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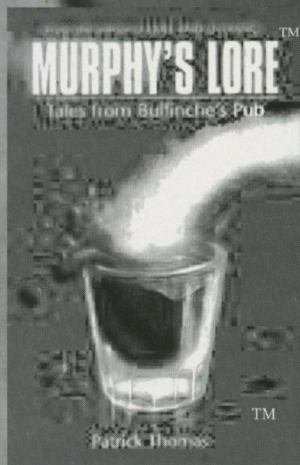
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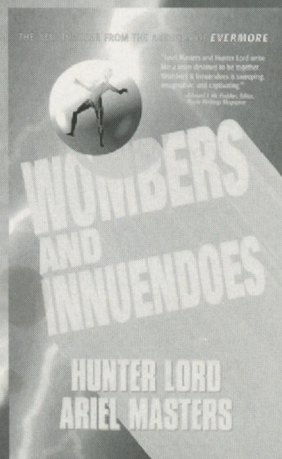
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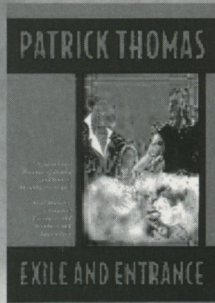
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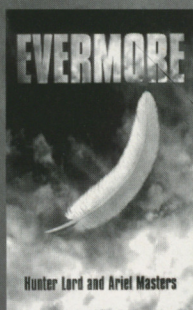
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# Fantastic

Stories of the Imagination

Formerly Pirate Writings

Spring 2000

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# Ed-itorial: Pirate Writings Is Dead; Long Live Fantastic!

I think George Carlin needs to update his comedy bit about the biggest bullshit story of all time. According to Carlin, religion is the biggest bullshit story of all time...I think Y2K is the new leader. As computer companies lined their pockets and panic-creating entrepreneurs sold survival products, *Pirate Writings'* fate was decided. You hold the last issue of *PW* in your hands.

However, much like the stories of gloom and doom leading up to the clocks turning double zero, this story has a happy ending. I am proud to announce that effective immediately *Pirate Writings: Tales of Fantasy, Mystery & Science Fiction* has become *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination*.

As any long time supporter of *PW* knows, I have thought about changing the name of the magazine many times. Ultimately, I decided that the name would stay until such time as it held the magazine back...that time came a year and half ago when ownership passed from Pirate Writings Publishing to DNA Publications. The name change is the culmination of discussions that took place between Warren Lapine and myself long before Warren became publisher of *PW*. We feel that the new name will provide more opportunities for the magazine to grow and become even more successful then it already is. In short, the new name is much more marketable in the mainstream then *Pirate Writings*.

Along with the name change come a few other major changes in the magazine. *Fantastic* will publish cutting-edge Science Fiction and Fantasy—sadly Mystery has been dropped from our repertoire, as have some of the other genre bending tales. However, *Fantastic* will continue in *Pirate Writings'* tradition of publishing stories that don't seem to fit anywhere else...stories that are unique. These changes also make the magazine more marketable.

Why this name? First, I love the name. It's the perfect name for a magazine edited by Ed McFadden. Second, I am very exited about becoming part of the great *Fantastic* tradition. For those of you who don't know, *Fantastic* was a top Science Fiction/Fantasy magazine in the '60s and early '70s. Publishing luminaries such as Roger Zelazny, *Fantastic* quickly became one the top magazines in the field. I look forward to continuing the fine *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination* tradition as we enter the new millennium. Read on and enjoy!

## Fantastic Stories of the Imagination

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# ED GORMAN

'The poet of dark suspense' BLOOMSBURY REVIEW

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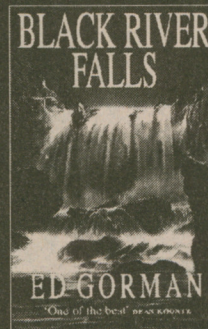
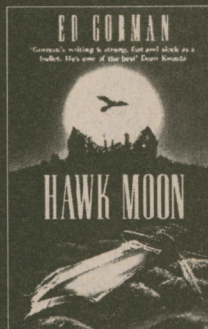
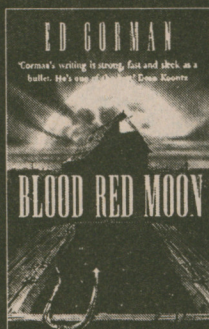
MOTEL

'Gorman's writing is strong, fast and sleek as a bullet. He's one of the best' *Dean Koontz*

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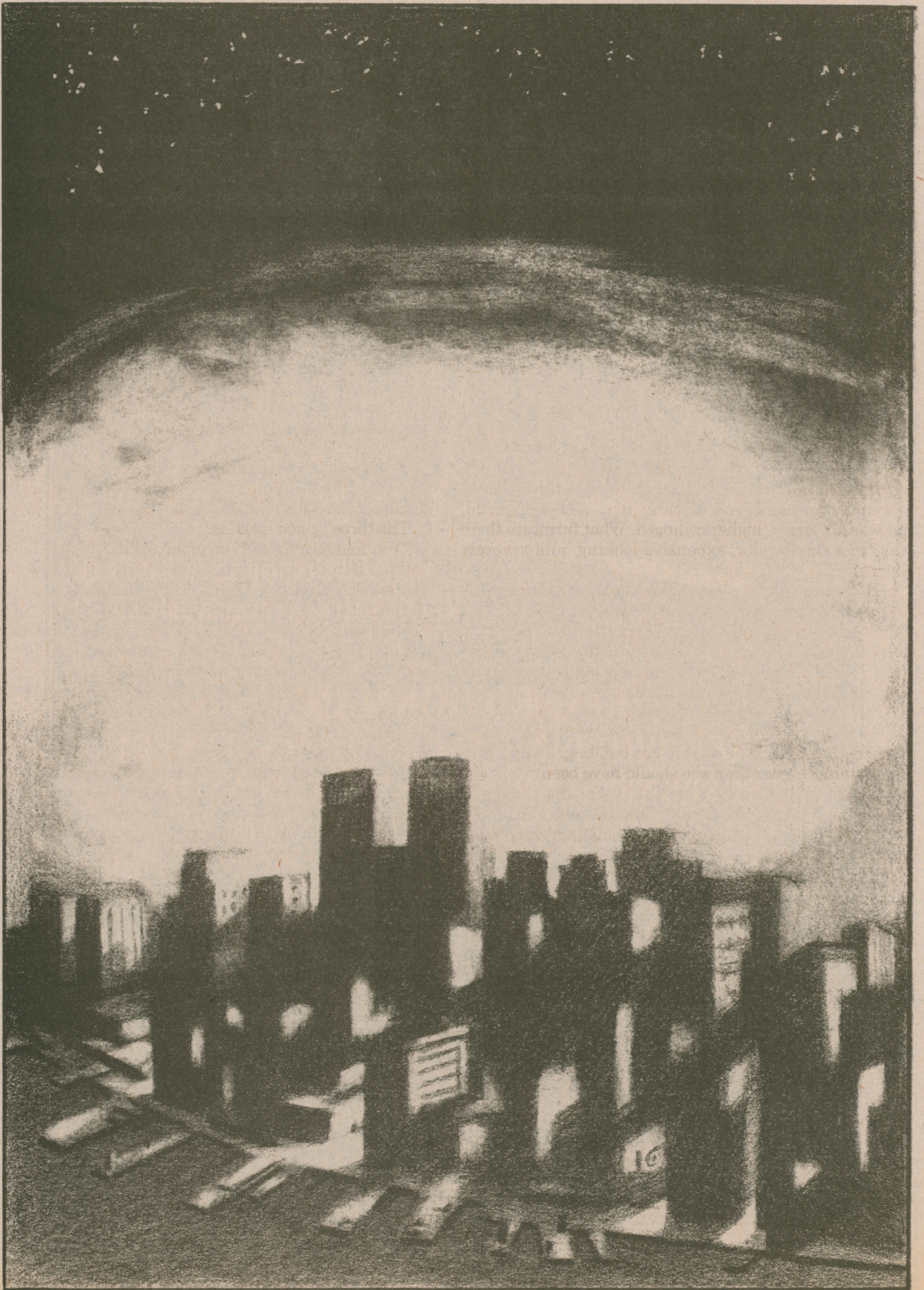
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*Chris Bunch is a New York Times best-selling author. He has written scores of books including Sten, Shadow Warrior, The Far Kingdom Trilogy, A Reckoning For Kings and many others.*

# QUEEN BEE

by Chris Bunch Illustrated by David J. Grilla

The woman's eyes opened, widened in surprise.

When she'd gone to sleep, there had been a chandelier over her head—an original Tiffany.

Now there was nothing except an omnipresent gentle glow against a ceiling of soothing aquamarine.

She'd gone to sleep naked, in a bed made of silk sheets a lover had bought at Harrod's.

Now she wore a gown that her fingers suggested was some material far finer than silk, and lay on a yielding surface that might have been a heated waterbed.

The room was not her carefully decorated apartment, but was far larger, higher-ceilinged. What furniture there was, was single-color, expensive-looking, and severely functional.

She stood. The floor was warm against her feet. She looked at the three paintings on the wall, saw them move gently into new, equally abstract forms.

Slowly, reluctantly, she went to one of the floor-to-ceiling drapes, and pulled it open, hardly daring to look out at what should be, must be, Central Park.

The park was there—or, rather, some sort of park. But there were no walkways, nor was Fifth Avenue below her. Instead, the grass came close to her building, and she was many stories higher than she should have been.

She had only allowed herself to accept the change in comfortable bits. Now it crashed down around her.

There were only a handful of tall buildings to be seen. There were elaborate, fenced mansions scattered here and there at random.

"Okay, a time machine," she said softly, then flinched back as a wingless aircraft that looked like a bullet shot past not far overhead and vanished. "But what goddamned time?"

There were other windows, and she went to each of them, opened the curtains.

The air was clean, not the brown haze of late summer. She could see all the way to the harbor, and, dimly, the Statue of Liberty.

"At least you're still there, lady," she whispered.

But the Statue was different, gleaming in the sun as if it had been gilded, like Rangoon's huge Shwe Dagon pagoda.

She turned quickly away.

"Screw Kansas," she said. "Toto, we're not on Earth anymore," she said, and suddenly, desperately, wanted a drink.

But she'd given that up three years ago.

"Yes," a voice came, and she spun, "you are still on Earth, Denise Roberts. But you are far in Earth's future."

There were three people in the arched entrance, two men and a woman. For a moment Roberts thought they were animated mannequins such as were all the rage that year, since they were impossibly beautiful. Two—one man, the woman—were blonde, the other was a dark, Latin-appearing brunette.

Everything swam about her, and she fought for and found control letting her mind itemize the most minute details of the scene. Suddenly she laughed.

The three looked startled.

"You find that funny?" one man asked.

"No," Denise said. "I was merely laughing at how you're dressed."

"Is there something the matter with it?"

"Not at all," Denise said. "I just thought that folks in the future'd wear doctors' smocks or robes or gold lamé or something." She laughed again, realized she sounded drill and stopped herself abruptly. "Sorry. Too many late-night science fiction movies."

One of the men, the dark-haired one wearing the blue shirt and slacks, stepped forward.

"We attempted to dress in a manner you would not find alarming, and had costumes constructed that matched the description our agent provided from your time."

"How thoughtful," Roberts murmured. "Almost as thoughtful as the polite way you asked before you kidnapped me."

"We are sorry," the woman said. "But we...and I speak for all mankind...had no choice."

Denise began to reply, stopped herself.

"I never fight with strangers if I have the choice. Let's get personal before we take out the shotguns."

The three introduced themselves: the woman was Alyss, the blonde man Meath, the dark one Conall. "We were in charge of the project that brought you here, and are also specialists in your dialect."

"I suppose I'm pleased to meet you," Denise said. "Now...just when am I?"

"I have not calculated the precise year," Alyss said. "But it is more than twelve thousand years from the era you lived in."

Once again the world seemed to swing in its orbit, and this time the woman found a chair. She breathed deeply three times, concentrating on her fingernails, feeling their smoothness, their tapering to exact perfection.

The three stood, not impatient, in silence, waiting.

Denise looked up, finally.

"So what do you want with me?"

The two men exchanged looks. Meath started to say something, was interrupted by Alyss.

"We shall explain, but not at this moment. But one thing you should know. What we have brought you here for is something you can refuse.

"Our culture forces no one to do anything they do not wish."

"Suppose I said I do not wish to be here," Denise said, "and want to go back?"

"That is impossible," Conall said. "We drained most of our world's power to send our agent back to get you. Another such journey will not be possible for at least 500 years, probably longer.

"Beyond all our lifespans."

It was if Denise was looking down the wrong end of a telescope, seeing things she loved vanish into the distance: the red glow of the camera as she stepped in front of it and heard applause; the perfect hush of a dry martini; the roar of synthed music taking her, lifting her away; the remembered embrace of a man, no, *two* men; the smiles of recognition and respect as she swept into her salon...

Gone.

All gone.

She almost screamed at them, but did not.

She almost burst into tears, but did not.

Thoughts came:

There was worse...before. There was change...before. You rode the storm before, and lived, and found happiness. Hold onto yourself, girl. You can do it again. You must!

She allowed her gown to slip open for a moment, as if by accident. Meath's eyes fixed on the momentary flash of the smooth, immaculately curved thigh, then he caught himself, saw that Denise had noted what had happened, and flushed.

The woman smiled slightly, just a flash of secret triumph.

Yes. It can be done again. Now let's see what their game is.

"I said, I'd like to know why you brought me here. I'm not used to having my wishes ignored...particularly from those who want something from me." Her voice was sharp, commanding.

"Perhaps," Alyss said quickly, "perhaps we can show you. That might make the explanation easier."

"Whichever way comes easiest," Denise said, silk returning to her voice.

"We'll show her in the proj room," Alyss said. The two men looked at each other, shrugged, and nodded.

Earth hung full before them, green and beautiful in three dimensions as if it was the most perfect globe ever made.





"This is the projection from one of our weather satellites," Conall said.

The room the four were in was semi-circular, and bare except for comfortable chairs.

"I'm disappointed," Denise said, determined to keep her advantage. "I would've thought after all these years you could've just whooshed me up into space and let me look for myself."

"Three thousand or so years ago, we could have done just that," Conall said. "But that was before we matured, before we realized there was nothing for us beyond Earth."

"Nothing," Denise wondered. "What about other planets?"

"We settled three, no, five of them," Meath said. "I think I remember that we even sent some spaceships further on. But it didn't seem to produce anything worthwhile."

"So we gave it up."

"Certainly no loss," Alyss said. "When you have everything you need close to you, why do you have to leave?"

"Maybe because new things make you grow," Denise said. "Grow and change."

"We had grown," Alyss said. "And once you have achieved contentment, achieved serenity, why should you want to change?"

Denise arched her eyebrows, said nothing.

The projection changed until Denise was looking at the night side of the planet.

"You'll notice," Meath said, "there aren't many city lights to be seen."

"There are only a few million of us now."

"Four million, two hundred and sixty thousand, three hundred and twenty four," Conall said.

"Twenty five now," Alyss said.

The three laughed briefly, in unison, as if a joke had been told.

"Mankind determined to turn the Earth into the paradise it had once been," Meath said. "We conquered disease. We conquered poverty. We conquered war. We conquered crime. Look!"

He motioned, and Denise was looking down at a tropical landscape. In the center was a pure white dot. It blossomed into the perfect purity of the Taj Mahal.

But there was no sign of the industrial waste of Agra around it. The beggars, crowds, cripples that Denise remembered from programs about the tomb had also vanished.

There were only two people to be seen, walking hand in hand beside the jawab, an older, regal looking couple.

Before Denise could ask, Meath's hand moved again, and a tiger peered at her.

The woman started involuntarily.

The tiger yawned, moved on, a pair of cubs in her wake, and disappeared soundlessly into a bamboo thicket.

"All the animals that once were threatened are safe now. We even used our knowledge of DNA codes to bring back certain species the people of your era had destroyed."

"There are mammoths in Siberia. Whales in every ocean. A scientist some centuries back even managed to reconstruct the dodo."

"What about the people who used to live around the Taj Mahal?" Denise said. "Or the peasants who were crowding the tigers out?"

"All too many of them...failed to qualify," Conall said.

"What does that mean," Denise said. "You killed them? Like the Nazis did?"

"I'm not familiar with that word," Alyss said. "Of course not. We murdered no one, and I must remind you that all this happened more than five thousand years ago."

"All that happened was the Council denied them permission to breed. They were given complete compensation for this, of course, and spent the remainder of their days in luxury."

"It was very democratic," Meath said. "Those who'd been determined worthy of preservation voted almost unanimously for that decision."

The three waited for Denise to say something. The woman remained silent.

Again the picture changed, and Denise saw vast herds of buffalo, moving across sea-like prairies.

Other images came.

The Seine, but not as Denise had seen it.

"Some cities," Conall explained, "we rebuilt as museums. Paris now looks as it did during what was known as the Eighth Republic, about two hundred years after your time."

The images of other cities came and went: Moscow as it had been before Napoleon burnt it, but without slums; London at the height of Wren's building; Angkor Wat in the peak of splendor.

"You can see what a beautiful planet Earth is...especially now that the population is what it should be."

Another picture came.

A black maned lion lifted his great head and roared. Behind him was the chattered ruins of a city.

"This was a place called Durban. It was determined as no longer necessary, and so, like vast portions of Africa, became a game preserve for all mankind to enjoy."

"All mankind...except for the blacks? I assume they didn't qualify, either."

Someone...one of the men...gasped.

"I don't know what you think we are," Alyss said, her voice shocked. "The problems the poor Africans had were mostly of their own making. Disease, poverty, their incessant tribal wars...near the end, even what was termed give-up-itis."

"We had to move swiftly to preserve those strong genes the entire race had sprung from. But it was successful. All of us now alive carry a portion of those noble Africans in our genetic codes."

"These are not the old days," Conall said, a bit stiffly. "All the races of man are intermingled, and what we are has all the strengths of Mankind, but with none of the weaknesses."

"So it's a great world," Denise said skeptically. "Now I'll ask my question again. Why me?"

There was a moment of silence. Denise waited. It was several minutes before Alyss spoke:

"As you've seen, we conquered the population crisis...and then it conquered us."

"I said there were 4,260,324 of us. I am hardly a precisionist, but that figure is graven into the souls of every human alive."

"Because that is all there is, and that is all there will ever be."

"There has not been a child born for 25 years. Most of us are now in our seventies, and can expect to live no more than another seventy years.

"Then the last Man will die, and the world will be empty, as it was before he came."

"Unless you help us."

"Fifteen years ago," Conall said, "we recognized our problem, and dedicated every effort to solve it."

"Seven years ago, we found, in our archives, the record of an abortive attempt to travel through time. It was abandoned when the researchers realized what an enormous amount of energy it would require."

"As I said, almost the entire resources of a world."

