porn holos, spent hours cackling, watching them happily.

Dadie was also busy, compiling her notebook. She wouldn't be command-qualified until it was complete, a large, hand-drawn book of every circuit, board, and pipe on the boat, proving she understood everything about the K-craft. She wondered if she'd finish it before time ran out for the Alliance, pushed that away, as well.

Dadie jumped as the com bell rang.

"That'll be our agent down on the ground who hasn't been nabbed like we were afraid of, just secretive," Bernari said confidently. "He'll be telling us those fat whores've lifted off, and giving us an intercept course."

Dadie went to the com board, touched keys, and the decoding began.

"It's not from any spy," she said. "It's an ALFOR."

Bernari bit his lip. Seldom within the last three years had had an ALFORces bulletin proclaimed anything other than "proud fighting withdrawals," "tightening the Alliance dominions to improve fighting lines," or, at worst, "the following units are to be removed from your order of battle."

Yeats turned another page of his book, but his eyes were on Dadie as she touched sensors.

Her lips moved, reading, as the screen scrolled the message.

Very suddenly, she started crying, the great, racking sobs of a grief-stricken man. She fought them under control, managed, finding a bit of pride in it, to find a calm, soldierly voice as she read:

"All Alliance units are instructed to cease hostilities as of this E-day, three E-hours, some minutes ago. All units are to return to their base, without engaging the enemy, or if in contact to immediately, repeat immediately, surrender to the nearest Federal ship."

"The authentication is legit," Dadie said, voice going dull.

Yeats closed his book hard, the snap loud in the silence.

"Son of a bitch," Bernari said. "First time I ever lost a frigging war."

"Name?"

"Merriwether Yeats."

"Service number?"

"Y431879QW."

"Former rank?" The Federal lieutenant put a little too much emphasis on the first word. Yeats noted he had a bit too large a potbelly for his youth.

"Haapt."

"Duty assignment?"

"You have it on the fiche in front of you," Yeats said.

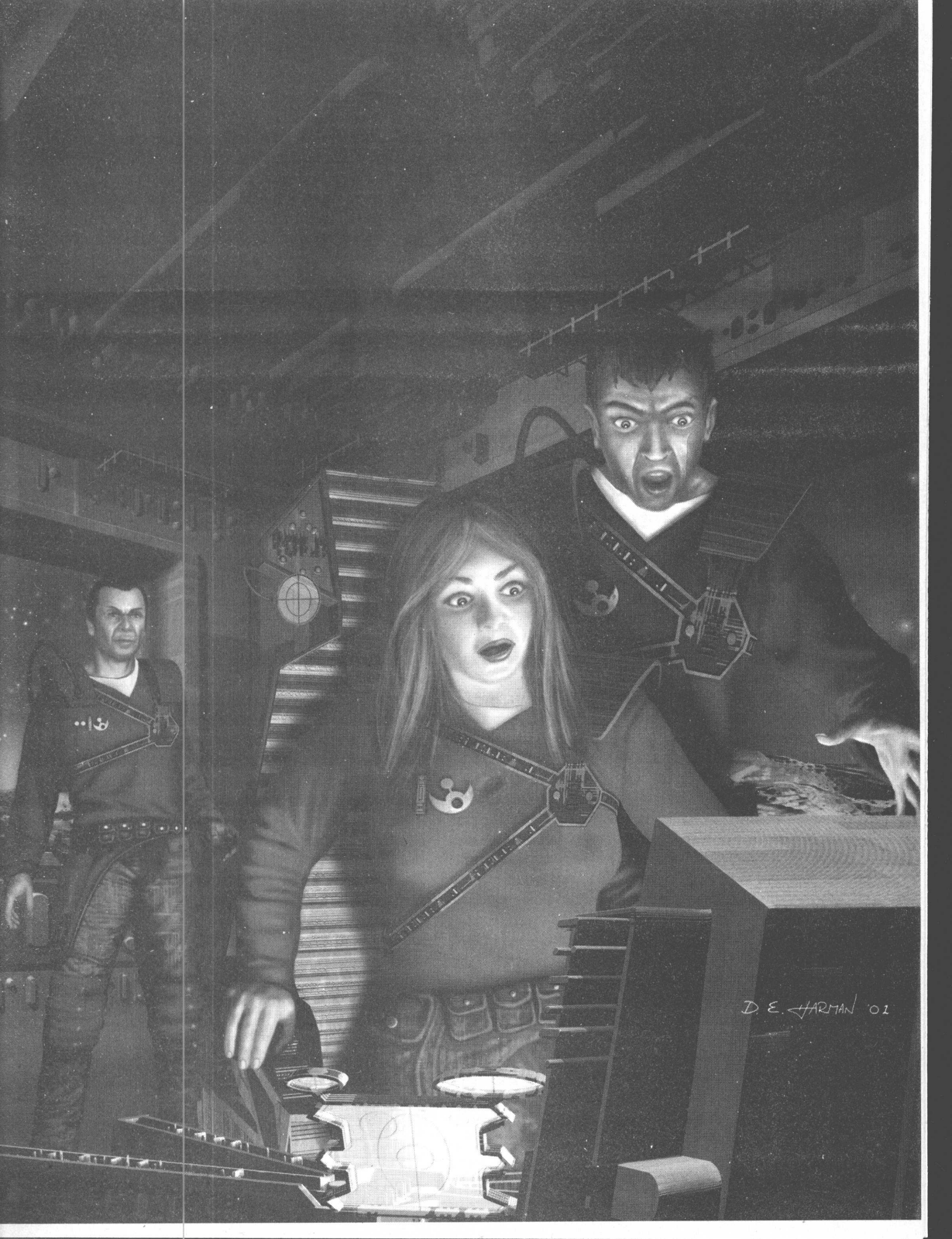
"Yeats," the Federal said, a degree of gloating in his voice. "It's our turn now to ask any questions we want."

Yeats gave the officer what he wanted. He wondered how Bernari had weathered this sort of arrogance, especially being a Federal citizen. But he'd lost track of both Salvatore and Dadie in the confusion of surrendering a K-boat without getting missiled into fragments and the aftermath.

"You'll do much better cooperating," the lieutenant said. "There's ten thousand in the prisoner cages waiting for outprocessing. I can pick and choose the order I want to deal with you people, you know."

"Of course you can."

"873rd Penetration," the lieutenant said. "That was one of the hotshot raiding units, wasn't it? Surprised we haven't



D. E. HARTMAN '01

Absolute Magnitude

decided to hold some of you pilots for war crimes investigation."

Yeats looked pointedly at the man's chest, at his arm, saw no combat decorations. The lieutenant saw where he was looking, flushed.

"I'm instructed, by the Federal Office of Prisoners of War, to advise you that you are to make no further resistance to any Federal laws, practices, officers or military, on pain of being tried and convicted as a civilian criminal.

"Further, you are banned from holding any public office, joining any Federal military formation, or traveling to Earth or the other main Federal capitals without specific permission from a Federal Armistice officer.

"Is that understood?"