"But that was no longer a restraining factor. When Death is inevitable, any sacrifice must be made, am I not right?"

"No kidding," Denise said. "Nobody goes gentle into that night, because we're pretty damned sure it isn't all that good."

Conall looked perplexed, frowned, went on.

"Since it was only possible to make a single journey, we chose carefully. We picked a time long before we began our genetic selection, for fear whatever caused this racial sterility was produced at an early date."

"We went even further back, before what we call the Ages of Pollution would have damaged the human genes badly."

"Finally, we chose a period at the beginning of civilization, feeling it would be almost impossible to bring an uncivilized being forward without the risk of her having a complete breakdown."

"So I'm one of the first Civilized Women, mmm?"

Conall looked uncomfortable.

"Not exactly," Alyss said. "There was an error. The machine placed our agent three hundred years further back than was intended. I don't mean to offend you by saying that."

She looked anxiously at Denise, was startled when the woman just laughed.

"Go ahead," she said finally.

"Our emissary went to the most civilized city of the time, and began his quest," Conall went on.

"It was not very long before he focused on you. First of course, as Alyss said before, we wished the most desirable woman of her time."

"He said, in the report that accompanied you, that you were everywhere. You were in the public entertainments of several sorts, you had recorded your songs, you had a clothes design studio...he said the phrase was a Renaissance Man, or Woman in your case."

"I must meet this man," Denise said. "I respond very well to flattery."

"That isn't possible," Meath said. "It was only possible for one to go back...and one to come forward."

"Oh." Denise sat silently for a minute. "Well, if he's as good-looking as you three, I'm sure my agent can get him some modeling gigs. He won't starve."

"Of course what meets the eye and mind is important," Conall said. "But there were practical matters. It was obvious from your successes that you were...are a survival-

oriented person. This became evident, our agent said, when he heard you talk about growing up in poverty."

"If there was anybody poorer'n me," Denise said grimly, "I don't even want to think about her."

"Next was that you were of African origins. This suggested strong genes."

"Ibo originally," Denise said. "But the slavers came often enough 'round midnight whisperin' 'Brown Sugar' to my mothers' mothers for me not to be as dark as I'd like."

"I do not understand what you're saying, sometimes," Conall said.

"It doesn't matter," Denise said. "Sometimes I don't understand myself either. Go on."

"Finally, we saw you with your daughter, and so knew you were fecund."

"The decision was reached."

"The people who guarded your apartment were neutralized, and the necessary machinery was brought in."

"And I woke up here," Denise said.

"Yes."

Denise shook her head slowly.

"Man, oh man. Talk about tangled webs."

She sighed.

"So what you grabbed me for is to be the queen bee of your hive...the mother of a whole new race?"

"In essence," Alyss said. "Yes."

"So what...exactly...is that going to mean, assuming I go for the deal? A long line of men with hard dicks in their hands?"

"Of course not," Alyss said, horrified. "We aren't barbarians! If you agree...and I must emphasize that this will only happen with your full consent...we'll take proper DNA samples, synthesize them, and fertilize them with sperm from as many males as we have time for."

"You need not have any contact with any man, unless you wish. And of course you will be the most famous woman of all time. We shall give you kudos and riches far greater than could be imagined in your age."

"Oh brother." Denise stood. "Turn on the lights. I want to see your faces when I tell you."

The walls glowed, with again no single point of illumination.

"First of all, that little girl isn't my daughter. She's my sister's child. She was staying with me while my sister was going through a nasty divorce. I sent her back to LA a week ago."

She noted the alarm, half-smiled.

"Now let me ask you another question. How good are your doctors?"

"Extraordinary," Conall said. "As we told you, we've conquered all known diseases. People only die from old age or from accident. If you have any...problems that might interfere with child bearing, I'm sure they can be dealt with."

"You better hope you're right, honey," Denise said. "Because back before, back in those days I don't even want to think about, before the hormone injections, before the surgery, back before I made up my mind to change, my last name was still Roberts."

"But my first name was John Lee."

# IMAGINE CON

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This is the first of two stories in this issue by Ralph Gamelli. Ralph is no stranger to the small press—his work having appeared in over 50 small press magazines including: The Leading Edge, Freezer Burn, Keene Science Fiction, and Random Realities. His chapbook titled Greetings From Planet Earth will be published by Moonletters Press this year.

# Aggressive Growth

by Ralph Gamelli

Illustrated by David J. Grilla



"Your order is going through right now, Mr. Eckworth." Tapping his finger against the phone, Pembroke had to wait only a moment for his computer screen to start flashing numbers at him. "Here we are. I've got a confirmation on fifteen hundred shares of Dronos purchased at 6 3/8...Yes, that's an excellent price, but as I said, it might be some time before you see any significant growth. Remember, the atmosphere is methane-based, and that's going to lessen the chances of an intelligent species rising to power anytime in the near future—say, in the next hundred million years or so, Universal Standard Time."

As he listened to his client on the other end of the connection, Pembroke rolled his eyes at Stanpoor, who sat opposite him at the large desk, tapping away on his own computer. Stanpoor slipped him an unsympathetic grin. Pembroke rubbed his temple and spoke patiently into the receiver.

"No, it's not impossible, of course. There are many species that have thrived in methane. It's just that it generally takes them longer to develop than others. Market analysts rate Dronos highly, however, so just bear in mind that you're in for the long run and I don't think you'll be disappointed. In fact, speaking of long-term potential, there's a little planet in the M7 Universe I've been keeping an eye on that I think is really going places in the future. It's been experiencing some encouraging changes lately that might give it...No, that's perfectly all right, Mr. Eckworth. Just wanted to let you know about it, just in case. Yes...fine...have a nice day."

He hung up and sighed, started rubbing his temple again.

Stanpoor glanced up from his keyboard. Unlike Pembroke, who was humanoid, Stanpoor resembled an octopus. He slid open a drawer on his side of the desk, picked up a smallish blue ball with a suction cup on the underside of his tentacle, and rolled it across to Pembroke. "Looks like it's time for the stress ball again, Jep."

Pembroke palmed the object, which was just pliable enough to yield under the pressure of his fingers. "Typical investor. Wants twenty-percent returns by the end of the quarter. They're all so damn shortsighted. He'll unload Dronos the first time it dips below six."

Stanpoor tossed up two opposing tentacles in his own unique version of a dismissive shrug. "Yeah, but what can you do about it? So what was that second stock you were trying to push on him? The one with the encouraging changes."

"Place called Earth."

"Isn't that the one that underwent a massive downsizing a while back?"

"Yeah. A wayward asteroid wiped out the dominant life forms a couple of months ago. Stock dropped from 10 and change to about 4 overnight."

"That's why I try and stay away from the Futures Market. Too volatile. Especially planetary futures. Stick with the blue chips and you can't go wrong. Wormholes, for example. Who ever lost money on a wormhole?"

"It was time for a change, anyway," Pembroke said. "Those reptiles weren't doing anything with the place, and it was going nowhere fast. But now it looks like there'll be some new management taking over."

"Oh?"

"Heard a market report a few days ago about a race of primates cropping up there."

"Hmm. Primates. They're fast developers."

"That's why I picked up a thousand shares when I saw the stock start to inch up toward 5."

"How much is it going for now?"

"Let's see..." Pembroke punched up an instant quote on his computer. "8 5/8."

"Hey, you've made a pretty nice profit there. Why don't you get out now?"

"I'm in it for the long haul, Enkt, you know that. None of that short-term in-and-out for me."

"Right. How could I forget?" He poked the tips of his tentacles at his keyboard. "Well, count me in for a couple of hundred shares of Mr. Long-haul's action."

Pembroke's gaze had roamed past some of the dozen other office workers, all of varying shapes and sizes, past the wall screen—across which a giant ticker consisting of stock symbols continuously glided from right to left—and settled on the wall-mounted time display, which read 11:48, Multiversal Standard Time. He slapped the stress ball down on his desk and reached for the business jacket slung over his office chair. "Why don't you save your money and buy me an early lunch instead? I hear there's a new seafood restaurant that just opened up in Hyperspace."

Stanpoor looked at him coldly for a moment. "Appreciate the offer, but I've got a few things I want to catch up on here." His phone buzzed. "Multiverse Investors," he said.

Pembroke left before his own phone decided to follow suit.

When he entered the office more than an hour later, Stanpoor excitedly waved him over with one of his tentacles. Pembroke was far more relaxed now—a couple of post-lunch cocktails relieved more stress than any squeeze toy every

could—and he took his time making his way over to Stanpoor's side of the desk.

"Jep, did you hear the news?"

"News?"

"Those primates of yours are on their way up. They sent Earth stock up a point and a quarter since you've been gone. Looks like I bought my shares just in time." He pointed to the graph on his computer, and to the Earth stock updates that filled the right column of the screen. "They went from tree-swingers to land-roamers just after you left for lunch, and now they've already formed primitive social structures, taken shelter in caves, and discovered fire."

"Already? That was quick, even for primates."

Pembroke's phone buzzed. He moved around the desk and took the call, spending several minutes to handle the transaction. When he hung up, Stanpoor had another update for him:

"They've discovered agriculture!"

"You've got to be kidding." Pembroke called up the same screen Stanpoor was watching.

"That brought them up another seven eighths," Stanpoor said.

"Hey, Pembroke!" one of the other workers, of elephantine appearance, called from his desk. "Thanks for the hot tip!" he tilted his trunk in a thumbs-up gesture.

"Yeah, good call, Pembroke!" another offered, displaying a smiling row of fangs beneath his snout.

"I see you've been busy while I was out," Pembroke said.

"I didn't see any harm in it," replied Stanpoor. "You don't mind, do you?"

"No. But like you said, futures can be risky. It's one thing to give bad advice to a client, but it's something else when you have to see that life form in the office every day."

"Stop worrying about it. They've already made a profit. In fact...it looks like it's up again! Another jump to 12 ½!"

"Up again?" Pembroke glanced at the update column on his screen. The new Earth dominants had formed primitive cultures, perfected the wheel. Without thinking, he picked up the stress ball from his desk and began persecuting it again.

"Pembroke!" one of his co-workers hissed excitedly with his forked tongue. "They just mentioned Earth stock on the wall screen. I think they're going to run a story on it."

Pembroke looked over at the ten by fifteen-foot screen. Someone had put on the Financial Information Broadcast while he'd been out, and now the three-dimensional humanoid countenance of a conservatively dressed news anchor stared back at him from above the ticker.

"...while Universe starts, due to the rising costs of Big Bangs, are off 4.2 percent. The Dow Jones Interdimensional Average continues to rise steadily, however, propelled by rumors that Space and Time, longtime adversaries in most financial Sectors, are planning a merger which would establish a unified Continuum. Now, for a look at two of the day's most active stocks, we go to FIB correspondent Olinsa Conpridex on the floor of the Multiversal Exchange."

"Thanks, Besk," began the insectoid who replaced the anchorbeing on the wall screen. She stood amid hundreds of traders who strode, slithered, hopped, crawled, and occasionally flew past her in every direction, animatedly waving slips of paper and barking at each other or one of

several information boards in the distance. "Two very active stocks they are, indeed. The first, Hlabur, a planetary body operating in the G4 Universe, is trading considerably higher today, up 7 3/8 to 42 1/4 on the strength of its newly released annual report. According to that report, the planet's amphibious dominants have begun the expansion from dome-headed telekinetics to fleshless, highly concentrated forms of energy. This advance, along with an announcement that the stocks will soon be offering a 2-for-1 split in the near future, has sent its value soaring.

"The most surprising story of the day, however, arrives from the M7 Universe, where a small world called Earth is posting extraordinarily rapid evolutionary gains, which have in turn led to exceptional financial gains for shareholders. The value of that stock has now climbed more than fifty percent for the day, from 8 ½ at the start of the session to its current 13 1/8."

Pembroke's eyes shot to his computer screen, then over to Stanpoor, who looked across the desk at him and shook his mantle in wonder.

"Up another five eighths," Stanpoor said happily. Pembroke started to search his update column for the explanation for this latest gain, but found his attention diverted by the remainder of the financial correspondent's report.

"With near-record swiftness, a new species of primates on that planet have made the leap from unorganized tree-dwellers to semi-intelligent civilization-based beings familiar with such concepts as architecture, metallurgy, mathematics, and written language. It looks like the sky's the limit for this rapidly growing stock. Back to you, Besk."

"Thanks, Olinsa. Moving to the Commodities Market, a shortage of mineral-rich asteroids in the J21 Universe is being blamed for—"

"If this keeps up, we'll be able to retire by the end of the day," Stanpoor grinned.

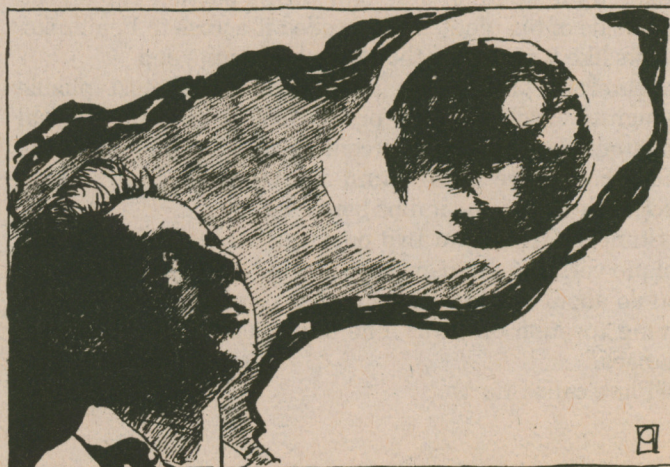
Pembroke didn't return the grin. Squeezing the ball in his hand at a quicker rate, he began to pace in front of his desk.

"What's wrong, Jep? We're going through the roof!"

Pembroke shrugged. "Just not used to such aggressive growth, I guess. Makes me nervous."

"Well, relax. Mr. Long-haul is going to make a short-term killing for once."

Pembroke halted in mid-stride, and mid-squeeze. "You're right." He set the ball down decisively on the desk. "Everyone



else has the give-it-to-me-now attitude....why shouldn't I? The hell with patience."

Staring at his computer screen, Stanpoor's smile widened. "That's exactly what the Earth dominants are thinking, too. They've reached an industrialized state. Up to 14 and still rising! From now on I'm recommending primates to all my cli—"

"And now we go back to Olinsa Conpridex on the floor of the Exchange, where a previously little-known stock continues to draw great attention."

They turned to the wall screen again.

"Besk, Earth stock continues to soar as the dominants there break all records for short-term growth. In the space of little more than one Multiversal hour — a merely thirty-five thousand Universal years — this species of primate has progressed from a tribe of cave-swalling primitives to a post-industrialized society. And only a moment ago, there came more big news concerning this stock. The board before me has just posted an update stating that they have already achieved atomic power, which has caused its value to skyrocket even further, to just over 16. Yet another startling advance, Besk."

"Yes, indeed, Olinsa. And to discuss these advances, we have with us market analyst Zennell Frooge, who is joining us, via subspace satellite, from our studios in the Infiniverse." A two-headed being with dual sets of eyeglasses appeared in a square in the upper corner of the screen. "Thanks for being with us, Mr. Frooge."

"My pleasure, Besk."

"Mr. Frooge, in your many years of experience, have you ever witnessed anything like this?"

"No, I haven't, Besk. This is truly phenomenal, particularly when you consider that it isn't unusual for most dominant life forms to take anywhere from three to four hundred thousand Universal years to reach such an advanced technological state."

"What, in your opinion, is responsible for such swift gains?"

"There may be a variety of factors at work here. Evolutionary trends can be nearly as difficult to predict as market trends. Perhaps this species possesses a cranial vault of such a uniquely flexible design that it allows them to continuously expand their brain capacities. Or perhaps they are simply exceptionally motivated. Of course, there is always the possibility that they are acquiring these advances through industrial espionage. However, considering that they are a planet-bound race, and have no means as yet of accessing the dimensional barriers, I really don't see how—"

"Just a moment, Mr. Frooge," the anchor cut it, holding his earpiece, "I've just been informed that there's been another update posted on the board of the Exchange. Olinsa, what's the latest from down there on the floor?"

The image on the wall screen switched to a three-way split-screen. "Besk, the Earth dominants have apparently formed plans for diversification. They have just achieved space travel, and in fact have already succeeded in landing upon their

satellite moon. The stock price has now exceeded 18 and shows no indications of slowing down."

"Thank you, Olinsa. It appears, Mr. Frooge, that they are planet-bound no longer."

"This is absolutely unprecedented, Besk. The only thing that might give me reason to be concerned about these incredibly rapid advances is the spiritual factor."

"Meaning what exactly, Mr. Frooge?"

"Well, you see, if technological growth outdistances spiritual growth by too vast of a margin, there is always the possibility that—"

"Besk, Mr. Frooge, I'm sorry to interrupt, but there's just been another major development."

"Go ahead, Olinsa."

"It seems that the internal tension existing between Earth's top levels of management—never a major cause for alarm in the past—has now, with the recent acquisition of atomic technology, resulted in an enormous downsizing. This, along with a near-total loss of assets and holdings, has the value of the stock plummeting a point and a half already, and continuing to sharply decline."

Frooge started to nod knowingly in stereo, as though this latest news was not all that surprising. "This was the point I was trying to make, Besk: The importance of establishing a well-formed spiritual base on which to build any further—"

Stanpoor and the others were slapping away at their keyboards in a frantic attempt to sell. Pembroke just leaned forward resignedly, chin resting heavily on his fists.

"Dammit!" Stanpoor curled one of his tentacles into a ball and slammed it on his side of the desk. "The lines are all jammed. Every stockholder in the Multiverse must be trying to unload their Earth shares at the same time."

Pembroke stared dully at his screen. The stock had plunged past 11 already, and showed no signs of bottoming-out anytime soon. "It's my fault," he said. "I jinxed it the minute I started counting on a quick return."

From across the room came the disgruntled hissing, snorting and trumpeting sounds of some of his co-workers.

"Don't pay any attention to them, Jep," said Stanpoor. "It's no one's fault. We knew what we were getting into. Everyone knows the Futures Market is risky."

"It's not going to happen again, Enkt," Pembroke said with quiet resolve, watching the price sink below 5. "I'll never let myself start thinking short-term again."

"Well, it's not as bad as it could have been, I suppose,"

Stanpoor said, clearly striving to put some optimism into his voice. "My screen shows a few dominants left over, so it wasn't a total liquidation. They should be able to pick up the pieces and rebuild eventually. I don't think it'll be anytime soon, though."

Nodding slowly, Pembroke picked up the stress ball and held it thoughtfully in his flattened palm. "Best to keep a long-term outlook, anyway. After all, there's only one thing more important than a good broker."

"Commissions?"

Pembroke studied the small blue globe in his hand. "Patience."







"Death Threat For A Hitman" is part of Gary's "Hitman" Series which have appeared in Robert Bloch's Psychos, Noirotica 2 and others. He and Bill Allen recently completed an sf/comedy called The Tycho Conspiracy—they completed the first draft of the novel in one week.