Yeats nodded.

"Sign here," the lieutenant said, pushing a form and a scribe across. "If you violate any of these rules, you may be subject to the most extreme penalties, including death.

"Good." Yeats signed, and the lieutenant took the paper back.

"What are your intentions?"

Yeats could have said sleeping for ten years in a bed he didn't have to fold up in, getting used to going somewhere without a blaster on his hip, keeping regular hours, never having to read a star chart, eating food that didn't have to be reconstituted, said only, "Going home."

The lieutenant checked the fiche.

"Compson's Planet in Phi Ceti, you call it Maldon. That was one of the first systems to rebel."

Yeats inclined his head.

"What are your plans for the future?"

"I've got most of a law degree, from before the war," Yeats said. "I'll take the bar exam, and open up my father's old office.

"I'm sure," he said, just a note of bitterness in his voice, "there'll be good business, explaining the new Federal laws."

"Good," the lieutenant said. "Too many of you damned rebels seem to think there'll be some kind of opening for soldiers.

"Not in the worlds that used to be the Alliance, there won't be. Not now, not ever.

"That's all.

"Next prisoner!"

Merriwether Yeats found an advantage in having been an Alliance officer for the first time: the examining board, in Compson's Planet's capital, Wingfield, was more interested in his combat record and praising him for being a hero of the Alliance than testing him for knowledge of the law or ability to prepare and argue cases.

The next day he was on his way to his home city of Lanier, now Merriwether Yeats, LL.D. He suspected if Salvatore Bernari had heard, he would've said, "Great. With that, and a

two credit piece, or a 100-credit Alliance bill, you can get a glass of water. Tepid."

He left Wingfield in a sour mood. Once the capital had been the perihelion of progress and sophistication to him. But the war had changed that—in the early days, when the Alliance appeared to be winning, Yeats had been on Federal planets, gone through the kilometer-long factories that operated with three men, one supervisor and two troubleshooters; seen multi-million-populations of myriad beliefs and languages; and marveled at the huge scatter of Federal systems.

How had the Alliance dared think it could stand against that juggernaut with its thirty-odd systems and much-bragged love for the simple life? That may have won haymaking contests, but not wars.

All we had was arrogance, he thought. Arrogance and thinking, because we were among the first worlds colonized, that we understood Earth, and hence the Federal Assembly, perfectly, and thought we could dictate laws to suit what we hoped would become our own style.

If Wingfield was disappointing, Lanier was . . . was something he didn't quite have the word for.

Now it appeared very small, less than 10,000 people in the whole district. The city, with four main commercial streets, set on a riverbank with rice plantations downriver from it, on the flats, some small manufacturers and struggling solvent manufacturers behind the town, and tree farms across the river.

Only a few of the other cities on Lanier were any bigger.

He went directly from the shuttle, which was as rusty and wheezing as any of the Wing's ships had been in the final days, to his father's now his office.

It sat on a steep side street angling up from the river, three ground-floor rooms. His neighbor, an old woman with an antique store, had the key. Fortunately she hadn't wanted to talk any more than he did, after establishing he was, indeed, Mister Yeats' son a good man he'll be missed welcome back from wherever you've been.

Yellowing envelopes were still piled below the delivery slot, the most recent, except for some fliers, two years old. That'd been when his father had fallen dead of a stroke on his way to the office, five years after Yeats' mother's death.

Yeats wandered through the three rooms, looking here and there, wondering if he'd have to buy new lawbooks, how much in the way of real—Federal—credits his inheritance amounted to.

He found himself more and more depressed, locked up, and walked the kilometer, up into the city's heights, to the house he'd grown up in.

On the way, he found the word to describe Wingfield, Lanier, and Compson's Planet:

Dusty.

The Stars Too Near

Yeats' father and mother had planned for a large family, so, just after marriage, they'd bought one of Lanier's near-ruined mansions that'd been built by a bankrupt timber baron, and refurbished it. But Yeats had been their only child. He'd grown up loving the huge, echoing manse, room enough for his wildest imaginings, and for the handful of girls and boys he befriended.

Yeats consulted with his father's banker, found the estate was just about enough to support him modestly for an E-year.

More than enough, he thought. I'll either be going strong, or bankrupt and run out of town on a rail by then.

He bought brooms, mops, splurged on a small household robot, and started to work. His next expense was a hand-made wooden sign that he frequently admired as it swung back and forth in the river wind:

YEATS
&
SON
ATTORNEYS AT LAW

His first case was a straightforward worker's compensation matter, his second a distressed and confused old woman who was being evicted, his third a personal injury matter handled with a single com, mostly on the strength of his name.

Then he had a visitor. A long, sleek lifter settled at the curb. A heavy-set, dignified man who appeared to be in his late 50s with coifed white hair got out, and came toward his office. Two other men got out of the lifter, waited beside it. Yeats knew two of the three.

The older man was Var Quintin. He was former Speaker of the House of the People, and had been a loud proponent of the Alliance, and its secession from the Federal Assembly. Merriwether's father had told his son, rather distastefully, that Quintin was the real boss of Lanier, and some said the whole planet, no matter who was elected to office. "He's so damned crooked he can walk a straight line up a spiral staircase."

Yeats had asked his father why, in that case, he went to Quintin's fundraisers at his huge restaurant-lounge-sometime casino, The Sartoris.

The older Yeats had smiled, a bit sadly, and said, "You do what you have to do to get along."

Quintin came in, and his smile got broader.

"Young Meredith, it's a pleasure to see you. I was delighted to hear you'd managed to survive the unpleasantness, and then I heard a month or so past you'd become a lawyer, like your father, a dearer man will never be more missed, and wanted to return home.

"I was thrilled, Merriwether, truly thrilled, for there's all too many of our youngest and best who either fell on the field of battle or else, maybe worse, have chosen to emigrate out to the Frontier Sectors.

"Lanier and Compson's Planet desperately need young blood like you, so we can recover and rise up strong again!"

Merriwether nodded. "I thought Dad would want me to come back."

"He would have, he would have," Quintin said. "And I'm sorry, most sorry, that I haven't found the time to come here and welcome you back myself before now.

"Perhaps we should do a homecoming, Merriwether. Some kind of dinner at The Sartoris. Perhaps" and Quintin's eyes roamed the room, the old-fashioned desk, the threadbare couch, the rather battered filing cabinets and the badly obsolescent computers and coms, "a bit of a benefit."

"Thanks," Yeats said. "But things like that are for winners."

"As you like it, Merriwether. I think you're being a bit, well, not foolish, but perhaps a little lofty in making that decision, but it's yours to make.

"The other two reasons I came calling were to ask if you're interested in the political process. We need fresh thinkers like you, not just in the courtrooms, but in the party, as well."

There were two parties in Lanier the Progressives, which normally won the elections, and the tiny Independents. Quintin openly was the gray eminence of the Progressives, rumor had it he controlled the Independents as well.

Quintin held up his hand.

"Now, I know it was a long hard war, and you did your damndest more than your damndest and you'd most likely want to just concentrate on building your career.