# Death Threat for a Hitman

by Gary Jonas

Illustrated by David J. Grilla

Whenever I doubt that I should be killing people, I take a job working with the public. People are so damn rude and stupid that I often wonder why no one has already killed them.

Check this out.

I hadn't made any money doing freelance hits in a long time and I needed money to eat, so like an idiot, I took a job in a grocery store. Thanks to my sunny disposition, they tossed me to the sharks in the customer service booth. No training, you understand, just gave me the keys and said, "Good luck."

A partial list of my responsibilities: rent videos, sell money orders, handle processed film, Western Union, UPS, lotto, keno and scratch lottery tickets, personal, payroll and government checks, handle complaints and returns, make sure the checkers and sackers got their breaks and lunches on time, count the money out of the checkers' tills and run change out to them when they need it, sell ski lift tickets, circus tickets, air show tickets, bus passes and bus tokens and answer the goddamn phones and the list goes on. But the real kicker is that you have to do it *all at the same time*.

My first day on the job is the first of the month, which means I have to deal with the welfare bitches. I used to work in a check-cashing place before I became a hitman, so I already know all about *them*. So here I am, trying my damndest to be nice to a bunch of losers who draw a check for sitting on their lazy asses. Some lady gives me her welfare check, ID and check-cashing card. I run it through the machine like I'm supposed to, which I gotta tell you is a royal pain in the ass. See, it takes forever and a day for the machine to approve the damn checks. Meanwhile, fifty thousand more impatient jerk-offs are jumping in line to cash their checks.

The machine is supposed to read the micro line along the bottom of the check, but that rarely works and I have to punch in the number by hand. One slip of the finger and you have to start all over, repunching the nineteen digits. Whoever designed this goddamn machine has never tried to get it to work when some jerk has stuffed a check into his or her pocket for half a day, crinkling it up like a wad of trash. Speedier service thanks to high tech equipment. Yeah right.

I make a note to find out who designed this stupid machine so I can find him and kill him.

I get the number punched in and turn to the lady. "Enter your PIN number, please."

"PIN number?" she asks. Stupid bitch.

"The four digit number you have to punch in every time you cash a check."

"I don't remember it."

"Try the last four of your social security number," I suggest, knowing that it's the most common number used by the company.

"Okay." And she has to dig through her purse in search of her social security card since her brain is too small to store nine lousy numbers. The line is growing longer and more impatient. Finally, she presses the number into the machine.

I reach over and press ENTER because she's too stupid to punch it herself.

The machine beeps and runs through its thirty second ritual—speedy service my ass—then flashes WRONG PIN NUMBER.

"That's the wrong PIN number," I say.

"You said that's what it was."

"No, I said to try it. What this means is that you *chose* your own number. Something you could *remember*."

"I don't remember it."

"I'm not surprised."

"What was that?"

"Just try a birth date or something."

She tries two more times and can't get the right number.

"Sorry, ma'am, the machine won't approve your check so I can't cash it."

"You have to cash it! Rent is due today and I don't have the thirty dollars!"

"Thirty dollars?" I ask. "You only pay thirty dollars for rent? I pay over six hundred a month. And I'll bet you're on food stamps, too, aren't you? So you don't pay jack shit for a place to live and all your goddamn food is paid for—" I stop myself because I need this job. I shake my head, lean to the side and point to the man behind her. "Help you?"

But the welfare bitch isn't through yet. "I need my money! If you won't cash it, where can I take it?"

I give her the dopiest expression I can muster. "Gee," I say, "you ever thought about trying a *bank*?"

"I'm going to report you!"

"Have at it, bitch. Next?"

This big black guy steps up to the counter and hands me a check. I'm nice to him and all, while I run the check through the system. It clears with no problem and I give him the cash and tell him to have a nice day. He's cool and tells me to take it easy.

Next guy is a big, fat, ugly bastard. He hands me a pack of cigarettes.

I tell him, "I don't smoke."

"No, shit-for-brains. I want you to ring them up."

I gesture around the counter. "You see a cash register here?"

He hesitates. "No."

"You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because this ain't a goddamn check stand!"

"But I waited in this damn line!"

"And now you can go wait in that line right over there. You know, the one that says 'check out'?"

"Keep your damn cigarettes," he says and throws them at me.

He's lucky my Beretta is out in the car or I wouldn't let him wait to die of cancer. "Have a nice day," I say with all the cheer I can manage because I know that will piss him off even more.

He turns and flips me off, spewing obscenities to let me know that my words have had the desired effect.

"Next," I say. I wish someone would come over and help me clear out this line, but I know that's about as likely as Malcolm X being elected Grand Wizard of the KKK.

I'm already sick of the damn job, but the next guy is a young kid who wears his pants like a gangbanger. You know the type—his pants look like they're falling down, damn near exposing the crack of his ass. Maybe gangbangers are taught to dress by the same ignorant fucks who teach repairmen. I guess the kid's age at eighteen.

"Need to cash this," the kid says sliding a check across the counter.

It's a payroll check, so maybe I misjudged him. At least he's working. But when I run the check, it comes back 007. I'm thinking *license to kill*, but I look it up on the code sheet and see that it means the kid has a returned check.

"You ever bounce a check to us?" I ask.

"I don't even have an account, man."

"Let me call on it. Maybe you forgot to sign your last payroll check or something."

I start to call security, but the phone rings. Some asshole wants to know the price of sugar. "Come down here and look for yourself," I say and hang up on him. Then I call about the check. I talk to the girl in security for a minute—she sounds cute—then hang up and turn back to the kid.

"Turns out you wrote a personal check for \$54.19 on April 7 of last year. It's at a collection agency. I'll get you there number."

"But I never had a personal account."

"According to security you have, so it'll have to be cleared up before I can cash any more of your checks."

"You mean you aren't gonna cash my check?"

"That's right."

"Don't you know who I am?"

"I don't care if you're the Pope. I'm not cashing your check until you take care of the bad one. Simple as that."

"I got news for you, man, I'm the head honcho of the 7th Avenue Crips. You'll cash this goddamn check or me and my bad boys will pay you a little visit."

"I don't entertain boys at my place. Only girls."

"You don't get it." He leans over the counter. "Cash this check," he whispers, "or I'll kill you. Understand?"

I lean over so we're face to face and I smile. "Are you threatening me, little boy?"

"Little boy?"

"Answer me, punk. You threatening me?"

"It's a promise, not a threat."

"Sounds like a threat to me. See, I've been threatened before and what you just said, that comes off as a threat."

"I'm serious, man. I'm gonna blow you away."

"Yeah, well, I get off at six. You want my home address?"

"We'll find you."

"And kill me because I won't cash a Burger Barn check for 42.68. I got it," I look at the name on the check, "Marcus."

He grabs the check and storms off in a huff. I don't help the next person right away, because I want to write down Marcus's address first.

The only time I'm worried is when I'm walking from the store to my car. Most people who make death threats aren't serious about it, but Marcus doesn't strike me as the type to joke around. I get into my car and things are cool. I get my Beretta out of the glove box and tuck it between the driver's seat and the center console. I drive slowly, watching the mirrors for signs that I'm being followed. I'm really hoping Marcus will pull up and try to make good on his threat. I've had a bad day and killing the stupid gangbanger would make me feel a lot better. No such luck.

I cruise by Marcus's place. It's a run-down apartment complex. I spot his apartment, but all the lights are off. Maybe he's at work.

What the hell. I'm hungry anyway, so I head over to the Burger Barn. I go through the drive-through and order a couple of cheeseburgers, fries and a Coke, then pull up to the window. Some bleach-blonde bimbo is manning the register and she has to stop chewing her bubble gum so she can concentrate on counting my change back to me.

"Marcus here?" I ask.

"You a cop?"

"I look like a cop? Get real."

"I never can tell. People always point out unmarked cop cars to me, but they don't look any different to me than any other car on the road."

"Tell me something," I say as I wait for my order. "What is a gang member doing working at Burger Barn? Drug trafficking not paying as well as it used to?"

"Uh...."

"It's all right. A friend told me that Marcus was the guy to see if I wanted to score a gram."

"Oh. Well, you're supposed to knock on the back door with the code."

"Oh, I forgot. Can you give him a note for me? Let him know I want to place an order?"

"I don't know. I—" The drive-through beeps at her letting her know she has another customer. "I gotta take another order," she says.

"That's cool. I'll write the note."

I grab a pen and jot my note on the back of an old receipt. The bimbo gives me my order and I hand her my note. I wish I could see Marcus's face when he finds someone who can read the note to him.

Marcus,

*I'm the guy who wouldn't cash your check, you worthless maggot. I thought you wanted to kill me. What's the matter? Your balls too small? Mommy won't let you out of the house after dark? What? If you work up the nerve, I live at 1341 S. Racine Way Apt # D-206.*

-H.

Midnight.

I'm sitting on the balcony watching the door of the address I gave to Marcus. I set up my camcorder with the night and zoom lens. It's aimed to cover the doorway. The apartment in question stands perpendicular to the building I'm using at the moment. The owner of the apartment across the way is out of town. I know because I've been sleeping with her for the past month. The apartment I'm using right now is vacant. I wouldn't line up a free hit in my own yard.

When I see two darkly clad men sneak toward the steps with a third hiding in the bushes, I make my move. I climb over the railing and lower myself to the ground. I'm wearing dark clothes like my would-be attackers and the guy in the bushes doesn't see me coming. I pull my gun and place the barrel against the back of the punk's head.

"You move," I whisper, "you die."

I take his gun from him. The kid shows a little more intelligence than I expect by not talking. He doesn't make any attempt to warn his buddies that something is not right in Denmark.

I push the kid to his knees and tie his hands behind him. I don't want to shoot him yet since that would attract the attention of the two guys currently sneaking up the steps.

I reach the stairway just as the idiots decide the best way to proceed is to break the door down. I don't wait for them to try.

"Hi guys," I say with a gun in each hand. I can't shoot for shit with my left hand, but they don't know that.

"Holy shit!" one says and whips out an AK-47. Before he can open fire, I shoot him in the head.

The other guy has his own assault rifle and he opens fire at me. I dive to one side, roll and come up firing. Bullets slam into the loser's chest and he slams backward against the door, then tumbles down the stairs.

Lights are coming on in the neighboring apartments and I know the cops will be here soon, but I take the time to walk back over and put a bullet into the gangbanger I tied up. I do it execution-style with a single bullet in the back of the head.

I slip into the shadows and make for my car a few blocks away. I'm upset about two things, though. Number one: Marcus is not one of the losers I killed. That really sucks since he's still out there and I know I'll have to go get him soon. And that brings me to number two: I wish the gangbangers hadn't opened fire on me because I wanted to line them up ear to ear and fire one shot to see if I could kill all three with one bullet.

Oh well, there'll be other nights.

Work the next day sucks. Some loser comes in with a bunch of razor blades in bent-up packages. It's obvious that he took the old five finger discount.

"I want a refund," he says slamming the blades down.

"Got a receipt?"

"No."

"Can't help you."

"I want my money back!" the man shouts.

"You didn't spend any money on these, pal."

"Like hell!"

"Really? Show me the receipt."

"I threw it away."

"Too bad." I take the blades and toss them onto the back counter out of the jerk-off's reach.

"Hey! Those are mine!"

"No they're not."

"I came in with them."

"Got a receipt to prove they're yours?"

"You know I don't."

"Then get the hell out of here."

"You can't talk to me like that! Whatever happened to the customer is always right?"

"Look, asshole, do the world a favor. Next time you steal a box of razor blades, use them to slice open your wrists."

"Let me talk to your manager!"

As luck would have it, the manager is coming down the stairs as the guy shouts. Also, as luck would have it, the manager has overheard more of the conversation than I thought. My luck improves then, because after the manager gives the thief a refund for the stolen merchandise, he fires me.

"Cool," I say. "This job sucks anyway."

And my luck gets even better still when I pull out of the parking lot to go home because I see the thief walking down the street. I race up beside him and roll the window down.

"Yo, loser!" I yell, raising my gun.

He looks over and flips me off. Then the bullet slams into his head and he can't spend the money he made off the razor blades.

Marcus doesn't see me when I walk into the Burger Barn, but I see him and that's the important thing. I walk up to the counter. The girl at the register looks at me, but continues helping the family of four in line before me. The husband and wife keep changing their order as soon as the girl gets it rung up and she has to figure out how to void it all off and start over. And the kids are screaming at each other.

"Danny touched me!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

I look at the parents, who aren't even *trying* to discipline their little brats. I'm tempted, but I'm not here for them. I'm here for Marcus.

Right now he's got the back door open and he's passing out plastic baggies full of goodies to his paying customers. Now's my chance.

I vault over the counter, ignoring the girl's protests, and race to the back. I shove Marcus out the back door. "We need to talk," I say slamming the door behind me.

"What the—?" one of his drug buyers says.

"None of your business," I say, shoving my gun into his face. "Get out of here."

The customers scatter.

"Man, what is your problem?" Marcus says.

I figure I have a couple of minutes tops before the cops arrive, since I'm reasonably certain the other employees have called them.

"You are my problem, Marcus. You threatened my life. Even sicced your losers on me since you weren't man enough to do the job yourself. That pisses me off."

"Blow me."

"Hold up, Marcus. I'm the one with the gun."

"If you were going to use it, you'd have shot me already."

I laugh. "You're pretty smart, Marcus. Still, I *am* going to kill you. I just need you to step over there under that streetlight so I can get it on tape."

"Say what?"

"I have a camcorder set up over there. I want you to go over under the light so I can have a good picture."

"Eat me!"

"No, you probably taste as bad as you smell." I push him and the little bastard ruins everything by trying to fight me. He spins and throws a punch. I duck it and he tries to kick me. I jump back, pulling the trigger. Marcus flies backward and hits the pavement. He's moaning since I haven't mortally wounded him.

I hear sirens in the distance.

"Well shit." I walk over and look into his eyes. "You're a spoil-sport. Now I don't even get a tape."

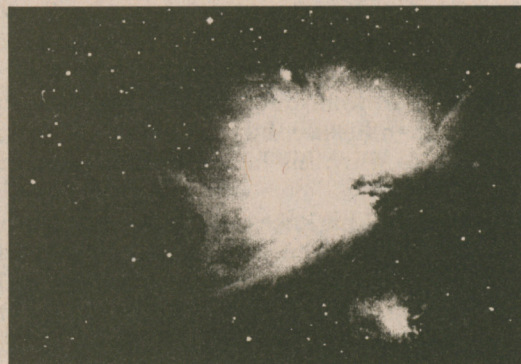
He moans in pain. I sigh and shoot him in the head to get him to shut up. Then I walk over, grab my camcorder from the post where I'd set it up and hop into my car.

I'm already heading toward the interstate when the cops pull into the parking lot. Freebies are okay to keep in practice, but I gotta tell you something. It sure would be nice to have a paying job come along soon.

## Space Cave

by Louise Webster

There is a cave in outer space,  
where icy stars are born.  
A dark and damp inviting place,  
for solar bats to swarm.  
Cobwebs catch galactic dust.  
Stalagmites pierce the ground.  
A spaceship in the corner rusts,  
the crew has not been found.  
Flying fish dive through the air,  
with fins of blue and green.  
Spiders dangling long black hairs,  
hide in crevices not seen.  
To reach this distant cavern,  
travel through the mind.  
But the only ones who get here,  
leave logic far behind.



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By MIKE ALLEN



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# Mojave Tortoise and the Egg Machine

by Frank C. Gunderloy, Jr.

Mojave had no idea he was going to be part of the Egg Machine when I lugged him outside to graze on the lawn. Mojave's my big old desert tortoise. I feed him lots of fresh kale and bananas, but he still enjoys getting out to munch on the dandelions—and on Mom's pizza hibiscus, too, if I get interested in a hummingbird or something and don't watch him carefully.

On my way out last Saturday, I found Walter and Sammy in the garage hunched over Walter's laptop computer. Walter is my big brother, but only by a year, so it doesn't count for much. Mom says he's "10 going on 30," because he's such a whiz with his computer. I don't mind, because sometimes we play "Castles and Monsters" or "Gobble Wobble" and it's better than the arcades. You don't need your Dad to go with you.

And Sammy is our little sister, but we don't call her that when Mom's around. We are very careful to call her "Suh-man-THUH." Just like that. "Suh-man-THUH." I think she's almost old enough to start hating it.

I'm Estelle, but Walter calls me "Ess" and spells my name "S-T-L." He says it means "slower than light." I used to hate *that*, but now I'm kind of used to it.

"Hey, Ess," called Walter, "Come see what I rigged up."

I turned Mojave loose to explore the garage floor, and went over to see what was going on. They sure weren't playing "Castles and Monsters." A tangle of wires was taped to Sammy's head, so she looked like one of those "before" ads for a home perm, and she *and* the computer were hooked up to an old discarded machine from Dad's clinic.

"Wow," I said, "Mom's sure gonna be mad—you've 'rigged up' an awful mess out of Sammy's hair."

"Don't care," said Sammy, "Walter's letting me make waves with the Egg Machine."

"I keep telling you, Suh-man-THUH," said Walter, "It's 'E-E-G.' It shows how the 'lectricity in your brain works when you think."

"I know *that*," retorted Sammy, who was just learning to spell. "E-E-G. Egg. Can I do more game now?"

"OK, Suh-man-THUH, bring on the Trolls and Dragons," said Walter.

Sammy squeezed her eyes shut and wrinkled her forehead. A horde of monsters appeared on the screen and marched across the drawbridge.

"I've programmed the game to run right off Sammy's brain waves," Walter said. "Ready, Suh-man-THUH? Call out the Knight Defenders."

"Tired now," said Sammy, and started pulling off the wires, making a worse tangle than ever.

"Oh, heck. You shoulda seen it, Ess. She was making the Trolls climb the Golden Queen's Tower, and all kinds of stuff, and I never had to touch the keyboard once. Well, maybe once, but she did most of it herself. It was great."

"Oh, sure," I said. "I'll bet."

"Come on," he said, "I'll prove it to you. Let me hook *you* up."

"No way. I'm not going to let you fool around with my head. Get somebody else," I said.

Then I came up with one of my best ideas ever.

"Try Mojave instead."

Mojave usually stays in our atrium, which in case you don't know is a sort of a garden with the house built all the way around it. I would rather have a Siamese cat, but Dad says "exotic" pets are more interesting, and I have to admit that Mojave did make a big hit in my Science Fair project last year. We don't know how old Mojave is for sure, but he must be at least 100. He used to live in the chicken-pen on Grandma's ranch before she sold it, and she told me he'd lived there as long as she could remember.

Anyhow, I made Walter wire Mojave into the Egg Machine. Mojave didn't want to cooperate at first. He just kept pulling his head into his shell, and hissing like he does when he's startled. But after I put him into a cardboard box, he hunkered down, stuck out his head, and relaxed. Mojave likes cardboard boxes. He spends the winter hibernating in one full of shredded newspapers, and really enjoys climbing in for a nap. The wires didn't bother him one bit. Maybe the tangle reminded him of a tumbleweed.

"This is a waste of time," grumbled Walter. "Tortoises' brains aren't anything like peoples'."

"Of course they aren't," I answered. "That's why I want you to set the game for 'easy.' Make it real simple—like years in the past when the Knights were just starting to build the Castle."

When the screen finally cleared, we saw an old barn with a lot of lines criss-crossing it.

"I told you—it's not working," Walter said, reaching for the keyboard. "The Castle isn't anything like that."

"WAIT!" I yelled, hardly able to believe what I was seeing.

"Wait for what? Let me try to fix it."

"Oh-my-gosh," I said, slapping his hands away. "That's Grandma's ranch. That's the way the barn looked from down in the chicken-pen with the wire in the way."

Walter got as far as saying "I don't believe..." when he caught his breath and his eyes began to get bigger and bigger.

Someone carrying a bucket had come out of the barn.

It was Grandma.

Well, I could have sat there all afternoon and watched Grandma do ranch chores, but after I figured out what was going on, Walter got so excited that I just barely saw her feed the chickens.

"It's a window in time, Walter. The egg machine is using old Mo's memory to let us see the things he saw in the past. And the simpler the game set-up, the further back it goes. Try adjusting the level again."

He fiddled with the keyboard again, and the picture changed.

The barn was still there, but it was off to the side and had a coat of bright red paint on it. And you could see the

back steps of the ranch house, fresh-looking with whitewash.

We saw lots of other things.

A really young Grandma, like maybe when she was first married.

A different barn, smaller, and the ranch house without any back porch.

Men who looked a little like Dad, or Grandpa, but who weren't quite. Walter said they were our "great-greats" or even our "great-great-greats" and I think he was right.

A funny-looking house—a cabin, really—built mostly out of mud and big slabs of dirt and grass.

After that, there was nothing but desert with long stretches of brown grass and dried-up bushes, or green grass and leafy bushes, depending on the season. Once there were some figures off in the distance, and Walter claimed they were Indians, but I don't know about that.

Sometimes it would be dark, and we'd just get a glimpse of the stars or the moon. And once we seemed to be in a narrow tunnel, which I'm sure was a burrow Mojave had dug to keep from being baked alive in the desert sun.

Finally, there was a picture that we couldn't understand

at all. It looked like a big curved wall made out of splotchy cream-colored canvas with a dim light behind it. That's when Sammy woke up. Sammy had been curled up in an old lawn chair ever since she got herself disconnected.

"Egg," she said.

"Hush up," said Walter, and I was about to tell her to go in the house, when I took a second look at the screen. Then it was my turn to catch my breath and stare.

Sammy was right!

We were back to the time before Mojave hatched, and were seeing his eggshell from the inside. It was spooky to think about.

Of course, there was no way to see anything from *before* Mojave hatched, and Walter lost interest after watching Grandma and Grandpa doing farm chores a few more times.

But I just happen to know a girl at school who claims she owns a parrot that's 200 years old. She says it used to belong to an old sea captain, and it's been around the world a dozen times.

I hope it likes crackers well enough to sit still while we tape the wires on.

## A Politically Incorrect Bedtime Story

by Mark Fewell

Two o'clock in the afternoon and Esmerelda is busy sawing off her sister's toes, but it just isn't working. They have to be finished soon, finished before Prince Charming and his motorcade arrive, all the Prince's men and all of their horsepower, the Prince in a white limousine.

Yeah, I know what you're thinking. With a name like Charming, he has to be gay, queer, a faggot, a homo-sex-u-al. Right? Wrong. Not this Prince. This is a Prince with the bod all the babes want.

But the Prince he only wants one babe. The pretty little one whose foot fits in the glass slipper he found after the ball, the big bash his father the King threw in order to find his son a bride.

Did it work? Yes and no. Charming didn't want any of the lovelies who stayed after midnight, offering an abundance of bodies.

No, he has to have this chick that left early. Left the ball so fast you would almost think the little red Corvette she arrived in was going to turn into a pumpkin if she didn't make it home early.

Which brings us back to Esmerelda and her sister. The saw still isn't working fast enough. You see, Esmerelda and Gretchen are big women, and big women have large feet. Much too large to fit into a dainty little glass slipper like that whiny stepsister of theirs, that bitch Cindy.

The Prince will be here soon. They can hear the parade of limos turning onto Happy St. They have no choice; they'll have to get out the ax. Of course, this means sneaking past Cindy.

Esmerelda can already hear the whiny, little bitch. "That was my father's ax. You can't have it." Not that Daddy Dearest did Cindy an favors, dying and leaving her with a

family who hates her.

Esmerelda is lucky enough to make it past Cindy unseen, lugging the ax into the bedroom she shares with Gretchen. "I got the ax."

"Is it sharp?"

"I didn't have the time."

"Who goes first?"

"I do?"

Esmerelda has to go first since she's the protagonist of this story. What some would call the heroine if there were any heroics in this tale.

Using both hands, Gretchen lifts the ax over her head and swings, cutting through flesh and bone, blood splatters everywhere, Esmerelda screams so loud the windows rattle.

"What's going on in there?" shouts their mother; Cindy's wicked stepmother, from another room.

"We're making ourselves presentable for the Prince," Gretchen shouts back.

"Well, do it quieter."

Gretchen used to be a Girl Scout, learning useful things like how to sell cookies and do first aid. It is the latter that saves Esmerelda's life.

Gretchen ties a tourniquet around her sister's ankle, effectively stopping the blood flow. She then bandages the foot, hiding the wound.

"It's my turn," says Gretchen.

The doorbell rings. "Oh, no, it's not," says Esmerelda, knocking her sister to the floor, a bone-crushing haymaker to the nose. Let it be known through the Kingdom: Big women hit hard.

Esmerelda changes into a clean dress faster than you can repeat the names of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, and hops

down the stairs on her one good foot. Even though she can't walk on it, the tourniquet has stopped it from throbbing.

Cindy answers the door. "Please, come in, Your Highness." Her voice is so saccharine it makes you want to puke.

Prince Charming enters the house. Seven of his men follow him in. "Who will be first?" He doesn't have to explain first at what. He knows these women woke early to watch his show on WVOK, the Voice of the Kingdom. How else were they going to find out who did what to whom at last night's party?

"I'm going first." Esmerelda pushes her stepsister out of the way. "Give me the shoe!" A man steps forward, opening the box containing the slipper. "Give me that!" She grabs the shoe right out of the box and proceeds to slip it on her wounded appendage.

"Are you okay, milady?" asks the Prince.

"I'm fine, Your Highness. Just stubbed a few toes running from your party." The shoe fits perfectly.

Charming rushes forward and locks lips with his true

love. They're so happy to have found each other they would start fucking then and there if not for the fact Cindy and the Prince's men are in the room.

Eventually the couple separates, and Prince Charming leaves with his new friends, his soon-to-be wife. Cindy, knowing that this isn't the way the story ends, files a grievance with Fairy Godmother Local No. 5.

And this isn't the way the story ends. The story ends with Prince Charming and Esmerelda living happily ever after. Does Esmerelda ever think about the family she left behind? Not one bit. She doesn't let Charming think about them either. Nor does she let her hubby know why or how she lost all the toes on her right foot.

But that's not the way the story ends either, you say. Cindy's supposed to get the Prince. Not in my story she isn't.

Hey, this fairy tale's been in the public domain for centuries. So if you want to retell it with the more traditional ending, go right ahead. Me, I'm telling it the way I want to tell it.

## It's Been Seven Hours and Fifteen Days

by Michael Bracken

I went back again and again and again and nothing I did changed the outcome. Sooner or later Penny and I always divorced. Usually, she left me for another man; once, she left me for a woman. The time-lines converging on our marriage splintered into a kaleidoscope of patterns. No matter how often I returned, I could not pinpoint that moment when our marriage soured.

I returned to the night I began my one and only affair and flattened all four tires on my car, leaving my younger self stranded at home. I returned to her forgotten birthday and had a dozen roses delivered just before my younger self arrived. I returned to the Christmas party at her office where I threw up on her boss and surreptitiously watered down all of my own drinks. According to my diary, I returned exactly two hundred and seven times, altering events in our marriage with each visit to my past. Two hundred and seven times I failed to alter the ultimate outcome of our marriage. Two hundred and seven times I lost the only person I'd ever loved.

I sat at my desk in the university's basement lab fingering the wedding band I still wore and stared across the room at the disassembled remains of my research project. Future funding had been denied when I could prove no tangible benefits; my equipment and my office had been relegated to the university's equivalent of Siberia when Dr. Zimbardo's gene-duplicating project, originally begun in the lab next to mine, required another few thousand square feet of laboratory space; my research assistants had been reassigned to Dr. Wolinski's cancerless tobacco project when it appeared he'd made a major breakthrough and R.J. Reynolds and Phillip Morris had pumped a combined two point eight million dollars into the project; and my class load had been increased so the regents would believe I could still carry my own weight—if not as a research scientist, then at least as a testifying monotone who frightened away freshmen.

Time travel had proven about as worthless as pet rocks and mood rings—good for a laugh at staff meetings and faculty dinner parties, but otherwise of no tangible value to the world. The Central Intelligence Agency—the first to invest in my project and the first to withdraw funding when they realized murdering Hitler as a baby only allowed another child with another name to fill the void of Adolf's absence—had stopped returning my calls. Xerox, providers of early funding, had withdrawn from the project when attempts to retrieve the lost works of composers, artists, and sculptors had resulted in the disappearance of Whistler's Mother, Michelangelo's David, and most of Mendelssohn's compositions. For every treasure saved another was lost. Time had a way of making all things balance.

Stevenson in philosophy had described it as "a void that once created must be filled." His paper on the nature of time had assured him of tenure, yet my work on the practical applications had only provided me with two hundred and seven personal failures.

Later, when the night guard poked his head in to see why all the lights were blazing in my lab at four past midnight, he found me reassembling the time machine. There wasn't much to be done after I wired the coffin-like transporter into the master console. None of the usual precautions and fail-safe systems were necessary as I planned a one-way trip into my past.

The guard continued on his rounds without comment while I booted up the time travel program on the university's mainframe, patched into it from the master console and prepared for my final trip. In my coat pocket I carried a fully loaded .38 caliber Smith & Wesson revolver, intending to return with it to the last moment I had been truly happy. I would find my younger self in the hotel bed on my wedding night, shortly after Penny and I had shared ourselves for the

fourth time, and I would shoot him and continue shooting until we died.

Penny would live her life without me much as she had after each of our divorces, someone else would perfect time

travel, and all the university freshman would be required to attend another boring professor's introductory classes.

Time would accommodate my loss, but only I could eliminate my pain.

## For Whom the Bell Tingles

by Vera Searles

When Ralph came home from work one evening, there were two dead bodies in the bathtub. "Oh no, not again," he said.

This time it was two women. They appeared to be middle-aged, and were both wearing navy print dresses. From the benign looks on their faces, it took Ralph only a minute to deduce they were Jehovah's Witnesses. "Norma!" he shouted.

The sound of ragged breathing told Ralph his wife was behind him. "Asthma's bad," she wheezed.

He sighed, closed the toilet seat, and sat her down. "You've got to stop this, Norma," he said as he handed her the inhaler. "This makes a total of six."

"I don't—" She caught her breath. "I don't do it on purpose, I can't help it."

"Yes, I know."

"It just happens. When the bell rings, something strange comes over me. I feel all little tingles inside of me, and when I open the door, whoever is there—down they pop."

He nodded. "I know. It's not your fault."

"These two kept on ringing," she said. "It drove me crazy. I tried not to answer, but they peeked in through the sidelight and saw me. They shouted that they had come to save me. I thought maybe they had a cure for me—" She hunched her shoulders and shrugged. Ralph saw that she was still wearing the same housecoat from this morning and her hair was a mess. Couldn't she at least put a comb through it?

He asked, "How long have they been here?"

"All day. Right after you left for work."

"Oh shit," he said. He took off his jacket and hung it on the doorknob. "Somebody'll be looking for them by now. Why did you put them in the bathtub?"

"I didn't want anybody to look in the window and see them on the floor." Dumb idea. All she had to do was draw the drapes. But Norma's mind didn't reason that well.

Ralph felt the first one's arm. "It's going into rigor mortis," he said. "We've got to get them out of here right away." He studied his wife's face. She was quickly fading into middle age, after twenty-three years of marriage and two kids. Both daughters were away at college. Thank God for small favors, he thought. "How's the asthma now?" he asked.

"Better, much better," Norma replied. "I can help."

"We'll drag them into the garage and put them in the car trunk. Then we'll drive up to the ridge."

"Like last time," she said.

"Yeah, like last time."

While they drove along, she asked, "Do you think they felt any pain when it happened? I'd hate to see anyone suffer because of my—my foams."

He winced. She could never get the word right, and he was tired of telling her it was 'pheromones.' He said, "I doubt it.

You said they just keeled over, like the others. They didn't scream or anything, did they?"

She shook her head. "No. One second they were standing there handing me a pamphlet, and the next, they were on the floor in a heap. I guess their hearts just stopped."

"Right," he said. Two, at the same moment? He knew it was spontaneous extinction again.

He remembered the first one—a vacuum cleaner salesman. It was right after Norma had her hysterectomy, and the doctor mentioned she might have a hormonal imbalance until her body adjusted. He had been in the bedroom when Norma answered the doorbell. "Yes?" he heard her say. Then there was a thump, and she screamed, "Oh my God!" When Ralph ran out to the front hall, he saw the man slumped over a vacuum in the doorway.

They called the medics and later learned the salesman hadn't died of natural or unnatural causes. There was no possible cause of death except that he had stopped living. A news item in the paper ascribed the death to spontaneous extinction.

Ralph had heard of spontaneous combustion and wondered if it was similar. He researched it, and found three other cases in the medical journals. But when it happened again a week later, to a magazine salesman, the medics got suspicious. "You've got somebody here spouting potent pheromones that cause spontaneous extinction," they told him. "You've got to stop whatever is triggering those pheromones, or we'll be back here every week." They hadn't been far wrong, for now there were six. After the first two, Ralph stopped calling the medics.

He made a left and steered up Ridge Road. The place he parked was dark and deserted. He and Norma dragged the two Jehovah's Witnesses from the trunk and pushed them over the edge.

They stood and watched the two bodies hurtle into the ravine below. Norma began to wheeze a little. She was still wearing the ratty housecoat. He could so easily push her over, too, but how would he explain her disappearance?

When they got back in the car, he said. "Norma, we have to talk about this—this affliction of yours."

She nodded. "Yes. I've been thinking—maybe if you retire early—you could stay home with me and—"

"I can't retire yet," he interrupted. "We have car payments, the girls in college—" In his mind he added, retire my ass. He just had a promotion and now a new secretary, who was everything he ever wanted. Blanche was young, beautiful, and prefect in bed. To Norma he said, "I was thinking more along the lines of—well, a rest home, you know."

Norma wheezed, "The funny farm? You'd send me to the funny farm? I'm not crazy!"



"No, no, darling." He chose his words carefully. "Nothing like that. Just a nice place where people go for a rest. Only for a week—until they get the pheromones out of you. You tell them how you tingle when the bell rings, and I'm sure they can help." Maybe they'd keep her there for good. There must be a million tests for postmenopausal women with potent pheromones and asthma. He'd have everything the way he wanted—no messy divorce, no more dragging bodies over the ridge, no more wheezing next to him at night. He and Blanche would be together, in the house and at work.

Norma said, "But I don't want to go away. I want to stay home. I promise I won't answer the doorbell any more. I really promise."

Ralph was glad she wasn't very bright. All he had to do was disconnect the wires from the bell. But she hadn't thought of that. "It'll be all right, darling," he promised. "We'll get you all well again, and then you can come home."

"A week. Only a week, Ralph, okay?"

He nodded.

When they arrived home she went to bed and he started looking over the sanitarium brochures. The plan had dawned on Ralph after the first two incidents. He was going to disconnect the doorbell but then realized that a plum had fallen into his lap. She was a psychotic, who claimed she tingled when the bell rang. They would study her for years, and meanwhile, he'd have his freedom.

Everything went fine. Their doctor agreed that Norma could use a little rest. Ralph gave Blanche the key to the house and told her to move in while he drove Norma to the restatorium.

"I don't like it here," Norma said, sitting on the bed next to her suitcase.

"You'll feel better when you unpack," Ralph told her.

"No." She shook her head. "I don't like it here. I might come home later. I'll call a cab."

"Please, darling—don't give up so soon. You want to get those pheromones out of you, don't you?" He hugged her, thinking of tonight with Blanche.

"Okay," she said. She started to unpack, and Ralph gave the nurse a fifty to keep an eye on her so she wouldn't escape.

He whistled and sang on the way home, and as he drove past the ridge, he waved goodbye jauntily. When he arrived at the house, it was empty. There was no answer when he called Blanche's apartment.

He wandered around, looking at the clock every five minutes and listening to the kitchen faucet drip. He'd have to fix that now—Blanche was fussy. He called her apartment again—still no answer. Where was she? She knew he was looking forward to tonight. Maybe she went shopping for new nightwear. Women did things like that, he remembered.

Ralph decided to take a shower, and while he was rinsing off, the doorbell rang. It couldn't be Blanche—she had the key. The bell kept ringing. He grabbed his robe and yelled, "All right, all right, I'm coming."

There was no letup—the bell rang steadily. Ralph felt a strange sensation, like a tingle, crawl up one leg, across his buttocks, and down the other leg. It reached up into his shoulder blades and along his arms. He was tingling all over. The sound of the bell was driving him crazy, and he suddenly realized it had nothing to do with Norma's hormones—whatever pheromones *he* had, they were fit to burst.

Dripping water across the carpet, he shouted, "All right! Hold on!" He glanced out the sidelight and saw a taxi parked in the driveway. Norma? Oh shit. His pheromones went into high gear, but he didn't care. He'd let Norma have it, full blast. As he reached for the doorknob, from outside he heard Blanche yell, "My car was stolen, with my purse in—"

He pulled back too late. The door was open, and spontaneous extinction had already set in.

## Tiny Doll-Face by Mattie Brahen

The house looked loomed before her, cold and sepulchral. "So I'm finally, formally, invited to visit with your mother. Remarkable, the power of a small gemstone." She waved her ring finger in the sunlight; the diamond's facets flashed.

"She's still not happy about it, Doll-Face."

Sarah ignored his favorite sexist endearment. "It's high time you stopped letting your mother run your life," she said as he led her to the parlor.

The gaunt woman in the wingback chair surveyed her with an uncertain but dignified scrutiny. Her hair, dyed black, was pulled back into a twist, her face thin, but her eyes dark and sharp. Sarah smiled at her, determined to be pleasant. "Hello, Gertrude. How are you?"

"Not well, but managing. Wally knows my back can be sore. Just sitting for more than half an hour is a challenge."