"But don't be too quick to pass on becoming part of the Progressive Party. You know, your father was one of our staunchest linchpins. Also, for a lawyer, there's good reasons to be an active Progressive. The courts tend to recommend cases to those who're very much a part of the community.

"And, to be frank, you owe me somewhat."

Yeats lifted an eyebrow.

"I made sure, while you were embroiled in opening your office that various people knew you're the son of one of my ablest supporters, and so I didn't want you to be bothered with a lot of unnecessary paperwork, like keeping your business license intact, when it lapsed not long after your father's unfortunate death. Or the various city and special taxes that've been levied during the war that haven't yet been repealed, such as the ones on coms and things like that.

"I told the bureaucrats, don't bother the boy. Let him get himself back on his feet, settle back into the community, first."

"I appreciate the favors," Meredith said, his voice flat.

A brief frown rolled across Quintin's senatorial brow, vanished.

"Good, Meredith, very good. Perhaps we'll see you at The Sartoris night after next."

"I'll try to find the time."

Quintin turned to the door, stopped.

"Something I almost forget. There's a new organization forming. The Alliance Legion. It'll be made up of veterans who served proudly and those of us who kept the home fires stoked, and made sure Compson's Planet stood firm behind you warriors.

Absolute Magnitude

"The Legion is an idea, I might add, that is sweeping across the former Alliance worlds.

"You of course, with your distinguished record, would be a salutary member."

"I assume the Legion was your idea?" Meredith asked.

"Well, mine and some of my closer associates. Lu Caddy—you remember Lu out there—he's the Legionmaster of the Lanier post. You and he would be some of our most noted combat veterans, and do us proud."

Meredith didn't answer.

"So, welcome once more, boy, and we'll see you two nights hence."

Quintin left, got into the lifter. But the two men next to it didn't follow. One, the biggest, ambled to Yeats' door, came in.

"Yeats," he said, voice neutral.

"Lu," Meredith said. "Hardly recognized you in a uniform."

Caddy was at least ten years older than Yeats. His face was reddish, not from the wind from the river, and he was balding, hair combed across the top of his head. He was naturally big, his bulk was starting to get sloppy. He wore a khaki uniform, an officer's hat, and an emblem on his left shoulder that said LANIER PEACEKEEPERS. He wore twin crowns on his epaulettes, which Yeats gathered, from the inscription on his nametag, meant CHIEF. On his right shoulder he wore the banned Alliance flag.

Caddy wore a heavy blaster, various other pouched bits of weaponry on a real leather braided belt.

He flushed hard at Yeats' comment.

"Careful with the mouth, Yeats."

"I'm careful," Meredith said. "Nice seeing you still alive. I thought the court-martial would've had you shot."

"That was all a misunderstanding," Caddy scowled. "And I hope you didn't say anything about it to Var. For your good, not mine."

"I didn't say anything," Yeats said.

Caddy had enlisted in the Alliance when Yeats did, in the first flush of patriotism. They'd ended up in the same training unit. Yeats had been Second Ranked Graduate, losing First Rank because of his tendency to tell the truth if asked.

Caddy had disappeared in the third week of training. Yeats had seen, a month later on the unit morning report, that he'd been taken into custody in a nearby city, and charged with extortion, living off the earnings of a prostitute, assault, assault and battery, and murder.

"Tell me something, Lu," Yeats said, leaning across his desk. "Why'd you kill that whore you were pimping for? I assume that's who you murdered."

"Everyone knows you've never had the balls to stand up to anyone in a fair fight."

Caddy's face went from red to white. His hand moved to the butt of that blaster.

"Things aren't like they were," he grated. "You aren't the tiddy little son of a bigtime pol, now."

"I'm the one who's tight with Quintin these days.

"And I can do exactly as I want."

"Exactly anything as long as it's what Var approves of, or he isn't bothered by," Yeats said. "Otherwise, you'll be floating face-down in the river and that other plug out there'll be the new Chief Peacekeeper."

Caddy growled, and his hand brushed his blaster.

"One thing you might want to think about," Yeats said.

"Can you get that gun out before I come across this desk?"

"Be sure you know the answer, Lu."

"You wouldn't want to make a mistake."

Caddy stared, then banged out of the office.

"You and your mouth," Merriwether said quietly. "And I'll bet you're dumb enough not to make Quintin's meeting, either."

Yeats didn't want trouble, just a quiet life, maybe doing a little of the good his father had believed in, making sure the law worked the same for everybody.

He got cases, but all minor. The big, fat trust cases, the civil suits with insurance companies in the background, executing the wills of greedy old bastards, who'd made many credits out of the war those went to other lawyers, lawyers he saw, from the daily holo, who were very much a part of the Progressive Party.

He went for dinner once a month or so, all that he could afford, generally to The Sartoris. It was the best place in the city, after all. He saw Var Quintin a couple of times. The man smiled affably, sent a drink to Yeats' table, but didn't come over.

Out of morbid interest and boredom, he went to a couple of Alliance Legion meetings. That was a complete waste, since all they consisted of was railing about Federal policies, making veiled threats about the scattering of Federal Armistice officials on the planet, and adulatory praise of the Progressives from Caddy or one or another of his two vestpocket thugs, who he learned were named Malplaca and Rudin. They were as brutish as Caddy but, not surprisingly, far stupider.

Another feature of Legion meetings came from little old ladies of various sexes, diatribes about how, during the "Federal Invasion," as it was now known around Lanier, Federal troops systematically raped and looted their way across innocent Alliance planets, moons, asteroids and captured star liners. Everyone of these elders, some of whom Yeats thought he remembered from the flagwaving little parade Lanier held when it sent its innocents off to war, had virginal daughters-nieces-granddaughters-devoted friends of the family who'd been subjected to the utmost barbarisms by the Federals.

Yeats guessed yet another reason the Alliance had lost was because of the extreme virility of the Federals, stopped going to the Legion meetings.

The Stars Too Near

Yeats went up the mansion's freshly-painted steps, feeling more than a bit like a fool.

He was wearing his best clothes—a waist-length suede windbreaker, pants cut close in the pre-war pattern, black ankle-boots, a new dark shirt, and a white silk neckcloth.

No more than five years out of style, he thought, touched the bell.

He waited a long time, was about to turn away, when the door opened, and he fell down and down into a starry void.

The woman in the door was just twenty, her dark hair in ringlets cascading down about her shoulders around an oval face, soft brown eyes, small breasts and a curving figure no more than a kilo or two over perfection.

"V-Vandy?" Yeats managed in some confusion.

"Vandy?" The woman laughed, water cascading over silver bells. "No, you silly man. I'm Peg. Her sister. I'm just in town for a couple of months. It's surprising you caught me, or anyone else for that matter, here in Lanier at all."

"Oh. Oh, I'm sorry," Yeats said.

"Vandy's married now, living in Wingfield," Peg said. "Her boy's just two, and she has another on the way. She married Representative Haller."