*More likely stiff, that back of hers,* Sarah thought, *from that rigid attitude.* She stared around the room, noticing all of the dolls. "What a stunning collection."

"Some of them are quite rare," Gertrude informed her.

"Take that small Egyptian doll. A grave doll, done in the image of a servant who would serve the deceased in the afterlife. And the tiny crude figure beside it is a voodoo doll, made in the likeness of a victim, whom the magician wishes to control or kill."

Sarah swallowed and sat closer to Wallace on the sofa. "I prefer the modern dolls."

"No doubt you played with those fashion floozy dolls as a child."

"Uh, no. I never owned one of those. I liked paper dolls." She changed the subject. "Wallace has told you we've set the date."

Gertrude nodded, as an older man came in, wheeling a tea trolley. "We'll have tea now. Alexander, please pour. This is Wally's Uncle Alexander. He lives here as well."

Alexander bent over the trolley and fixed them each a brimming cup. It was fragrant and warm, and Sarah sipped it, taking the edge off the chill in the room.

"Yes," Gertrude said, "Wally has told me of your wedding

plans. I personally can't imagine his moving from home and hearth, but he seems bent on having you, and I know of only one way to please his desire. More tea?"

Sarah held her cup out. "Then you'll give your blessing to the marriage."

"Sarah," Wallace cut in. "That is my place to ask."

"Then you ask," she returned, quickening anger making her stomach queasy.

"Mother, will you accept Sarah into the household?"

"Yes, dear. But, of course, there's no need for you to leave home to do so."

"Wait," Sarah piped, surprised and disgruntled that the word had come out in a tinny squeak. "We're not living here. He's a grown man. We need a place of our own, Gertrude."

Gertrude shook her head, a crafty smile playing on her lips. "But he belongs here. And done our way, my dear, not even death will part you from him." And then she mumbled a string of guttural sounds, nonsense words.

"You're impossible," Sarah said. "Wallace, let's leave. I'm sorry, but my patience is exhausted." She started to rise. She heard Wallace reciting his own hodge-podge of gibberish, as a dizzy spell hit her. She sank back into the chair, seeming to fall into it.

She had no memory of blacking out, but when she awoke, her limbs felt stiff and she was lying naked on a bed, in a darkened room. Wallace was beside her, fondling her. His hands seemed much larger than usual, and she wondered if she was sick with fever, imagining it.

He reached over her and turned on the bedside light. Sarah gazed up at him in horror. He had doubled in height and the shock caused a scream to rise in her throat. But her mouth would not open, even when her line of vision took in the shelf of dolls. Each had its own name plaque: Ruth, Karen, and Beth. The empty space read *Sarah*.

"Mother knows best, tiny doll-face," he cooed at her and kissed her lips, forever frozen in a fetching pout.

## Now Playing by Christopher Stires

As Tierney crossed the cineplex lobby, she spotted Gage near the concession counter, waving his red gaming tickets at her, and she was stunned, because it was only yesterday that she'd last seen him and he'd been fine then. Today, however, twenty-five hours later, his full head of dark hair was feathered with gray, more gray than brown, and deep furrows half-mooned under his beautiful eyes.

"What's happened to you?" Tierney asked, reaching him. "When you called in sick at the lab, I thought it was so you could be first in line for the contest."

Gage smiled, but his handsome features remained haunted and drawn. "It was and I've never felt better, Tier. I was here when the theater opened. Second in line. I've seen the movie three times now. My name's on the big board."

Tierney turned. Next to the open theater doors was a giant black-trimmed com-sign. It read:

CAN YOU SURVIVE  
DEVIL'S HOLIDAY?

JOIN B COMPANY ON ENEMY-HELD PLANET CWN ANNWN  
EXPERIENCE THE BATTLE AS IF YOU ARE THERE

AND  
WIN

THE PERSON WHO SURVIVES THE MOST  
VIEWINGS

BETWEEN FRIDAY AND SUNDAY OPENING WEEKEND  
WILL RECEIVE

TEN MILLION DOLLARS TAX-FREE!

Tierney watched as names, from across the nation, from the East Coast to the West, from the Canadian border to the Gulf, scrolled underneath the advertisement. "There must be eighteen-twenty million people playing this contest. What do

the red stars mean?"

"Multiple viewings. Those are the current contest leaders."

"Aren't too many of those. Half a mil I'd guess. Maybe a mil. But the odds here are still much better than with the Federal Lottery." She stared at the broken blood vessels webbing the whites of his eyes and the yellow hue tingeing his flesh. "How rough is it?"

"Never seen anything like it. This is as real as it gets without actually being there. I saw some vets bail out."

Tierney stared inside the theater. Ushers were cleaning the aisles and the seats. Technicians were repairing the viewing helmets. Others were adjusting the robotics in the ceiling. The giant speakers near the concave screen hummed softly with... Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries." She frowned. What cornball, subliminal crap. It would have been subtler to play stuff by John Philip Sousa.

"I heard twenty guys were killed while they were filming the landing scene," Gage whispered in her ear.

"I read thirty. It's all studio hype," replied Tierney. Suddenly she was angry. "You don't want me to enter. You're three tickets ahead of me and you want me to fold in the gate, don't you?"

"Didn't say that."

"I want to win this, too. Maybe even more than you do. I don't want to spend the rest of my life checking coolant temperatures and waste levels. I'm tired of eating government-issued dehydrated meals and only being able to buy it on my assigned days. I'm fed-up with drinking recycled liquids. I've had it sharing my sleep quarters with five other people. I want to go some place where there isn't another single human being for a hundred kilometers. There are still places like that on the planet. You hear about it on the pirate web. Come midnight Sunday I'm the one who will have the

most tickets in this contest.”

Gage nodded, weakly. “I’ve never tasted a real peach. Never. I want to eat a real peach before I’m done. An orange, too.”

“One of us *will* win this contest,” Tierney said. “And that one will take care of the other. We’re partners.”

“Yeah. Partners.”

“But maybe you should sit this viewing out, Gage. No harm in taking one break.”

“I can handle it.”

The ushers finally removed the chain across the door opening and people began to fill inside. Tierney allowed Gage to lean against her as they moved down the aisle.

A male, university age, wearing a green Margaret Sanger Band tee, flashed his three tickets at them. “We’re the only ones left from the first showings,” he said. “Good luck, bud.”

“Luck to you, too,” replied Gage.

The boy staggered toward the front row.

“Where do you want to sit?” Tierney asked.

Gage gazed across the rows. “There. On the aisle.”

Tierney eased Gage into his seat and helped him slip his helmet on. Slowly, ever so slowly, Gage punched his personal code into the seat’s remote control panel. Tierney sat down and prepared herself for the film. She patted George’s hand. He smiled behind his helmet screen.

As Tierney tapped her personal code into her seat’s remote, the music ceased, the house lights dimmed, and for a moment she was deaf and blind, then she heard the rumble of intergalaxy transport engines and saw the screen brighten with the words:

*PopCon Corporation Presents*

For the next two hours, Tierney was on Cwn Annwn. She

was a member of B Company fighting the invading alien army. She felt the withering sun on her face as they disembarked near the Mountains of Uca Pacha. She tasted the volcanic ash in the wind and felt the sting of insects on her cheeks. Her eardrums vibrated as laser bullets whizzed past and pulsar mines exploded. She cried when the lieutenant was killed and, later, when the chaplain crawled through the lava rocks to rescue the wounded sergeant. She cheered when they raised the flag over the defeated alien command center.

“There will be a thirty-minute intermission before the next showing,” the usher announced as the house lights came brightened. “Those with validated tickets from this show will be allowed to purchase tickets before any newcomers. Management has decided, because of demand, to show the film around the clock until the contest is over.”

Tierney, trembling, eased off her helmet. Laser rounds had decimated the entire first row. The university boy lay riddled in the aisle. His tickets were still clutched in his fist. In the back section, near the exit, a pulsar mortar had killed four people and wounded several others. Scattered throughout the theater, people had been downed by sniper-fire.

She jumped as Gage touched her arm.

“You made it,” he whispered.

Tierney swallowed but the heavy lump in her throat remained. “Your hair’s gone completely gray.”

“You get in line for the next show,” Gage replied, plucking his validated ticket from the remote dispenser.

“This is madness.”

“Yeah. But what’s our alternative, Tier? I’m going to check the big board.”

“Okay ... I’ll get the tickets.”

## Dead Meat

by Michael Bracken

Farley pressed the point of his laser knife against the base of the young woman’s skull. He wrapped his left arm around her throat.

“Keep moving,” he whispered into her ear as he steered her toward the darkened alley to their right. Without struggling, the young woman complied.

Farley could smell her perfume—an expensive brand—even above the stench of garbage in the alley, and her shimmering blonde hair tickled his nose as it blew back against his face. She was a beautiful woman, an unexpected treasure in Farley’s part of town.

As Farley pushed the blonde forward, she stumbled. The blonde caught herself against the brick wall, scraping her hand. A streak of blood smeared on the rough brick. Farley released the woman, then spun her around to face him.

The blonde opened her mouth to scream. Before any sound came out, Farley slapped her. The blonde’s head snapped back. Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. She pressed her fingertips to her lips.

“One sound,” Farley said. “Just one sound and you’re dead.”

He reached out and grabbed the front of her skin-tight jumpsuit. His thick fingers found the hidden seal and he pulled it open. The seam split down the front.

He couldn’t tear the suit off the blonde.

“Off,” he commanded.

She slipped her arms from the sleeves of the jumpsuit. Her heavy breasts fell free of the confining material, her nipples firm and erect. The blonde bent, slid her firm legs from the jumpsuit, then stood, the jumpsuit bundled in one hand. She stood naked in the alley.

Farley pushed her back against the brick wall and held the laser knife to her throat. The blonde caught her breath. Roughly, Farley squeezed one of her breasts in his hand. His thumb brushed over a thick nipple.

“Why are you here?” he whispered hoarsely. “This ain’t your part of town.”

In Farley’s part of town, few people walked alone or

unarmed. Farley was one of the reasons why. Farley and all the others like him kept people inside at night, hidden behind their alarm systems and their opaqued windows.

Farley's hand moved farther down, down the blonde's rib cage, down her abdomen, and lower still. The blonde struggled, trying to turn away.

The laser knife nicked her cheek, cauterizing the cut the moment it touched her. The laser knife was silent and deadly and never left a bloody wound.

"Next time I cut your throat out."

Farley liked women who struggled, women who twisted and turned while he let his hands explore their bodies. He liked his women scared. And this one was scared. He could see it in her eyes. He could taste it on her skin as his tongue touched her cheek. He could feel it in the way she moved. His body responded, his penis growing stiff and pressing against the inside of his black jumpsuit.

It had been more than a year since Farley had had a woman like this in his hands. He usually caught the ugly women, the malnourished addicts as they stumbled home from one of the bottle bars.

Sometimes he dared to venture from his home turf. At least once a year he tried to cross town to find one of the beautiful people. Sometimes he caught one, but it was hard work. The Special Police took care of the beautiful people, patrolled the streets, rode the subways, monitored the video cameras. This year Farley didn't have to cross town; one of the beautiful people had come to him.

His callused finger slid into her.

"You'll beg for more when I'm finished with you," Farley said, his voice a low, husky growl. Then stepped back and quickly shed his jumpsuit.

"On your knees," Farley ordered. He pushed the blonde to the ground, onto her hands and knees. He moved behind her and knelt between her legs. Then Farley pushed forward, forcing himself into her. He pulled back and pushed forward again and again.

The blonde braced herself against the wall to keep her face from grinding into the brick.

He leaned forward, across her back. Then suddenly he screamed—a piercing, blood-curdling wail that echoed down the alley.

Farley rolled away from the blonde, his hands gripping his crotch where his penis had been only moments before. He screamed again, curled into a ball, dropping the laser knife as he wailed and rolled through the garbage.

The blonde pushed herself to her feet and looked down at Farley as his screams turned to whimpers. Then she gathered her jumpsuit and pulled it on. As she brushed her long blonde hair back away from her neck, she exposed the manufacturer's label that read, *Justice Department Anti-Rape Experimental Model 1*.

The blonde glanced back at Farley, smiled, then walked out of the alley. Farley's whimpers followed her into the night.

## The Hard Landing

by Patrick Wilson

Then, the dust began to settle.

The scattered parts that made up the debris field where the first manned mission to Mars had just crashed spread silver all the way to the horizon. Jagged edges caught the noon sun and dappled the video feed with dots of champagne-bubble pink.

Almost the entire civilized population of Earth had just witnessed the same feed WSS-NASA received, with shot after shot fuzzing out to a mute white screen as camera after camera was destroyed. All except his one, a Sony DigiCom minicam that was originally designed to withstand the pressures of very deep water but, sturdy and moisture-proof, was found to be ideal for the interior of the spacecraft's cabin.

This particular camera, the only one of seventeen still transmitting, had only minutes ago overlooked the craft's "kitchen" at mid-deck, where millions saw Col. Adams, Dr. Chomiski, Col. Nawlundi, and Comdr. Breckener eat their three squares out of plastic cylinders, day after month after year. This was the camera that witnessed Mitch Adams surprise his crewmates on their first Christmas with a weird oblong turkey roast he had smuggled onboard and kept frozen in beta junction for eight months. Camera 11 transmitted

constantly to the Internet, two minutes from absolute live, as sleepy-eyed Chomiski and ever jovial Adams decided to hell with shaving and grew full mountain-man beards, and then last month they shaved for The Landing and looked suddenly ten years younger. This camera watched the handsome Thomas Breckner pore over the schematics of the secondary solar panels to repair a potentially deadly power shortage and became a Cosmopolitan pin-up in the process ("The Man You'd Most Want To Fly To Mars With"). This camera recorded Chomiski and surly Nawlundi's epic magnetic ceiling-chess battles, the results of which were wagered on back in Vegas.

This was not the camera they used to send intimacies to their girlfriends—each had a private link in their compartments for personal correspondence—and it was not one of the two half-ton 65 mm IMAX behemoths.

It was the camera they complained about the dehydrated steak to, and was the sole witness that these four dead men did reach Mars.

Any last words the men uttered were undiscovered.

Why it happened, no one yet knew.

Now it was calm, and that one kitchen camera, off-level by

only a few degrees, maybe five feet above the dirt, stared over the wreckage like the stunned survivor of a highway rollover.

Quiet, gleaming metal, blowing dust.

Quiet.

Then the camera, apparently buffeted by the wind, jiggled. The angle changed slightly. It now faced lower and took in more of the immediate area.

To the lower left of the viewing field, between a corrugated length of rubber tubing and a blackened steel panel with the letters *wlett-Pa*, something was moving. Wriggling, just beneath the dirt.

In the diagonally opposite corner, breaking the jagged horizon-line, was an elbow-bend of scorched metal. It jerked impolitely, impatiently, wagging faster and faster and finally toppling altogether.

More movement. Much more.

The brown-red soil of the crash site squirmed in two dozen places. Lighter pieces of debris—polyurethane rings, tangles of wire, a University of Ottawa sweatshirt—came in motion as black, chitinous creatures crawled to the surface to investigate their otherworldly visitors. In seconds the entire field of view teemed with odd, industrious black shadows.

An Azorean exchange student named Mackie Dinnidak studying at Aoraki Polytechnic, New Zealand, watched this. The board of directors of PepsiCo International watched this from a Mexico City Hilton. Eleven prisoners of war in Singapore huddled around a tiny twenty-year-old black-and-white saw this, as did a hundred million families and a hundred thousand bartenders. They watched as first the tiniest pieces—the bolts and clamps and the one silvery glove

in view—then larger components were either carted off-frame by the dirty dark things or were taken to underground tunnels. Holes—their holes—were everywhere, and what they couldn't fit into their holes or carry off, they tore apart. Including, presumably, the crew.

Then they reached Camera 11.

The shot rocked wildly, flashing in and out of focus before finally spinning to face the long, long trail of burned metal and ruined hopes behind. This was the full view of the wreck. It was truly immense, miles long, and it was being buried, piece by piece, by the dark swarms.

The camera was knocked again, flipping and tumbling and then resting face-up, staring into the sun. For an unblinking, unmolested minute the camera fixed only on feathery blue ice-clouds and the pink-tinted circle at the top of the sky.

A shadow; the image shook again.

One of the creatures crawled onto the downed camera lens, pincer-jaws snapping. Although it was backlit and showed no detail, this is the image would be reproduced the next morning in thousands of newspapers: A haloed, spiky ink-black form neither insect nor mammal and possessing unknown intelligence.

The transmission began breaking.

White.

White.

A snow flicker.

The same silhouette, head cocked, studying the lens. Or its own reflection.

White.

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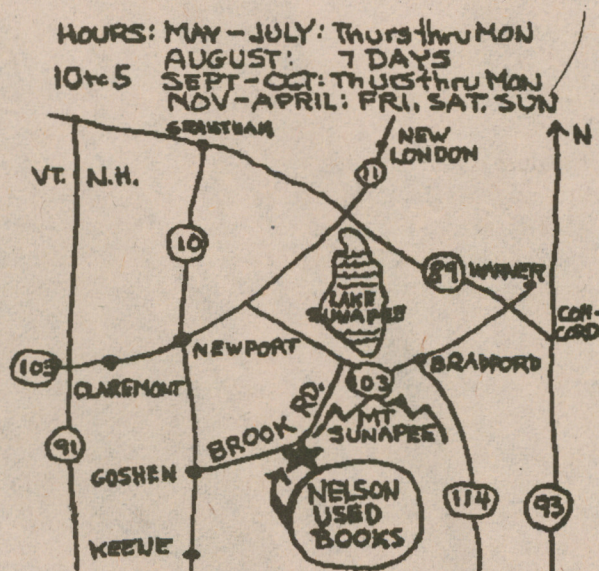
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Andrew Burt decided he finally had to get a real job, gave up his cushy position as a professor in the Mathematics and Computer Science Department at the University of Denver after twelve years, and is now president of TechSoft, a software development company specializing in networking, operating system design, computer security, and an unusual branch of AI. He has dozens of fiction sales plus a wide assortment of published non-fiction. For a hobby, he constructs solutions to all the world's problems. Fortunately, nobody listens. He lives in the foothills of the Rockies with his wife and their four parrots.

# Pigskin in a Poke

by Andrew Burt

Illustrated by David J. Grilla



**CNN** camera crews don't usually trample your garden (*oh, sorry about the flowers, man*) and shove a microphone up your nose as you step out of your car. That was my first clue something was up.

"Chester Tuten, will the aliens be the end of football as we know it?"

You know what I said. If you don't, you must live in a prairie-dog hole, since there's some damn satellite showing the veins in my forehead throbbing as I say every half hour, "F@!# off, pansies! No alien's crap worth talking about." They say Neil Armstrong muffed his first words, too; but his mumbling didn't make us Texans look like mouth-frothing idiots. For the record, I meant to say, "Get the f@!# off the pansies! I don't know what 'aliens' crap you're talking about," and that's the truth. I knew my wife, Lydia, would kill me for messing with those flowers and the damn phone was ringing inside. It'd be, oh, a whole five more minutes before I realized I was the swing vote in an interplanetary dispute.

Now you have to realize, we Texans take our football seriously. I played a bit of college ball, El Paso State. Home of Billy Lee Johnson. That's right, our one and only who made it to the pros, and boy are we proud even if you never heard of him. Mostly I warmed the bench too, since Coach Sibanda's philosophy was "If God had wanted man to pass, he'd have given him a basket to catch with." I wasn't a third string receiver for lack of trying. I sprinted as hard as I—never quite fast enough. I concentrated my utmost—but come a big play, my fingers turned to butter. And my timing... Like I said, I was a benchwarmer. But I played, and around here, that's worth a tip of the hat. Some years later, when Eddie Bartholomew of the county high school league rules committee asked me to join, I was honored to do my civic duty (even if he was just fishing for a contract to build me a new garage).

Jeff Davis County only has two high schools, and you might think a seven person committee a bit large to oversee 'league' rules, but, that's how it's always been. Well, a long time ago they were division 6A, but split on account of some damn feud. They still play the other schools, but none of it

'counts.' Anyway, The Rules themselves have been laid down since Moses (that's Moses Tamburello). In the ten years since I joined, we never decided anything more important than what color to paint the all-county stadium—and that suited me just fine.

"Will the alien play football?" ESPN had asked.

That was the question on everyone's lips (except the Felthuranians', who had over half a ton of everything but lips). And The Rules didn't say. Exactly.

It was East High's turn to hold the meeting, and just the seven us were sitting in room 207, though I could hear the clatter of those pesky reporters sweating on the blacktop below. We'd turned a bunch of desks around into a circle. I'd chosen the seat I used to have when I had Mrs. Bartuziak's history class in here mumble-mumble years ago. Hated that class. She made us think. The early-August humidity was stifling now, too, despite the windows slanted open. Just how I remember it.

The battle-lines themselves, well, I knew from phone calls how they'd be drawn: Except for me, sitting in the middle, the other six were evenly split: Hell Yes and Hell No. Just like me. I could see both sides, fifty-fifty. In other words, between the Irresistible Forces pummeling the Immovable Rock, I was that thin layer of air that catches all the heat.

I've never been on a jury, but it must be like this. "The fate of the world," ABC tagged it. I hate making decisions that'll affect me, let alone so many lives. I never feel right, and I'm no good at it. I just try to rock along. But I had no choice now, because one thing I hate worse is a quitter. So I listened, more attentively than I ever did to Mrs. Bartuziak.

"The Rules say, nobody over nineteen can play. This Felthuranian's a hundred fifty years old!" Ted Jenkins said, shaking his round head and turning red. Ted's the coach of the East High Panthers. The Felthuranian, Quungoor, showed up for tryouts to join the Tornadoes, over at West. He assumed he was eligible to play, since he's a Remedial Earth Studies student there like so many of their kids, but I nodded. Ted had a point. Some team would as likely sneak a pro on their roster without that rule. (Not that some of them couldn't use a bit of remedial schooling, too.)

Of course, both coaches are on the committee. Bo Thorndike, the Tornadoes' coach, predictably disagreed. Hell, they'd argue whether it was sunny or rainy, let alone the eligibility of a creature that looked like an unplanted maple tree with its canvas-covered root ball on casters. Besides, Bo knew an All-State nose guard when he saw one: At twelve hundred pounds and eight feet wide at the base of his pyramid-shaped body, nobody would be getting through him to the quarterback. Even if he did move as slow as an out of tune VW bus struggling up a mountain. "Now, Ted," Bo said, a toothpick wagging in his mouth, "Quungoor's only seventeen when you use the government's conversion formula." I nodded the other way. True 'nuff.

"Y'all know the Supreme Court hasn't ruled on that," Eddie Bartholomew threw in. "And anyway, that's meant for retirement stuff, not schooling." Eddie's kid goes to East. Kid's kinda scrawny is all, like his pa. Nobody's saying he's sucking up to Ted so the kid'll make the team. Did I say that? No siree. "These critters are a real pig in a poke, Bo. You don't know what could happen. Suppose he got in the way of a pass. What with that slime on their antennae he'd never hold on, and then the ball'd be all slimy. Better if they have their own school. Their own team. Their own league," Eddie said, as if that settled the argument. "Like with like, I say."

"That's discrimination, Ed," Bob Kingman said. New feller. Californian. Sold a house the size of a pinhead and bought himself one here big as Idaho. No kids, never played football, and frankly, nobody seems to remember whose idea it was inviting him on the committee. "The appellate court ruled the Felthuranians are people, so unless the Supreme Court overturns that, which I doubt, you'd better watch how you say stuff like that." He was definitely on target there, Californian or not. I'm all for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

That's when that Greek god Eureka struck me with his lightning bolt. Or however that goes when you get an idea. I didn't have to be the swing vote. All I had to do was convince one of the others to change their minds. Wouldn't be the coaches, but maybe this California fellow. I watched for weakness.

"All I meant was it's damn expensive to rip out every other floor in the buildings," Eddie was saying, waving around the room that would have to be demolished if the Supreme Court affirmed the Felthuranians right to equal access. "If they built their own school, they'd make the ceilings tall enough for 'em, is all. East's an old building. I don't know about West, but it's gonna be hard to reinforce these floors." Nobody wanted to argue with Eddie on that, on account of his being a contractor. There was a bit of a staring-at-your-feet pause, and I think we were all sort of thankful Eddie blew his nose loudly into his hanky. Deep down, we knew he had a point. Millions of refugee aliens suddenly descend on us. Sure, we invite them in, that's just hospitality. Especially the United States, melting pot and whatnot. But it'd be a lot easier adjustment if they were smaller, is all.

I watched Bob's tanned face for a reaction. Yep, he might have nodded at that.

"I think everyone is missing the most important issue," Mary Beth Simon said, her faced pinched up like a flower

at night. Her kid plays defense for East. "And I don't mean that they stink like rotting garbage. Though they do. I mean *safety*. What if this half-ton monstrosity falls over on my Tommy? I mean, that's how they eat, isn't it? Waddle up to some food and squish it. Their mouth's on the bottom, you know," she said, twisting her lips in revulsion. Whiny stage-mother that she is, I could sympathize, having landed under a few three hundred pounders before.

"Oh, that's the great thing, Mary Beth," Coach Thorndike said. "Their center of gravity is so low when they're young and still a single sex, they literally can't fall over. They're pretty solid even as dual-sexual adults." He turned a bit red and coughed, as if he wasn't sure he wanted to look like an expert on Felthuranian sexuality.

Of course, that line of thought might work to convince Mary Beth to change her mind. I filed that away.

"Oh they don't eat people, Ms. Simon," Mr. California added. "They control where the symbiont moves them, the way greyhound racing dogs chase a fake rabbit." He waved his hands like an undulating bull walrus chasing off a challenger to illustrate the way the Felthuranian's base, or "sled," chased the decoy dangled before them. Myself, I always thought they looked more like a bouquet of giant, greasy flowers in a pyramid-shaped vase sitting on a wheely cart that collapsed every so often, plopping their mass down with the same whump as my grandma used to drop into her easy chair. I could see Mr. California was thinking she might change her vote too. But I didn't say anything. Deep down I guess I shared Mary Beth's concern, and I just hoped they confined themselves to eating the giant rat-like things they brought with them.

Harlan Fossum, the school board's representative on the committee, a mousey little guy, cleared his throat. Probably an accountant, but I never asked. "It's a matter of liability, really. They've been here over a year now, and they haven't killed anyone. But the school district couldn't afford a lawsuit if we don't let him play. The ACLU has already threatened."

Ah, now a bean counter, I thought, would change his mind depending on how he read the bean leaves.

Coach Jenkins waved him off. "Haven't killed anybody yet. We're not playing tag football, here. Things get rough. What if one of my kids says something walrus-boy don't like? How do we know they don't spit fire or something when they get mad? Now there's *liability*."

"Perhaps you could use them like timeouts, Coach Thorndike," Fossum suggested. "Use them in three plays per half?"

Well, that killed any chance of my changing Harlan's mind. If the three-committee members opposed to Felthuranian had had tomatoes, Fossum would be red and gooey. Not that they were upset by his inconsideration for the Felthuranians as people, or even that they simply didn't want them playing under any circumstances—rather, they hated Really Dumb Ideas. I rolled my eyes. Thorndike and Kingman frowned. Lacking tomatoes, the 'nay' group settled for raspberries and dismissive waves. Which was a Bad Move. This left Fossum (who's not terribly adept at reading body language) more annoyed with the 'nays,' prompting him to retort, "Then I'm voting for Felthuranians. I say they play."



"Aw now don't go doing that, Harlan," Eddie said (and I nodded). "Keep an open mind at least till the end of the meeting. We all know you get fixed on one idea like a robot. Look, these Felthuranians and their hive mind, they adopt things as fast as the Japanese did electronics—one day you wake up and there aren't any American made TVs. You want that to happen to football?"

Which ordinarily would have been a wasted question, since we all knew Harlan couldn't care less. It meant something to me, though. Football's precious. You've got to tend the Rules like a bonsai tree, snipping carefully, not whacking at it with a chain saw. Nobody had ever envisioned half-ton linemen. Defense is about controlling the line of scrimmage. Three of these guys in a row... I shuddered. It could—would—change the very nature of the game. Our decision would have global repercussions.

It was then, as Coach Jenkins reminded us that Felthuranians despise wearing clothes and brought up rule 36, "all players must wear athletic supporters," that I realized it. None of them were really listening to each other. It felt like two continental plates grinding away at each other, with me in the middle.

I suddenly doubted I could change anyone's mind. I wanted to slink away before—

"You're awfully quiet, Tuten. What do you say?"

And there it was. The question.

"I haven't the faintest fucking idea," I said, and walked out. At least this time, there weren't any cameramen.

The meeting turned out to be a mirror in microcosm of the world at large. The president called. "National security," he told me on a special phone some fellers in dark suits hustled through the hoard of reporters (who were killing the whole lawn by now). "We've got to move slowly. The world's not ready for this. This isn't about football, son." I felt proud when he called me "son," even though he's younger than me and I didn't vote for him. He said, "It's about politics, and you'd best leave that to me." In other words, he was a Hell No.

I decided right then that I'd just vote "no," what with me being ex-Navy and he the commander-in-chief. And that was that.

Until then the Pope called. The Pope, now he told me to remember the Golden Rule. I'm not Catholic, but I respect the Pope. He'd issued a Papal Bull declaring that the Felthuranians had souls, which I imagined simplified their own problems quite a bit. I'm not saying he mentioned the kid might want to play for Notre Dame, and I'm not saying he didn't. Clearly he was a Hell-well, I mean he was a Yes.

Needless to say, so was the Felthuranian's Prime Speaker. He/she came in person. He/she was too large to fit in the house, so we had a chat in the back yard. (I'm grimacing in the news videos—damn those helicopters and zoom lenses—only because I was slowly watching my patio crumble like crackers beneath the weight of his/her delegation.)

I could trot on down the list of other world dignitaries, but you get the idea. They all called, and by God if they weren't fifty-fifty right down the line. The only thing that seemed certain to me was that everyone in the whole damn world had solidly made up their mind. Except me.

Atlas only had one world to carry on his back. I had two.

I couldn't sleep the night before we reconvened for the vote. Everybody was antsy to get on with it, not least of all me. As Lydia can attest, I wasn't eating, I was crabby, and my old nervous tic had returned, of punching my palm. I'd have had her decide for me, like I do most decisions, but she wouldn't have even if I'd asked. But she's understanding, more so than me, and it was when I finally heard her (for she'd said it several times; I never said I was a rocket scientist) that I grabbed the root of my problem. "Put yourself in his shoes," she'd said, meaning Quungoor's.

Well, that's why I love Lydia. She put a whole new spin on things. She crystallized in my mind that everybody's reason for wanting this kid to play—or not to play—was selfish. The Coaches were looking after their own glory, the parents after their kids, the bean-counters after their beans, the president, the Pope, all of them. Not one of them expressed the slightest care for Quungoor himself. I understand the Felthuranians aren't pushy (politicians aside), so I should have expected the parents and Quungoor himself not to lobby me. Still, to be fair, I had to know. Why *did* he/she want to play? He probably was a pawn in some galactic chess game, like the president said, but I had to know.

Quungoor's three parents were understanding. They left me alone with him in their tent. Most Felthuranians still live in the refugee camps. The TV plays up the few who sell technology and get pig-wallowing rich, but for the most part, the world doesn't need rat-eating bulldozers. All I can say is, on TV you can't tell the camps stink overpoweringly of creosote, which is to say, their sweat, and garbage, which is to say, their breath. And no, you don't get used to that smell. I kept my meeting brief.

I took a seat on the foot of a giant... chair? and faced the massive creature. Quungoor had decorated a corner of the almost circus-sized tent with sewn-on posters of last year's Superbowl-winning Dallas Cowboy's team. The posters were frayed and torn from the tent's canvas flapping in the wind, and the corners were missing from repeated sewing jobs. He had a football on a base made up to look like the Lombardi trophy. The ball had been signed, near as I could tell, by all the players on last year's team. "I have never been to a Dallas game," he told me through his translator, "but I hang out at all the practices I can. It is a long walk."

Unfortunately, though he could understand spoken English fairly well, the translator was a cheap unit that lay under him like a throw rug on the canvas floor. He really had to jiggle his rabbit a lot in order to move his sled and ponderous body around the translator's mat, sort of like fat hands on a Ouija board. I say 'unfortunately' because all those aerobics really made him sweat, and made me apologize for holding my nose.

"So, son," (I paused and my face felt flushed as I accidentally used a parental word, which they say is an insult, but I don't think he noticed), "I hear you want to play some football."

"Yes sir," he squawked out, shuffling around the mat.

"Just why is that? I mean, it's a lot of running and bruising about, baking under the hot sun..."



"All the way on the trip to Earth, after the hyperjump, I watched football on your television broadcasts. I was only able to <something that sounded like fralump> around the forests for a single rotation before we had to leave. All Felthuranians live for <fralumping>. It makes us feel... the way you humans describe sex. That way."

I was feeling just a little uncomfortable about now. "You mean, you want to have... relations... on the football field?" I'd heard enough. I stood up. I was now firmly a Hell No, if you know what I mean.

"No no! <Fralumping> is not for reproduction. It is only play. We enjoy it very much. We cannot play it on earth because of the lesser gravity. I was the first to notice the likeness of football and <fralumping>. The likeness is very subtle, I think. I have not told any others in the hive yet. I wanted to be the first. Do you not get excited when you play football?"

Okay, so the kid had a point. I let that slide. I sat back down. "Now," and I stopped myself from saying 'Son,' "you understand that football has Rules. You can't just... fralump however you like."

"Yes, I know! <Fralumping> has rules too, but very different. I will miss them, but I will play by your Rules."

Something about that hive-mind bothered me, so I tried a trick question. "And if another of your kind were on the opposing team, you'd tell him the play that was called, right?"

Quungoor tilted away. "I know the rules. I am not a cheater."

"Sorry. Just testing." I put my hands on my knees, ready to leave. "Well, I'm not sure how we'll vote," (meaning, I was back to being confused), "but you sure would make a helluva nose guard."

Quungoor's 'flowers' drooped a bit. "Oh. If I must. I would really prefer... that is, I hoped I could... I would like to be a receiver."

"What!" I'm afraid I jumped upright, not very politely. "Son, don't make a mockery of the game! You're not—You're not—"

I stopped myself. I could hear Lydia's voice. Not what? Not fast enough? Neither was I. Didn't have hands worth spit to catch with? Neither had I.

"I just want to play," he said. It sounded sad, though I know those cheap translators don't have emotional ability.

I sat back down (albeit holding my nose). Lydia had been right all along, of course. I should have just talked to the kid at the start. Put myself in his shoes. That sense of 'rightness' I'd been lacking had finally settled on me like a sweater on a cold night. It wasn't about The Rules, or slimy footballs, and it wasn't about interplanetary politics. It was about a kid who wanted to play football.

"I'm sorry, Quungoor. You're right. It's not fitting that I should judge. Football has adapted before. Why, pro ball didn't always have the two-point conversion, and did you know kickers used to kick off from the thirty-five?" I stood up, bowing slightly in what human-Felthuranian relations had come to call a handshake. "If we survived instant replay, I'm sure we can handle half-ton receivers. I'm voting that you'll play. Of course, you'll have to convince coach you're a receiver. But you know what? I hope you break every record that damn Jerry Rice ever set."

# SURREAL WORLD

## New Revelations in the Betty Hill Star Map

by Kevin M. Carr

### Imagine

you're coming home from a much needed vacation with your spouse. You're driving at night along a deserted highway and you see a bright light in the sky—possibly the planet Jupiter, which is unusually brilliant in the night sky. Without too much thought, you continue on your journey until miraculously, "Jupiter" zig zags out of the sky and hovers in front of your car on the road. In terror, you try to speed away, driving directly under the object. You hear a high-pitched beeping noise and your world dissolves into a foggy haze...

...until two hours later, when you regain consciousness and find yourself driving your car along a different road thirty five miles away.

Sounds like the teaser for this week's *X-Files* episode, doesn't it? But this is not a new teleplay being passed through Chris Carter's office. This is an account of Betty and Barney Hill, whose experience became one of the first modern UFO abduction cases.

Betty and Barney Hill's story is one of the most famous in UFO circles. It happened almost 40 years ago—on a dark New Hampshire evening in 1961. Books were written about their experience, including the phenomenal best seller, *The Interrupted Journey* by John Fuller. A TV movie starring James Earl Jones was made chronicling the events.

In the nearly four decades since the abduction, the UFO field has changed considerably. In fact, at the time, Betty and Barney Hill were referred to as "contactees" instead of the now common "abductees." In the 1960s, there was little differentiation made between what we now see as classic UFO abduction cases and the wild stories of blond-haired Venusians popularized by George Adamski in the 1950s. (Today, Adamski's "contactee" claims have been thoroughly debunked by many inside and outside of the UFO community, while abduction scenarios like that of the Hills are given much more credit.)