"Oh, I didn't mean to bother you," Yeats repeated, still in confusion.

"No bother," Peg said. "I know you now! You're you had that strange name, don't tell me, Merideth, Merideth Yeats. You and Vandy were, well, pretty close friends, back before the war."

"Merriwether, actually," Yeats said. "And I remember you, too. You were the one who always wanted to know what we were doing."

Peg laughed.

"Now I know," she said. "Vandy didn't have to tell me, either."

Yeats hoped he hadn't blushed. Vandy Mellan had been the local beauty, and for some reason, seemed to favor Merriwether over the others that came courting. She was a year younger than he in calendar age, decades older in sophistication, he'd realized. He'd thought, with some jealousy, she'd learned what she knew at the family's winter house in Wingfield, in the capital, center of decadence, passionate older men who'd been offworld, and exotic delights, where the Mellans spent most of their time, dealing with their planetwide investments.

Yeats had assumed, without any reason, that Vandy would be waiting for him when he came back. Certainly the two days they'd spent together at a lakeside cottage before he'd shipped out left him dazed and, he thought, in love.

But only the first two of his passionate messages had been answered. When he'd found the credits for a ruinous interstellar com, just before he'd been commissioned, whoever'd answered the com at the Mellans had curtly told

him Miss Vandy could no longer be reached at this number, and she had no idea what other might be good.

Yeats had thought he'd mourn forever. But the first slashing encounter between a K-boat and three Federal heavy sloops taught him there wasn't any room for anything except war, if he planned on having any future at all.

Why he'd come to the Mellan mansion, he had no idea. Maybe to find out what happened to Vandy. And, well, he'd found out.

He started away. Peg caught him by the sleeve.

"You were always so nice to me," she said. "And my sister is such a bitch. I cried for a week when she, well, just dropped you, because you were far away and she always wants what's right there, right now.

"It was awful! I still haven't forgiven her!"

Yeats smiled a little.

"People change. Things change. Don't be too hard on Vandy"

"But she did such a positively shitty, and I'm sorry for the language, thing. Won't you come in? Or, better yet, why you'd want to come into this spooky old house, where there's only me and a couple of dodderers is stupid.

"Let me get a jacket," Peg said. "I'll buy you a drink."

"You don't have to—"

"Merriwether Yeats, don't be such a dunk! That gives me an excuse to get out of here, before the cobwebs eat me alive! Now, where'll we go? I know, The Sartoris."

"Why not?" Yeats said, in a bit of happy confusion.

Over drinks, which turned into dinner, Merriwether listened to Peg Mellan's cheerful babblings about Wingfield society, about how Lanier was dull to critmass, about her friends whom he didn't know and couldn't afford to associate with.

Var Quintin came by, picked up the check for the meal, had a brandy, chatted about inconsequentialia.

When he left, Peg looked after him thoughtfully.

"He doesn't like you very much."

"Probably not."

"Why not?"

Yeats shook his head. "Maybe my strings are a little loose."

"What does—oh. You mean like a puppet?"

Yeats nodded.

"You know," Peg said, "Vandy said he once tried to get her into bed. I don't think she went for it."

Peg shuddered.

"That'd be like screwing your own father, wouldn't it?, I mean I couldn't stand the idea of those cold old man's hands on me."

She shuddered again.

"Come on. Let's get out of here. I know a place out on the edge of town where we can dance."

They went out twice more, then, as seemed most natural, they ended up in one of the Mellan house's huge beds.

After it was over, she looked down at Yeats.

Absolute Magnitude

"Well? Was I better than my sister?"

Yeats managed something noncommittal.

"Here," Peg said. "Get back on the bed." She fumbled in a drawer, brought something out. "I'll bet she never let you do this to her!"

Meredith Yeats and Peg Mellan became a duo. They ate dinner together, alternated nights between their houses. On weekends they took the Mellans' small hovercraft up or downriver, exploring abandoned towns or finding country inns. Peg delighted in these rustic spots, in what she called "real people's music." Yeats found that some of these real backwoods people also seemed to think whatever they wanted they could have, sneered at Merriwether's limp, and so he had to get physical. That seemed to make Mellan even happier.

He decided Peg Mellan was sweet, even though she had the intelligence of a rock squirrel. Yeats found himself comparing her to Goffa Dadie, other women warriors he'd served with in the Alliance, even though he'd never considered an affair with any of them. He decided thinking like that wasn't exactly productive.

Peg thought being highly experimental in bed and having a cunning ability to size people up made her sophisticated, without any real knowledge of holos, books, politics or art. But then, who in Lanier did? There were three 'casters in the city, one religious yammering, the second 'casting prewar holos, mostly action, and the third and worst being a public station. A brilliant conversationalist was someone whose behind-the-back slur at the bar last night was remembered until noon the next day.

Yeats supposed, even though he realized he wasn't going much of anywhere, he was about as happy as he'd be allowed to be, let thoughts of the future, his slight dreams, ebb.

"I think," the young man said, "I might need a lawyer. A week ago, I would've said the best lawyer in Lanier, but the best lawyers in Lanier won't talk to me."

"Thanks for the compliment," Merriwether said.

"I like everyone including myself to know exactly what is going on," the man said. "I'm Pel Maleter, and I'm trying to start a plas factory in these parts."

"What's the problem?"

"I seem to have fallen afoul of a certain Var Quintin," Maleter said. "For reasons I'm not sure of."

"That explains why some other people might not want your retainer," Yeats allowed.

"And what made me hunt you down, since I understand you two aren't exactly sleeping together," Maleter said. "Look. I'm funded like a bastard. I've got six million hard credits on deposit, letters of credit for another ten."

"I had agents in town a couple of months ago, and I've got a lease on the old Spruce Volatiles plant, and have plans drawn up for a complete rebuild. I've optioned my extrusion,

casting, stamping machines from Federal plants, and have six months supply of chemicals on order."

"That sounds promising," Yeats said. "What are you going to be producing?"

"These." Maleter took a rather strange-looking casting from a pocket, dropped it on Yeats's desk. "It seems there's an occasional problem with vibration affecting the fuel flow into most secondary drives."

Yeats remembered Bernari's swearing and hammer blows coming from the drive space control room on *Bel III*.

"I've got guaranteed flat-out guaranteed, contracts, in writing orders for 340,000 of these little shock absorbers. Takes about five minutes to drill in the mounting bracket to a hull plate, recontour the lines through these little clips, and no more problems."

"So you're about to be a multi-millionaire," Yeats said. "How'd you run afoul of Quintin? Not want to bribe him or something?"

"Oh, hell no!" Maleter said. "I've been in, pardon me, other pissy little towns on pissy little planets, and your goddamned ex-Alliance has more than its share. I know the turf."

"I'm already a millionaire and then some. So I know how things work when you've got a town boss, who you've got to slip a bundle under the table, and so on and so forth."

"I was am more than willing to grease Quintin and his people. I've already figured my bribes into the cost of production, for pity's sake. I'm hardly a virgin!"

Yeats waited.