Being one of the first modern abduction cases, the Hill disappearance was a landmark in the UFO field. To date,

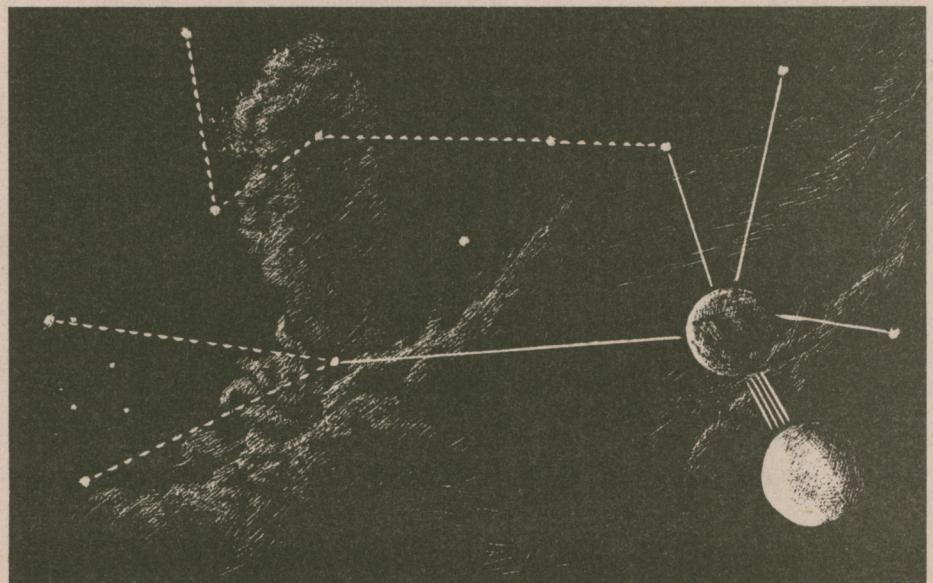
it is still one of the most credible. Even now, evidence is surfacing that supports the validity of their story.

For years after the Hills' "missing time," the couple was plagued with nightmares and anxiety. Barney Hill, a confirmed UFO skeptic with an IQ of 140 and a respectable job, discreetly sought help with his wife. Through counseling and hypnotic regression, the couple was able to remember being taken from their car by a group of beings and brought into a space craft. During the experience, Betty recalled seeing a three dimensional star map in the craft, a stellar cartography station designed to be viewed from every possible angle. She asked one of her captors about the map and was informed that it detailed trade routes from their home world. Assuming that our sun was part of those routes [otherwise, why would they be here?], Betty asked the being where they were on the map.

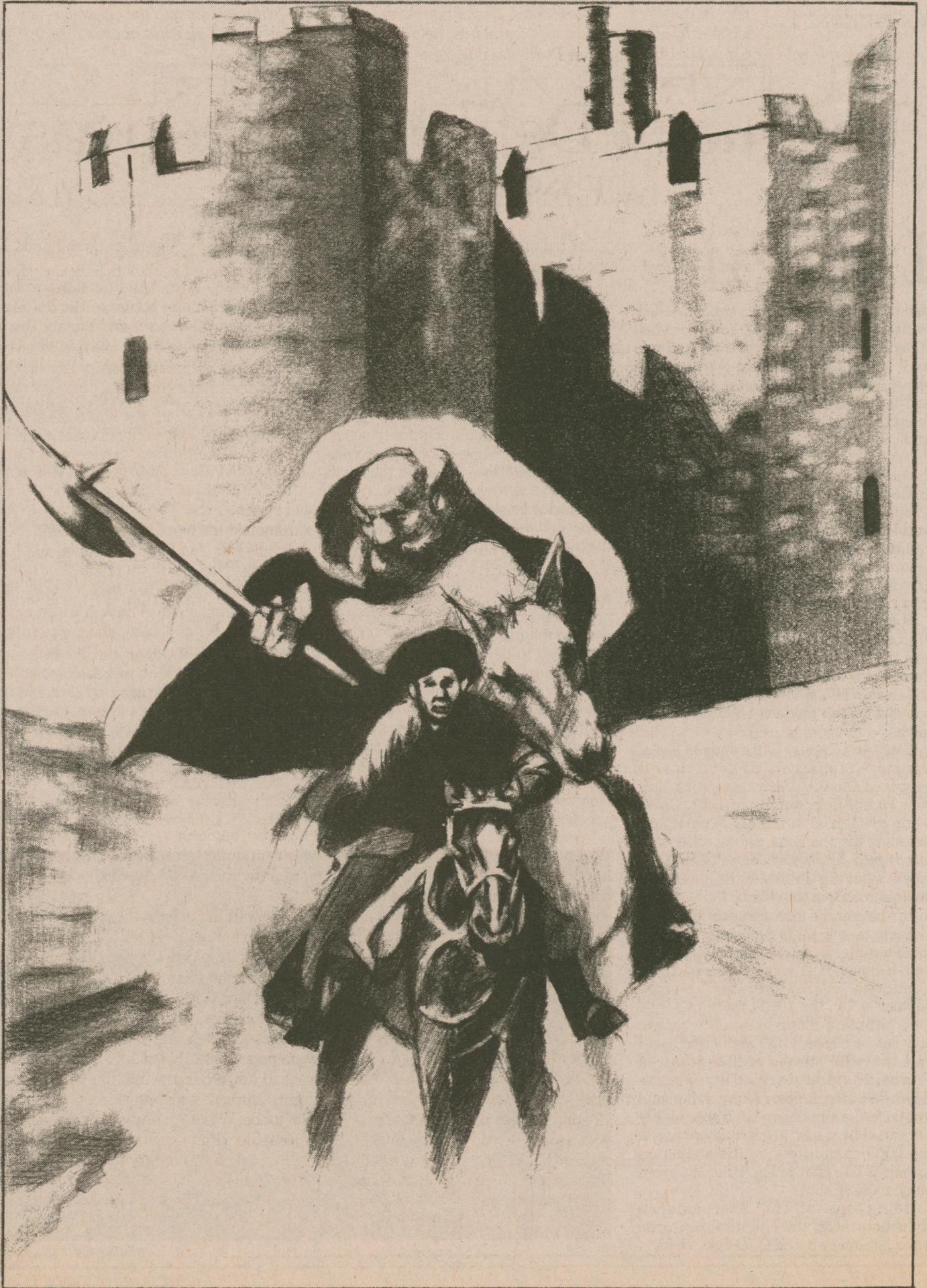
Talking to her as we might talk to a curious puppy, the visitor asked Betty if she knew where they were on the map. Of course, she did not. Much like a map of the United States is drawn from an aerial perspective, this star map was constructed from outside of the trade route system. When Betty said she couldn't identify the sun, the being dismissed her question.

The rest of the abduction experience was relatively standard as abduction experiences go (for full details, including transcripts of the hypnotic regressions, check out Fuller's book). It was the now famous star map that would be the thorn in the sides of skeptics—and would also start to unravel the mystery of the visitors' origins. Under hypnosis by Dr. Benjamin Simon, Betty redrew the star map on a piece of paper. Because she was translating the three dimensional model to a two dimensional drawing, Simon instructed her to draw it only if she could recall it exactly. Under the power of hypnosis, she was able to recreate its image as she saw it when conversing with her captor.

The map was an intriguing find, but it wasn't very valuable in 1964. Remember, it was not constructed from Earth's perspective [and, in fact, Betty's recollection of it was from whatever random angle she happened to be viewing it.] Sure, in the 1960s, we had mapped our sky with relative locations of stars. But no one had done an extensive three dimensional map of the thousands and thousands of stars in our section of the galaxy. Plus, the star map had no scale associated with it, so there was no way of telling how far away the stars were. With not one star labeled, there was literally no



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Norman's first story appeared in PW#16; "In the Garden on the Far Shore of the Styx" featured Novarro the Crusader—I was delighted when Chris decided to write another tale featuring this most excellent character. Since his appearance in PW Christopher has sold stories to Hardboiled, Outer Darkness and a few others.

# Sanctuary Defiled at Ananyas

by Christopher Stires

Illustrated by David J. Grilla

As I spurred the Appaloosa along the valley trail, its hooves raised a gray-black specter of ash into the chilled air with each step. Long-dead embers, rimmed with ancient frost, sheathed the rolling landscape in all directions. Scorched oak and sequoia stood frozen with meter-long icicles clinging to their barren branches. A wide glacial stream ran parallel to the trail. At one bend, submerged in the ice-dark waters, still clutching shield and sword, was the headless skeleton of a Viking warrior.

Once, in a time before the first spoken word, this far valley had been green and lush and blessed by the sun and stars. Then Satan claimed it as his. It was legend that an Apache shaman, Loradas, had dueled the banished angel for this ground; that Quon, the poet-soldier of the first Hsia dynasty, and the Titan Mangus had both attempted to reclaim this valley. All had perished here under its veiled gray sky. The original name of this land had been forgotten before the birth of my great-grandfather's great-grandfather. For as long as could be remembered, by those few who ventured to the edge of the world, this was Ananyas—the Valley of Lies. And, at the end of its trail, my destination, was the sanctuary of the damned.

A snow scorpion scurried onto the trail.

I reined the Appaloosa to stop and turned in the saddle toward a twisted, seared oak. On a thick bone-white branch, among the ice crystals, a solitary bright-green lobe blossomed. Twin stalks of grass spiraled up through the ash at the tree's base. I smiled. New Life. Satan's claim on this domain was in jeopardy. Someone had challenged his right of possession.

"Crusader."

I pivoted toward the feral voice, drawing the revolver pistol from under my long coat as I came about and spotted the creature squatting in the fork of a dwarf sequoia. She was four feet in height, I estimated, and the same in width. Violet-and-crimson hair, mangled and gnarled, curled down her spine to her massive scabrous tail. Ivory eyes peered at me from ragged slits in her bearded jackal-shaped face. Her hands and feet were talons. A spiked hauberk tunic cloaked her heavy breasts and broad hips.

She pointed at my pistol, amused. "I see that you still carry that useless weapon, Novarro. Do you not wonder why there is none other like it on the frontier? Because it is a graceless trifle. It is inaccurate and fouls the wind with its stench when fired. Cannon and musket have their place, I suppose, but a true gentleman—one of your reputation and accomplishments—should prefer the elegance of the blade. Or, at the very least, the bow."

"Let's see how useless it is," I replied, squaring the pistol on the bridge of her nose.

"Wait!" she cried, covering her face with her talon-hands. "I am the one who sent for you!"

I cocked the revolver's hammer, my hand steadfast. While in the railroad town of Zoya, near the border of the desolate Cimera Plains, a blind prophet had requested my audience. The woman, half-mad and sobbing, said that she had received a message for me from within Satan's flaming palace on the River Styx. She did not understand its meaning but she would pray to the archangels for my safety. The simple message was written in Pre-Thurian hieroglyphics. I understood, and that message had brought me to this valley.

THE PRIZE—LENORE. COME TO THE SANCTUARY AT ANANYAS AT ONCE.

The scorpion edged closer.

"Why have you summoned me here, K'Yur?" I asked.

K'Yur lowered her hands from her face. She smiled and her tail flicked from side-to-side. "You know who I am?"

"You're the succubus demon known as K'Yur. You are the most favored concubine in Satan's stable. I have seen Omusa's unfinished portrait of the Nine Rings of Hell. You are pictured devouring a fallen pilgrim as you perch as Satan's feet."

K'Yur hissed. "I hate that miserable scrawl. I look bloated and my hair is the wrong color. Most importantly, I should be at the Master's side not at his feet with the dragon-hounds."

"Iscariot is pictured on Satan's right side. My Lenore is shackled on his left."

"It should not be! Not even by error! The mortal bitch does not deserve that honor! It is mine!"

I squeezed the trigger.

The bullet notched the demon's ear and she shrieked, grasping the bloody nub and retreating behind the sequoia.

The scorpion bolted forward and the Appaloosa stomped it into the trail.

A triad of ice cobras rose from beneath the ash.

K'Yur peeked at me from behind the tree.

As I gripped the reins, the Appaloosa wiped the remains of the scorpion from its hoof on the ground.

"My sincerest apologies, Crusader," K'Yur whispered. "I will not defame the Lady Lenore again. To you, my word may be worthless, but, nonetheless, I give it to you in this matter."

I stared at the demon. Black blood bubbled from her maimed ear and webbed down her jaw into her thick beard. She fears me, I thought, stunned. It also appeared that I could injure her. This could not be. Was it an illusion? Hell's sleight-of-hand? Was it possible that in this valley she was unprotected? If so, why would Satan allow her to come here?

K'Yur edged back into the open.

"I'll ask only once more, demon," I said. "Why have you sent for me?"

"The Master sent me here to kneel before you," she replied. "Why?"

"The Master requests a service from you."

I laughed. The sound echoed, jarring and harsh, among the surrounding hills. The cobras recoiled into the ash. K'Yur stared, uncomprehending, at me.

"Satan wants a favor from me?" I said, smiling broadly. "Go back to Hell, demon. We've both wasted our time here."

K'Yur scampered further onto the branch. "Hear me out, Crusader. You have nothing to lose by listening to the request."

"And nothing to gain."

"That is not true." K'Yur curled her tail around the branch and lowered herself down. "If you accomplish the service requested, the Master will pay."

"There is only one thing I want from Satan and that, as we all know, I'll have to take from him."

"The archangels themselves cannot sever the covenant between my Master and your lady. They have negotiated on her behalf. More than once. But a covenant cannot be undone once sealed except by agreement from both parties. And that, *as we all know*, will never happen. So what can you hope to do? The quest you have undertaken these long years is pointless."

I holstered my pistol and reined the Appaloosa around.

K'Yur rose swiftly to her talon-feet. "The Master will pay for the service."

I nudged the Appaloosa with my spurs.

"The Master will reunite you and the Lady Lenore, in all her mortal glory, without hindrance of any kind or untold stipulation, for one hour."

I jerked toward the demon. "What?"

"Yes. For one hour, Crusader."

A deep chill pierced my heavy coat and collected around my shoulders. My days with Lenore, my bride, were the most favored of my short life. The greatest of poets could only sketch hollow verses about our brief time together. She loved me and I her. And it was enough. Then, one night, it ended. I was attacked and stabbed in the heart by a thief after my meager purse. As I lay dying, no doctor or shaman able to save me, my beloved Lenore entered into a covenant with Satan. My life for her soul and for me to live the remainder of my years without harm from Satan or his minions. Satan gazed upon my frail body, reviewed my undistinguished history, and agreed. I lived, and Lenore died and was taken to the fallen angel's palace on the River Styx.

"Why should I trust Satan to keep his pledge?" I asked. "He is a liar by word, deed, and omission."

K'Yur nodded, accepting. "The Master knew that would be your response. That is why he sent me. In this valley, for this time, I am mortal. If I die here, by your hand or by any other, my soul will not be returned to the Master's kingdom. If I die here, my soul will be dropped into the Abyss to fall forever through the darkness. That alone should eliminate any misgivings or fears you have."

"It doesn't."

K'Yur sighed. "Very well," she said. "I will bond myself to your service for your lifetime, Crusader. I will perform all requests without question. Even those requests that benefit...*Heaven*."

"Not interested."

The demon danced angrily on the branch. "You spurn me? I am K'Yur Xoth-Jana of the 8000 Pleasures. Mortals collapse in fleshly rapture at my mere touch. Kings and Queens have given their entire realms for one night with me. Paladins and nobles have sacrificed their good honor to lick the sweat from my feet. And you...you spurn me?"

"Without a second thought."

"Damn you," she said, growling. "Damn you for what you are forcing me to do now."

I slipped my hand back under my coat and around my pistol.

K'Yur, trembling, turned toward the east and lowered her head. "You may enter this valley at your convenience."

A circular rainbow bloomed in the veiled gray sky. K'Yur winced, shielding her eyes with her hands from the light. The Appaloosa's ears perked and it wheeled toward the eastern horizon. The rainbow's shadow sliced a path along the hills toward us. As I watched, the snow along the shadow's multi-hued course dissolved and, immediately, green clover rose from the scorched ground. In the center of the rainbow, in the form of a female, a vision crystallized.

K'Yur spat. "Crusader, this is—"

"—the Archangel Magdalene," I finished.

"Unfortunately," she said.

The archangel glided from the circular rainbow and down onto the clover path. As she moved toward us, her luminous white robe flowed around her. Doves and sparrows floated on the gentle breeze beside the archangel and a blue unicorn pranced along the clover behind her. K'Yur shivered. The archangel gazed at me and, as the Appaloosa kneeled on its forelegs and lowered its head, a peaceful warmth touched my flesh and caressed my bones.

"I regret, Patrick Novarro, most deeply, that you have been called here," she said, sorrow etching her porcelain features.

"How may I be of assistance?" I asked.

K'Yur bounced on the branch. "I want to tell."

"This is the Valley of Lies," the archangel replied. "In this matter, however, you must tell the truth."

K'Yur sighed. "I will."

"Proceed then."

I looked from K'Yur, perched in the scorched sequoia, to the archangel, then back at the demon.

"The sanctuary here has been seized," K'Yur said. "Three fanatics gained entry. They killed the keeper and a visitor. They captured another visitor and are planning to execute this man. We want to rescue him. Ready to go?"

"You're a wealth of details," I said. "Mortals may only enter a sanctuary of the damned by invitation or escort. How did these three get inside?"

K'Yur shook her head and waved her hands. "That's unimportant. The man must be saved."

"It was you, wasn't it? They tricked you and you took them inside. That's why Satan sent you to deal with me. You have to redeem yourself or go into the Abyss. Satan must be very pissed at you."

K'Yur crossed her arms over her chest. "I said it is unimportant how the three got inside the sanctuary. It remains that they did."

I looked up at the archangel. "Is it the wish of Heaven that this man be saved also?"

"Yes," replied the archangel, nodding.

I turned in my saddle and stared down the trail. I was confused. Demons were accepted into the sanctuary at Ananyas. Mortals who were damned, who were beyond redemption, were allowed entry. Here they could relax and feast and plan their next sacrilege without fear of harm from Heaven or Heaven's mortal soldiers. Upon occasion, a demon would use a sanctuary to help entice a mortal to swear allegiance to Hell. It was an unholy place and those who used its services deserved the fate of the damned. I applauded the three who had tricked their way inside and seized it. I was tempted to ride to the sanctuary and ask if I could assist them. Yet, I was being asked, by emissaries from Heaven and Hell to rescue one of the damned.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"Unimportant," replied Kyur. "But he must be saved."

I turned toward the archangel.

"The Exiled One," she said.

"The Exiled One," I repeated. "Cain?"

"Yes," replied the archangel. "It is written and so it is that the mark was put upon Cain so that all who encountered him would know him and shun him. He will wander the face of the earth until the end of time itself without home and hearth to give him comfort. It is also written that no harm shall befall him. For whosoever slays him shall reap the terrible vengeance of Heaven and their descendants shall be cursed for seven-hundred generations."

"He's one of the Master's favorites," added Kyur.

The archangel continued. "The three warriors, in their honest zeal to do Heaven's work, have forgotten this proclamation. They must be reminded. They must be stopped from proceeding on the course they have taken. This is the task we ask of you, Patrick Novarro."

I shifted uncomfortably in the saddle. "Who are these three?"

"I'll tell," Kyur said, bouncing on the sequoia branch. "The leader is Bowden the Elder from Cape Galatea. He drove the Gorgon witches from the mountain township of Bram and slew the Enyo bull of Alos."

"I know of him," I said. "He is praised for his unswerving devotion to Heaven and his protection of the weak and innocent."

Kyur frowned. "He's not the reasonable man I thought he was," she responded. "He's deceitful and conniving. The two mortals accompanying him are Pilar Molina from the abbey at Shankur and a Moor knight known only as the Centurion."