"I had dinner last week with Quintin, and some of the other mucketies around here," Maleter said. "I told them I wanted to start production before the end of the year, and I was well aware of the unemployment rate around here a pretty damned dismal 18 percent, if you didn't know, and that I'd be needing initially casual labor, lots of it, plus local contractors, and that I'd be willing to train up any capables to work in the factory, or train young people, since the only jobs that Lanier seems to have are either in the fields or on the towboats or pushing a broom for some dying store."

"I told all of these people what I've told you, and Quintin looked at me, shook his head, and thanked me for dinner."

"The bastard and his frigging friends wouldn't see me, return my coms after that."

"What did I do wrong?"

"I don't know," Yeats said.

"Would you try to find out? None of the other lawyers would even take a meeting with me."

Yeats thought about it. He could see why Maleter had a bit of a hard time in Lanier. He was everything the people of Compson's Planet weren't—brusque, assertive, a little more profane than common, and very much to the point.

He reminded Yeats of Bernari, other people who'd come back from Federal worlds to fight for the Alliance, come to think about it.

"What kind of retainer would you want?"

The Stars Too Near

Yeats named a figure.

"Peanuts," Maleter said, took out a pad. "What's your bank account number?"

Yeats, starting to be a bit amused, told him.

Maleter wrote with his finger on the pad, hit a transmit button, turned the pad to Yeats.

"That's what it's worth to me, if you solve things, as a starter. And I'll need somebody on full retainer as time goes on."

The figure was ten times the one Yeats had named.

66 So what did Mister Maleter do to anger you?" Yeats asked. He ignored the snifter of brandy Quintin had brought from the bar, sipped ice water.

"He's a pushy Federal bastard, just for openers," Quintin said.

"So he appears," Yeats agreed. "But he has pushy Federal credits, which Lanier could certainly use."

"Not the way he's going to spend them," Quintin said.

"Maybe I missed something," Yeats said. "He's going to refurbish the Spruce plant, which is one step short of spontaneous combustion, hire locals to do the work. He's going to bring in machines and materials, teach anybody who wants a job to use them. He said he wasn't going to bring in more than ten or twenty outside workers, who'll be temporary supervisors until locals get enough experience to take over.

"All of that he's more than willing to put in writing, and let your pocket City Assembly make into formal legal requirements.

"What's wrong with all that?"

Yeats didn't think he had to mention that Quintin would certainly make more than his kilo of flesh out of the proceedings.

"You know what's wrong with that? Did he tell you what he wants to pay people?"

Yeats shook his head.

"He wants to start people at six credits an hour!" Quintin snarled. "You know what that means? Local wages start at three and a quarter. You start paying people like that, particularly kids and those damned swamp layabouts you can't ever get to do any real work anyway, and pretty soon they'll be wanting everybody to pay that kind of money! He wants to pay in hard Federal credits, not script or draws!

"That's not only inflationary, it's pure foolishness! It'd drive Lanier right into bankruptcy. We'll end up like some of those little ghost towns you and your girlfriend like to visit, nothing but mud, dust and echoes."

"I see," Yeats said.

"There is no way, no way at all," Quintin said, "we are going to allow this Maleter to do anything in Lanier except leave quietly.

"I personally guarantee I, and my associates, will fight him on every legal ground possible. I've already got a measure in

the works before the City Assembly to forbid any development in the Spruce area, due to land instability.

"I'll guarantee you, Meredith, right now, speaking honestly because I've got certain little devices that confirm you aren't recording this conversation, I'll fight him on every ground he chooses to find, in the Spruce area, across the river, here in town, or anywhere.

"And," Quintin hissed, "if he keeps trying to destroy the very fabric of Lanier society, the bastard will likely find himself very, very dead!"

Yeats waited until Maleter stopped raving, stopped making counter-threats.

"All right," he said mildly. "Both of you are big strong boys, with big gonads and friends who own guns.

"Let's go back one. The whole thing, as I see it, is this thing about the wages. Quintin is scared silly that you'll end civilization as we know it if you start paying people a decent salary.

"Would it bother you to, at least at the beginning, go along with the local wages? Then, after people relax, you can start giving raises."

"No chance," Maleter said flatly. "I grew up butt-dirty poor. My father worked himself to death before I could finish school. My mother sewed, did any kind of piece work she could. My sisters had to get married young, and their husbands were ground into the dust by fatcat bastards who weren't human enough to treat people like people.

"No way will I treat anybody who works for me like that, not now, not ever. Quintin can shit through his ears and whistle out his bung before that'll happen."

"I knew things wouldn't be that easy," Yeats said. "Let me think a bit."

Four days later, Meredith Yeats personally served injunctions on Quintin, the members of the City Assembly, and the other big business owners who'd been the meeting with Maleter.

The injunctions, issued by a Federal Armistice official in Wingfield, forbade any interference with Pal Maleter, his proposed business enterprises and his employees and business associates, on pain of being brought before a Federal court on civil and possible criminal charges.

Var Quintin tried to hide his anger, couldn't, threw the injunction on the floor of The Sartoris and slammed away into a back room.

Malplaca, one of Caddy's louts, blocked Yeats' exit from the restaurant, thumb in his pistol belt.

"Maybe you're in violation of the law, Yeats," he said. "Remember that I'm a sworn Peacekeeper."

"Maybe I am." ---

"Maybe you might need some talking to."

Absolute Magnitude

Yeats slid his hand to his waist, thumb extended to brush back his jacket, centered his body in a slight crouch.

"Talk away," he said, voice just above a whisper, cold gray eyes hard on Malplaca.

Malplaca licked suddenly dry lips, thought about the snap on his holster, remembered stories he'd heard about Yeats during the war, from the holos, that he always carried a gun, strange for a ship-raider, and the blaster wasn't for show.

"Go on ahead now," he said, stepping aside. "I didn't figure you'd be interested in listening to reason."

Yeats didn't answer, didn't turn his back on Malplaca as he left.

Lu Caddy stopped Yeats as he left his office that afternoon.

"Peacekeeper Malplaca said you threatened him with a gun today," he said, his own blaster held loosely in his hand. "I couldn't find any record that you've got a concealed weapon's permit."

Yeats smiled tightly, carefully opened his jacket, revealing a bare belt.

"Malplaca," he said, "sees things where they aren't. Maybe you want to have a word with him. Ask him if he's ever needed a backbone."

He started away. Lu Caddy made no move to stop him.

Yeats rang four times at the Mellan house before one of the ancient housekeepers answered it.

"Miss Mellan isn't here," she said. "She's gone back to Wingfield."

Yeats hid his surprise.

"She said, Mister Yeats, for me to give you a message. She said anybody who could betray everything that was worthwhile, and play traitor with the Federals like you did is someone she never wants to see or talk to again."

The housekeeper finished, and slammed the door, hard, in satisfaction.

That night, fire sirens screamed.

Yeats sat up in bed. He'd thought about finding a bottle and nursing his shattered love affair, found himself grinning wryly.

What love affair?

But he'd still tossed for awhile before drifting off.

Yeats went to a window, looked out. Flames roared high into the night, about five kilometers away.

Just about where the old Spruce Volatile plant was, or had been.



The Stars Too Near

66 **A** complete loss," Pal Maleter said bitterly. "I know when I'm beaten.

"I find another site, they'll burn that out. Maybe with me in it.

"Life's too goddamned short for this."

"I'm sorry," Yeats offered.

"Why apologize? You didn't do anything but give it your best shot.

"Fine. These godforsaken neanderthals want to play like that, I'm gone.

"I can get my ass out to the Frontier Sectors, find people who want to work, get the Federal bonus for moving into an undeveloped zone, make more millions and not have to be looking over my shoulder every minute like I'd have to here.

"So much for the goddamned Alliance that never was, and the goddamned Federals who want, so desperately, for someone to help you poor benighted bastards rebuild.

"I'm gone, Yeats. And I've got one goddamned question."

Merriwether waited.

"What the hell keeps you in this armpit?"

It was a month or so later, and Yeats had finally found a sinecure of sorts. Since workers' compensation frequently had to deal with Federals, and payment came directly from the government, Merriwether had the field to himself.

The most interesting was a murder. Two sons of the local gentry got into an argument at The Sartoris after too many drinks for both of them, decided they were going to have a duel. Both pistols in their lifters, grabbed them and started firing. One took a bolt in the leg, seemed, as nearly as Yeats could tell from the report, to drop his pistol, which went off, killing him. Or else his opponent was more accurate with his second shot.

Yeats saw a good case, was ready to send to Wingfield for a forensic burn expert to determine whose gun did the killing. But the case never came to trial. An older lawyer told Yeats, quietly, that neither family wanted an investigation: "who's dead is dead, and nobody wants to make a big thing out of something like this, especially when it might come out that poor whatsisname shot himself as he went down. Come, Yeats. You know Lanier. We always believed a man has the right to defend himself, and so long as there isn't anyone screaming for revenge, that's that."

That being that, of course there was no fee except the initial retainer, only half of which Yeats felt he'd earned.

There were other cases, and when they came to trial, as they did distressingly often instead of being quietly settled in a professional manner, Yeats was pretty well guaranteed to lose on a procedural matter the judge suddenly found most significant.

He saw Quintin's fine hand behind this, morosely considered telling potential clients to go up the street if they wanted to win their case, realized he wasn't that suicidal. Yet.

He had a computer's case open, was staring at two bubblechips, trying to figure out which of them was hiccuping, and the door came open.

"Ho-ho, skipper," the voice came, "And aren't you in over your head?"

It was Salvatore Bernari, lugging two small suitcases.

"Where in the blazes—" and Yeats, normally not a man to display emotion, was hugging the smaller man.

"Enough, already," Bernari said. "I just came to this backwater for a visit, not to get married."

The two looked at each other.

"You're skinnier," Bernari said.

"So are you."

"No I'm not," Salvatore said. "But you're a polite bastard, and thanks."

"How'd you track me down?" Yeats said.

"Easy. You were always racketing about this stupid city, which is a lot frigging smaller than I thought it'd be. I chanced a few credits on an info com from Phobos, which is where I was working, found a Merriwether Yeats, lawyer-type, one-each, figured it had to be you. There are some bennies in having a stupid weird name like yours.

"And it only cost me fifty credits to add a little sidetrip to my ticket so here I am."

"Come on, Sally," Yeats said. "Drop the bags and let me buy you a drink."

"Got one with me," Bernari said, opening one case. "If you've got glasses "

Yeats found some, rinsed them off. Bernari looked around the office.

"No offense, boss, but you don't look like you're taking the legal profession by storm."

"I'm not," Yeats said. Bernari took a half-empty bottle without a label from one bag, uncapped it.

"This shit's as evil as the crap I used to make," he said. "Got it on Deimos, when I was transshipping, as a reminder of the bad old days. It was supposed to be a present, unopened, but . . .

"Hell, skipper, I'm drinking too much these days."

But he made no move to stop Yeats from half-filling the glasses, waved the water chaser away, and settled in Yeats' most comfortable client chair.

Yeats looked at him carefully, as he sipped his drink, winced, poured water after it.

"No offense, but you have looked better," Merriwether said. "What happened?"

Bernari drank half of his drink, put it down hard on the desk.

"You remember my wife, and my four kids?"

Yeats nodded.

"I got back to Phoebus City and had five kids, another on the way."

"Oh."

"Gwenette also had her friend in permanent housekeeping." Bernari grimaced.

Absolute Magnitude

"I dunno what I was expecting. Gone six years, only a couple of coms, that's a long damned time to wait, especially without any messages back and forth.

"So I tried to be understanding, and move out, and make the whole divorce thing happen real fast so everybody could get on with their lives. That wasn't a problem; lots of Federals are coming back home to find out nothing's there.

"Somehow, that sort of understanding didn't happen like it was supposed to in me, and I found myself thinking things. Ugly things.

"And I'm not that kind of person. At least, I never thought I was. Here, c'mon, drink up. Don't make me feel like more of a lush than I am."

Yeats obeyed. Bernari reached for the bottle.

"Uh-uh," Merriwether said. "If we're going to be drinking, let's switch to something less corrosive. And I'm buying, so we'll go to the only decent bar in town, even if a shitheel owns it.

"After we drop your stuff off at my place."

"Hang on a sec, cap," Bernari said. "I got three presents for you. Well, two and a half, since I got feeling strange on the shuttle, and needed something to settle my stomach."

"Presents?"

"First one's verbal," Salvatore said. "You heard any mutterings about anybody who was with the raiding squadron is maybe on some kind of Federal shit list?"

"The clown who handled my discharge from the cages said something about war criminals, and how I can't join any Federal service and such."

"Yeah, well, that's something you don't have to worry about. Remember Leut Mind Milo?"

"Hell yes," Merriwether said. "Best damned supply officer the Wing ever had. He was even a better thief than you."

"You give him too much praise," Bernari said. "Anyway, I ran into him on Phobos that's where I went when I decided I had to get off Mars. Got a job cooking, and hey, a lot of people think I'm pretty damned good."

"A lot of people had their tastebuds shot off in the war," Yeats said.

"Pfiddle. Milo recognized me, took me aside, and told me I didn't have to worry about any kind of trouble from the government. He accessed most of the raiding Wings records after the surrender, blanked them cold. This is not going to make historians really happy, I guess, but screw 'em."

"Good God," Yeats said. "Milo always was one for the large strokes. I wonder how he—"

"Don't know, didn't ask," Bernari interrupted. "Anyway, he was headed through the Federal worlds, on his way out to the Frontiers when I spotted him. He said the Frontier Sectors are where the big credits would be made, and not staying in the Alliance.

"He said he was going to get in on the ground floor, start trading with the Eets."

The ExtraTerrestrials were a hundred or more tribes, cultures, even more varied than the human cultures scattered through the galaxy. They'd stayed mostly neutral during the war, although Yeats had heard of a planet or two that'd backed one side or the other.

"That's what made me start thinking," Bernari said. "It's too easy to drop down from Phobos to Mars, and having that big goddamned reddish blob overhead kept me always thinking about the past. Remembering. And, yeah, drinking."

"I'm sorry, Sally."

Bernari shrugged.

"Shit floats downstream, the last I heard, and I seem to be just where it pools up. So I hunted around, talked to some people, and damned straight, there's kilotons of jobs out on the Frontier. Maybe they don't pay as well as in civilization, but it's cheaper to live out there, so it compensates.

"Anyway, so I signed on, chief cook, with a landing field developer. That'll keep me traveling, pay me good, let me forget."

He looked around again at the shabby office.

"Maybe you ought to think about doing the same thing, skipper. Unless you're nice and settled in back home here?"

"Not very."

"Milo said there's always a place for a man who's willing to work actually, he said, somebody with his eye on the main chance. I don't know if there's any need for lawyers; what I hear about the Frontier is they're running a little in front of Federal law."

"That and soldiering are just about the only thing I know," Merriwether said.

"You don't want to do that, skipper. Federal Assembly's cutting way back on its military. Only active sorts are out there trying to keep the peace between the Eets and the scramblin' settlers. Seems like half of the goddamned Federals and more'n that of the Alliance are picking up stakes and heading out, looking for a clean place to start over. And a lot of them don't like aliens any better than they liked people with different skin colors or ways of combing their hair.

"Anyway, not meaning to encourage your killer impulses, since we're all at peace and such. Here's your real present."

Bernari took out a gun from his duffle. It was in a worn brown leather holster, meant to hang low on the right leg, almost to the knee, and belt. It was a rig for a shooter, a killer. The pistol itself was a large-aperture Federal issue blaster, 15 charges, the mouth slightly pitted, showing more than occasional use.

It was Meredith Yeats' service arm, taken from a dead Federal early in the war.

"Son of a gun," Yeats said reverently. "How the blazes did you manage to acquire that? I had to give it up to that Federal ensign who took the *Bel III*'s surrender. I thought he wanted to shoot me with it for having a sidearm that must've belonged to one of his kith."

The Stars Too Near

"It wasn't any problem, skip," Bernari said. "I just wiggled my nose, and made a wish, and there it was, in the bottom of my barracks bag when I got discharged."

"You're amazing," Yeats said. "Damned amazing."

"I been telling you that for years, cap," Bernari said playfully. "Now are you gonna start believing me?"

"I am. I surely am."

"Then let's go drop off this crap and look for a drink."

"And a meal," Yeats said.

"If we gotta eat, we gotta eat," Bernari said resignedly.

At The Sartoris, Salvatore had two drinks to Merriwether's one, picked at his food, brightened when it was taken away and more alcohol came.

Yeats himself had two or three drinks more than he was quite used to. Quintin came out once, pursed his lips, went away. Yeats saw Malplaca and Rudin peer in, then jerk back when they realized they'd been seen.

Bernari wasn't paying any attention.

"I figure, out there on the Frontiers," he said, "I won't have much trouble knocking off this boozing. Although there's sure a lot of cooks who like to hit the bottle, I've noticed.

"But I don't guess I'll have the time to be sucking up alk. Not if I want to keep my job."

Bernari dipped a finger into his brandy, ran it around the rim of the snifter, listening to the glass sing.

"There was another thing that got me away from Mars," he said. "This'll sound weird."

Yeats smiled. "You can sound as weird as you want, Sally."

"Thanks. That's the problem with being around people who haven't been around you long enough to grind the rough edges off," Bernari said. "You sort of can't say anything that comes to mind, unless you want people to think you've got more than zeds and ones in your program.

"But I'm a little soused and ziggling, aren't I?"

"Like I was saying, another reason I wanted out, away from Earth, away from all the old worlds, is the stars are too close."

"Huh?"

"They are. I know Earth's out in the fringes, more or less, away from Galactic Center. But you look around at night, and there's this big gleaming blanket, everywhere.

"Not like it was during the war. Remember, sometimes we'd be waiting for somebody to shoot up, and there'd be almost nothing, maybe one or two visibles, and some light-haze?"

Yeats nodded.

"Stars, fences, houses," Bernari murmured. "All too goddamned close together, people able to hang over fences, look in your business, see what you're doing, what you're thinking.

"Screw 'em."

Yeats tried to find something comforting, or even light to say, failed.

"Come on, Sally," he said. "Let's call it a night. I don't need a big head tomorrow. And you're staying four days, you said."

"Yeah. Then off, into the black unknown," Bernari said. "Look, you go on, skipper. I need about two, maybe three more drinks. I'm way too sober to sleep right now."

Yeats looked at Bernari carefully.

"Well, you don't sound drunk, and I assume you can walk. You want the number of a cab company?"

Bernari snorted.

"The day I can't walk straight is the day I can crawl at 34kph. Leave the door open, and I'll navigate directly to bed.

"And don't worry about me being hungover. I still don't get 'em. Never have, never will."

Bernari was telling the truth about that, and Yeats had never seen him visibly drunk.

Merriwether clapped Bernari on the shoulder.

"Don't make it too late. The local peacekeepers don't like people out terrorizing the locals, and besides, they roll the sidewalks up early."

"Ah, screw 'em. No, skipper, don't get worried. I don't even have an equalizer, and you know me, I don't tangle with the police unless I'm a lot better armed than they are."

Yeats fell asleep an hour or so after he'd gotten home. He was a little worried, caught himself. Sally Bernari was a big boy, and well in charge of his fate.

Yeats woke at dawn, rolled out of bed. He checked the bedroom he'd given Bernari before going out on his daily run, found it empty.

Yeats grimaced, decided he'd better check with the Peacekeepers, and the buzz of the com beat him to it.

"Yeats."

"This is Peacekeeper Damnon. Do you know a Salvatore Bernari?"

"I do."

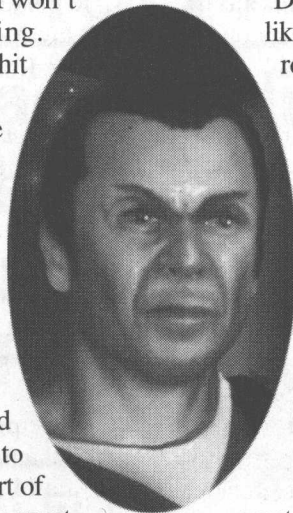
"I think you should come to Peacekeeper Central as soon as you can."

"Very well," Yeats said. "Can I ask you, what's his bail amount?"

There was a long silence, then: "I'm afraid the matter is a great deal more critical than that."

Salvatore Bernari was quite dead. There was a blaster hole in his chest, another in his lower back, and part of his right hand had been blown away.

Yeats asked for a copy of the incident report, was given it reluctantly, since he was an officer of the court.



Absolute Magnitude

It was a routine stop. Peacekeepers Rudin and Malplaca had earlier observed the deceased drinking more than he should, and had decided to make sure he arrived home without problems, and so followed him when he left The Sartoris.

Halfway to the place he was staying, evidently the residence of one Meredith Yeats, he'd stopped and urinated through a business mail slot.

At that point, he'd been challenged by Peacekeeper Rudin. Instead of putting up his hands as ordered, he'd reached into a pocket, and produced a small pistol.

He'd fired once, missing Rudin, and been shot by both Peacekeepers.

"Where's Bernari's gun?" Yeats asked the watch commander.

"In the evidence locker."

"Why was Bernari shot in the back if he was trying to shoot at the two Peacekeepers?"

The watch commander looked momentarily uncomfortable.

"He must've twisted when the first round hit him, I'd guess."

Yeats told the commander he'd take care of the cremation arrangements and that the body would be shipped out-system, left.

He spent the rest of the morning sitting in his living room, staring out at the river, at the shabby little town around him. Three times he saw Peacekeeper lifters cruise slowly past, helmeted faces staring in.

Finally he went to the com, contacted a funeral home with orders to pick up Salvatori's body, cremate it and send the ashes to a certain address on Mars he'd found in Bernari's cases, said there'd be no ceremony. Then he comed his banker, transferred funds to pay for the cremation, and closed the rest of his accounts.

He'd pick up the credits personally.

Just before dusk, Yeats put on dark pants, shirt and jacket, and running shoes. Carrying an unobtrusive bundle, he walked to his office.

He stood in the middle of the main room for a moment, made a face.

"Sorry, dad."

He went out, locked the door, gave the key to the crone in the antique store.

"You're going away?"

Yeats nodded.

It was full dark, but still early for The Sartoris's crowd. Yeats came out of the shadows, walked up to the valet, past him into the restaurant.

The woman noticed Yeats was wearing a pistol, openly worn low on his hip, and hurried for a com.

Yeats went to the bar, ordered the best brandy in the house, a glass of ice water. He positioned himself carefully, so a crystal vase behind the bar reflected the door, sipped at his drink.

The bartender answered an intercom, looked, eyes wide, at Yeats, then, trying and failing to look casual, went into the back room.

Yeats saw movement in the crystal as the outer door opened, saw the surreal reflection of a man in khaki, saw the man's arm move toward his waist.

He turned, hand going to his blaster. Rudin stood there, just drawing his weapon. To one side was Malplaca.

"You're under—"

The worn butt of the blaster was in Yeats hand. He fired once, and the top of Rudin's head shattered, spraying blood back out of the open door.

Rudin fell across Malplaca, who pushed the corpse out of the way, seemingly forgetting about the gun in his hand.

"Now we're both carrying," Yeats said, voice calm.

"No I don't—"

Yeats shot him twice in the chest, and he curled atop Rudin's corpse.

Lu Caddy was in the doorway, saw the carnage, shot as Yeats siderolled to the floor, taking barstools with him. Caddy shot again, and Yeats pulled the trigger.

Both of them missed.

Yeats, even over the ringing in his ears from the blaster explosions heard a door bang open, heard Var Quintin's voice.

"Great gods! What the hell is going on!"

Lu Caddy was in a fighter's crouch, and his pistol reflexively came up at the figure coming out of the dimness of the bar's back office, fired.

Var Quintin screamed, a high shrill, pivoted, grabbing at his side.

Merriwether Yeats came to his knees, pistol held level in both hands. Caddy was turning toward him, eyes glaring in fear, rage, shock.

Yeats blew Caddy's gun hand off at the wrist, then put a second, more accurate round into Caddy's throat. The Peacekeeper's hands came up, right hand spraying blood as if it were a hose, then he dropped.

Yeats was on his feet, gun sweeping the room. But he was the only one left alive. He walked around the bar, looked down at Var Quintin.

"What a stupid way to go and get . . ." Quintin managed, then blood poured from his mouth, and he went limp.

"Yeah," Yeats said. "Stupid is the way to put it."

Three weeks later, Meredith Yeats waited at a gate at Wingfield's terminal.



The Stars Too Near

He had a few minutes before the liner would board, walked out onto a balcony.

The disaster at The Sartoris had been handled the same way as the duel. No one wanted to tie things up with an inquiry or trial. The only two deaths that mattered were Var Quintin's and Lu Caddy's—the two gunsels were utterly unimportant.

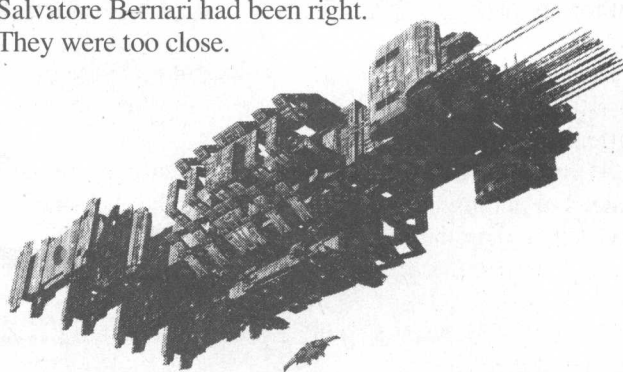
Yeats had told the truth, and the Progressive hierarchy caucused. The story sounded like enough of the truth to be accepted, quite a few remembered Yeats' father, certainly weren't sure anyone could manage to convict a certified war hero. Besides, they were wasting time with this, instead of dividing up Var Quintin's legacy, both real and political.

It simplified matters when Yeats told them his plans, and so the matter would be allowed to fade into local legend.

A speaker murmured the call for the starship, naming

systems Merriwether Yeats had never heard of, systems on the edges of the galaxy.

He started inside, looked up at the stars above him. Salvatore Bernari had been right. They were too close.



Published Authors

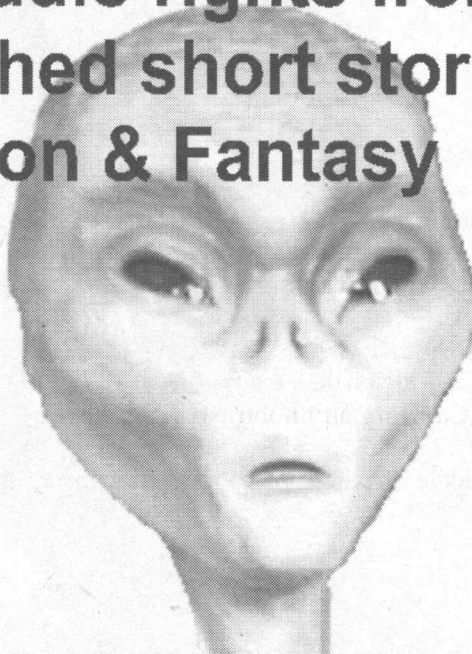
Images SI Inc.

**will purchase audio rights from
previously published short stories.
Science Fiction & Fantasy**

Fantasy & Sci-Fi



Images SI Inc.



**** Audio Rights Do Not Infringe **
Upon Print Rights Sold to Magazines.**

Contact Images SI Inc. 718-698-9398