I looked at the archangel. She knew but remained silent. Perhaps Kyur knew also but, for the moment, the succubus demon was mute. Pilar was the middle daughter of John Gabriel Molina, my friend and the great gunsmith of Shankur. He had designed the revolver pistol that I carried. He presented it to me after I rescued his children from the Griffin Vampire. The last time I saw Pilar, she was a skinny towheaded girl of eight who captured river frogs that she sold to the village children for a penny and preferred brown-sugar pastries over all other treats. Now she was a grown woman that had abandoned her studies at the Shankur abbey to follow Bowden the Elder on his quest to the edge of the world.

"Is there anything else I should know?" I asked.

"No," answered Kyur quickly.

"Yes," the archangel said.

"Can't keep anything a secret with you around," Kyur said,



growling. "You don't have many friends, do you?" She huffed. "It's a minor complication, Novarro. Nothing to worry about. It is this. Because of the Lady Lenore's covenant, you are shielded by the Master's own oath. You may not be harmed by the Master or by any who serve him."

"I know this," I replied.

"The three who have seized Ananyas do not serve Hell. They can harm and kill you."

Ride away, I thought. That was the intelligent thing to do. Before the blind prophet in Zoya contacted me, before I came here, I had been searching the badlands of the Cimera Plains for a mage who rumor said possessed a map of Hell. I was hoping this map would show a back door into the Lower World. A door that I could use to sneak into Hell and find Lenore. I could, and should, return to that hunt.

"Archangel," I called.

"Yes, Patrick Novarro," she replied.

"If I'm killed, will you continue to negotiate on Lenore's behalf?"

"We shall never forsake her."

I twisted toward the demon. "All conditions and rewards mentioned are acceptable."

Kyur chuckled. "Done. Let's go then."

"Heaven rides with you, Patrick Novarro," the archangel said, bowing her head in prayer.

"I hope so," I whispered.

I reined the Appaloosa around as the archangel glided back toward the circular rainbow. Kyur jumped from the sequoia and bounded across the ice drifts to the trail. The demon stopped beside me, her tail swishing from side-to-side, and raised her talon-hand for me to lift her up.

"Don't need you with me," I said.

"The sanctuary has been seized but it hasn't fallen yet," replied Kyur. "You cannot enter without escort."

"You're lying."

"No need this time." She wiggled her talon-fingers at me.

I shook my head. "Shape-shift."

Kyur rocked back on her tail, pleased. "What outward appearance would you prefer. Crusader? Would a Horus falcon or a Fenrir wolf best suit your needs? Perhaps, a black Tamanous. No, no. I have the perfect exterior."

The demon's flesh ripped and pulsed, her bones cracked. Her scabrous body drew inward upon itself with her arms and legs and tail receding into her torso. A swirling, fire-tattooed cocoon engulfed her. Then, as quickly as it had appeared, the burning vapors vanished. Kyur's flesh had turned soft and silky, her eyes an enchanting blue-gray. Her height had increased by more than a foot and her width had decreased by three-quarters. Long, dark hair cascaded down her smooth shoulders. She was beautiful and enticing. She stood nude before me and, as glacial spears spiked my heart, raised her arms to me.

Kyur was the mirror image of Lenore.

"Weasel," I said tightly.

"What?"

"Change into a weasel," I replied. "Or stay behind."

Kyur smiled and tilted her head. "Perhaps I could retain this mortal form until we reach the sanctuary gate. It wouldn't be a hardship on me."

I spurred the Appaloosa and trotted down the trail.

A minute later, a brown short-legged weasel bounded across the ice bank beside me.

"Okay, okay," Kyur called. "I've done what you requested."

I reined the Appaloosa up. "Don't shape-shift into Lenore ever again. Got it?"

"I understand," Kyur replied, exasperated. "Mortals shouldn't be allowed to talk to archangels. The fun is sapped right out of them."

I swung down in the saddle and stretched out my hand. Kyur scampered up my arm to my shoulder, licked my cheek, then dropped into my lap. She giggled. I grabbed her by the scruff of her tiny neck and placed her on the other side of the saddle horn.

"Play dead," I ordered.

"Haven't done this game in a long time."

"Silence."

"Your lap was much more comfortable."

"Shut up."

Kyur collapsed onto the Appaloosa's neck. Her tiny tongue protruded from the corner of her mouth. The Appaloosa growled.

We moved down the trail toward the western rim of the valley. The winds whipped about us. Snow-ash furies danced across the landscape. As we continued onward, trees vanished completely from the surrounding hills and steaming geysers erupted from jagged crevices along the stream. The gray sky faded into twilight black. The Appaloosa trembled beneath me. Or was it I who was quivering? Kyur opened one eye and looked at me but remained silent. I stroked Lenore's cameo that hung on a thin chain around my neck.

Rounding a bend in the trail, we approached a bridge across the stream. Lightning flashed, like the fingers of a broken hand, across the sky. I heard the thunder call my name.

Two twin albino dragon-hounds rose up from their nests beside the bridge to meet us. Kyur whispered to them and the beasts withdrew. The Appaloosa trotted gingerly onto the bridge. I stared down at the bridge then at the paved road beyond. Both were constructed of a yellowish-white material that I didn't recognize. It wasn't stone or wood. It wasn't brick or petrified sod. It was... My stomach folded upon itself. Kyur smiled. The bridge and the road were paved with human bone.

I inhaled deeply. The road straightened and before us, shrouded in the mist, with walls and turrets rising thirty feet high, was our destination—the sanctuary of the damned at Ananyas. The walls were made of human skull and from the spiral turrets hung a dozen mummified corpses. Among the remains decorating the outside of the sanctuary would be the great warriors Loradas, Quon, and Mangus. I wondered if I had earned a place beside them or if I would be just more raw material for the road.

Beyond the sanctuary, I realized, was nothing. No hills or flatlands, no forest or lake. Nothing. We had come to the edge of the world.

The gates of the sanctuary opened and, from inside, appeared a giant riding a mammoth white stallion. I stared in awe and disbelief. The rider wore no armor except an iron breastplate imprinted with the insignia of a Moor dynasty. He was a muscular, bull-shouldered man who easily stood eight feet in height if not more. In one gloved hand he held a broad sword and in the other an axe. As raised the weapons above



his head, I saw that he had a leather patch over his right eye and a trio of scars that slashed across his face from cheek to cheek.

"I am Centurion," he called.

"I'm Patrick Novarro of Valon," I answered. "I've come in peace at the behest of the Archangel Magdalene."

"Demon liar! You are a spawn of Satan and I will send you back to Hell where you belong!" He spurred the stallion and the horse bolted into full gallop.

Damn. As I whipped the Appaloosa about, I felt its hooves slipping on the bone road, and I heard K'Yur shriek as she grabbed for the saddle horn with her weasel-paws—missed—and tumbled to the ground. She was on her own. I raced the Appaloosa toward the bridge. Behind us, the pounding hooves of the Centurion's mammoth stallion echoed like cannon fire. I glanced back over my shoulder, and saw K'Yur cover her weasel head. The Centurion rode over her without pause.

At the bridge, the twin dragon-hounds jumped up from their nests and blocked the road. One roared and the other spit a plume of flame into the air.

I yanked hard on the reins and the Appaloosa skidded to a stop, nearly going down. I leaped from the saddle, throwing off my coat and drawing my revolver pistol, and stepped to the middle of the road. Cocking the hammer, inhaling and holding the breath, I aimed my pistol and fired. The bullet whizzed past the stallion's ear. Nothing, no effect. The animal had been trained for battle. The Centurion cocked his arm holding the ax as he thundered closer. I fired again. The bullet thudded off the Centurion's breastplate. He swung the ax over his head and sailed it at me.

"Forgive me," I whispered.

The ax blade sliced into the road beside my boot. I gripped my pistol double fisted, aimed, and fired. The bullet smashed into the Centurion's patched eye. He fell sideways, his left foot tangled in the stirrup. The mammoth stallion galloped past me and onto the bridge, dragging its rider behind it. The dragon-hounds retreated and allowed the stallion to cross.

"You left me!" snapped K'Yur, scurrying to my side.

"What's your point?" I asked, grabbing up my coat. K'Yur frowned. "None, I guess. One down."

I walked over to the Appaloosa and ran my hand down its legs. It was unhurt. Good. Silently, I slipped my coat on and mounted. As I studied the sanctuary once again, I reloaded the pistol.

K'Yur hopped onto my boot and scampered back to the saddle horn. "Are you feeling sorry for the Centurion?"

"He didn't deserve this fate."

"The Centurion was a murderer. Four score had fallen under his blade. He looted the burial caverns at Laguna Ness. His sentence in Hell was determined long ago by his own hand."

"If his fate was already sealed, then why was he here?"

K'Yur giggled. "He was seeking redemption," she replied. "His wife and child are quarantined at the leper colony on Xadagus. He was hoping that his actions would earn them some comfort in their miserable existence. The Centurion was a fool."

I spurred the Appaloosa forward. K'Yur draped herself across the horse's neck again. We trotted toward the open gates of the sanctuary. Ghosts rose up from the fields on both

sides of the bone road to watch us. Some were praying, others chanted. But no one, mortal or otherwise, appeared at the gate or upon the walls. The winds ceased as we moved into the shadow of the sanctuary.

"Is Cain still alive?" I asked quietly.

K'Yur sniffed the air. "Yes."

A thousand eyeless skulls studied us as we rode through the arched gateway and into the sanctuary courtyard. The square was deserted except for the bodies of two demons that lay sprawled near the fountain. They must have been the keeper and the visitor that K'Yur had spoke of. The ones that Bowden the Elder and his companions had killed when they seized the sanctuary. Each was staked through the heart and their heads removed.

Past the fountain, with his arms shackled to a hitching post, was a mortal man. He slowly raised his head and looked at me. A soul-chilling shudder pierced my body.

Cain—the Exiled One.

As I dismounted, I could feel more eyes watching me. Someone was up high on the catwalk of the rear wall. And another was inside the lodge directly behind Cain. I removed my coat and hung it across my saddle. I slipped a knife from the coat pocket then stepped away from the Appaloosa.

"Show yourselves," I called. "You know me, Pilar. Your father and I are old friends. I'm Patrick Novarro of Valon. The Archangel Magdalene has asked me to speak to you."

A tall gray-bearded man, wearing a dark amber cloak, stepped from the shadows of the rear turret and moved along the catwalk. He tugged his cloak back and revealed two wheel-lock pistols holstered on his hip. "You say you're the Crusader and the Archangel Magdalene has sent you to us."

"Yes," I replied, looking up.

"Satan can quote holy verses if it suits his needs," Bowden said flatly.

"He's Patrick Novarro," a woman announced, stepping from the lodge doorway. "I know him, Bowden, from when I was a child."

I pivoted toward the lodge. Pilar had become a handsome, lean woman. As she walked toward Cain and the hitching post, with a dagger in her fist, I could see the Molina gait in her stride. This was the young towheaded girl who had rewarded me with her favorite bullfrog after I rescued her and her siblings from the Griffin Vampire. She had grown into womanhood and joined the order of the abbey at Shankur. The abbey was well known for offering shelter to all that knocked upon its door. Not a single individual, regardless of their sins, was every turned away.

"What he once was," Bowden said, "he is no longer. He has been corrupted. He is in league with Satan."

"No," replied Pilar, stopping behind Cain. "He would not."

Bowden stared down at me. "Ask him if he killed the Centurion?"

"I confess," I said. From the corner of my eye, I spotted K'Yur—who had shifted into a python—slithering up the stone steps to the catwalk. "The Centurion attacked and left me only two choices—to kill or to die. I wish he had given me a third option."

"You'll take his place, or course," Pilar said, nodding. "With you at our side, Satan will never reclaim this valley."

I pointed at Cain. "He must be released."

"No," cried Bowden. "He is the *first* murderer. As it is written, eye for eye and blood for blood. He shall forfeit his own life for the one he took. You know how many others have followed in his shadow. He must be punished. He will be a warning to those who break Heaven's laws. The angels will sing our praises for what we do here."

"If that is so, then why have you waited?"

Bowden twisted in one direction then in the other. I glanced at Pilar. She stared at the dagger in her hand.

"Whether this valley remains in Satan's dominion or not depends on what you do now," I said. "If you execute him, you'll undo all that you've accomplished and curse yourself and your descendants for the next seven-hundred generations."

"He must reap the harvest he has sown," cried Bowden.

"He has already been sentenced," I yelled. "He is despised and shunned as he should be. He lost his family in the Year of the Flood. For the remainder of his days, he shall wander alone and find no peace or comfort anywhere. It isn't your place or mine to change that judgement."

"What about the ones who follow his path?"

"They shall be despised and shunned also and *they* will be judged and sentenced by their fellow man as deemed fit by their deeds."

Bowden covered his face with his hands and screamed in rage and frustration. Pilar steadied herself against the hitching post. Cain lowered his head. Kyur slipped onto the catwalk.

"You have seized this sanctuary and destroyed its keeper," I continued. "It should have collapsed into dust. Why hasn't it?"

"Give us strength to do what must be done, Pilar," said Bowden. "Destroy him!"

I whipped about, toward Pilar and Cain, and I saw Pilar—her eyes ablaze—raise the dagger in both fists above her head, and as my hand grabbed my revolver, I heard a wheel-lock pistol fire. The bullet flared across my side and I fell, twisting, to the ground. Up on the catwalk, Bowden aimed his second pistol and Kyur launched herself toward him, shifting from python to jaguar in mid-leap. She slammed into Bowden and he sailed backwards, crashing into the sanctuary wall and flipping over the side, off the edge of the world. His scream echoed in my ears as I drew my revolver and rolled toward the hitching post.

Pilar was faster than I was. Much faster. She stabbed down and the dagger sliced the bonds holding Cain's left arm.

I lowered the revolver. Pilar, tears glistening on her cheeks, cut the remaining bonds. Then she tossed the dagger aside and dropped to her knees in prayer.

Cain rubbed his arms and, slowly, stood up on his feet.

The veiled sky buckled and lightning flashed, near blinding, across the entire horizon. Then, a moment later, the sky was blue and the sanctuary around us was gone as if it had never been. The fields and hills bloomed with green grass and bright flowers. The breeze was warm and inviting.

Cain walked toward me. I rose up, clutching the wound at my side. He looked at me with haunted and hollow eyes. On his forehead, for all to see, was the mark. The mark of the damned:



Neither he nor I said a word, neither made a gesture. We only stood there, staring at one another, for a long moment. Then he turned and headed down the road and out of the valley. As far as I know, shunned and despised, he still wanders the earth alone.

Kyur, shifted back into her original form, waddled over to me. She poked at my wound. "Just a crease. You'll survive."

"You saved my life, demon."

"No," she answered quickly. "The first shot was for you. The second was for Cain. I let him fire the first round before I attacked."

"Uh-huh."

Kyur pointed at a magnificent oak down near the stream. "All rewards will be fulfilled. When the sun reaches its apex, the Lady Lenore, in all her mortal glory, without hindrance of any kind or untold stipulation, will meet you there. You have one hour. Not a moment longer?"

"And the other reward?"

"What other reward?"

I smiled. "Your services bonded to me for my lifetime. All requests performed without question."

"Oh, yes," she said, giggling. "That, too, Crusader. I will administer pleasures to you that few mortals have ever known."

I turned toward Pilar. "First, I want you to escort her back to the abbey. You will protect her from all harm during the trip. You will not attempt to seduce or beguile her in any way."

Kyur frowned. "That will be a boring journey. But it will be done as you've instructed. No need to tell me where to find you after, I'll know."

"Don't find me," I said, walking toward the Appaloosa.

"Why?" Kyur asked uneasily.

"Go from the abbey to Xadagus."

"The leper colony?"

"Yes," I mounted the Appaloosa slowly. "For my lifetime, you will serve the inhabitants there. You will treat them with kindness and a gentle hand. You will ease their pain and suffering. You won't harm them or jeopardize their souls in any manner. You will pay special attention to the Centurion's wife and child."

"I won't do it!" Kyur stomped her talon-feet. "You can't make me do this despicable thing!"

I reined the Appaloosa toward the stream.

"I won't! I won't! I won't!"

I glanced back at Pilar, still deep in prayer, then rode toward the oak.

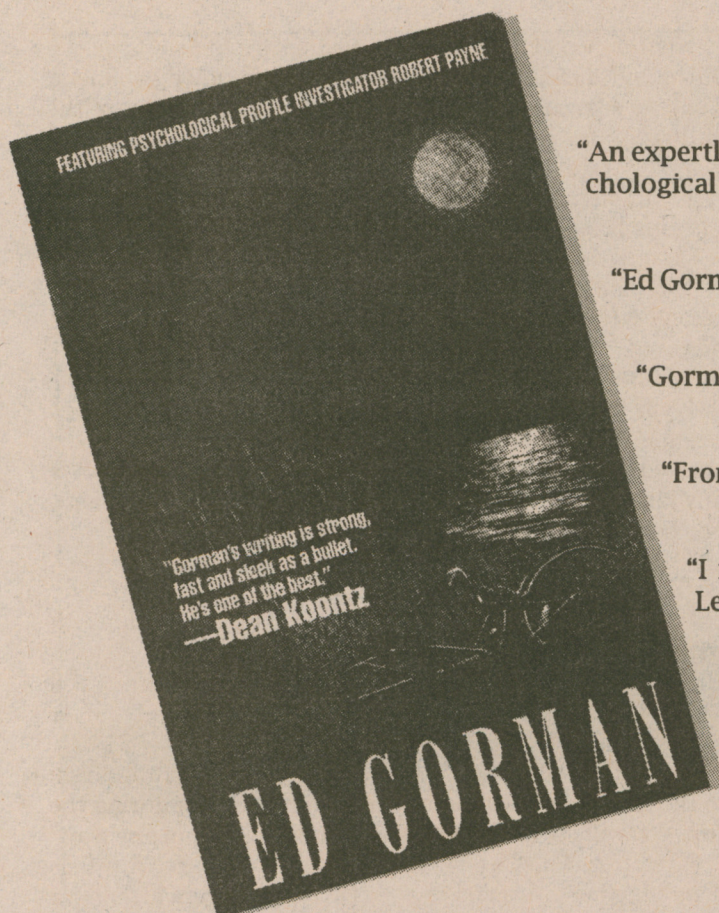
"I won't!" Kyur shrieked.

Later, in the inns and taverns along the border, I heard the story of a woman known only as K who had arrived unannounced at Xadagus. It wasn't known where she had come from or how she had received her training in the medical arts. But she was blessed for her kind and gentle work among the inhabitants at the colony.

I dismounted beside the huge, green oak near the stream and turned the Appaloosa free to graze. I bandaged my side, I waited for Lenore to arrive. I drank the cool water from the stream, I waited for Lenore to arrive. I scanned the lush landscape of the valley. I waited for Lenore to arrive.

At the sun's height, she came as promised without hindrance of any kind or untold stipulation.

The hour was glorious.



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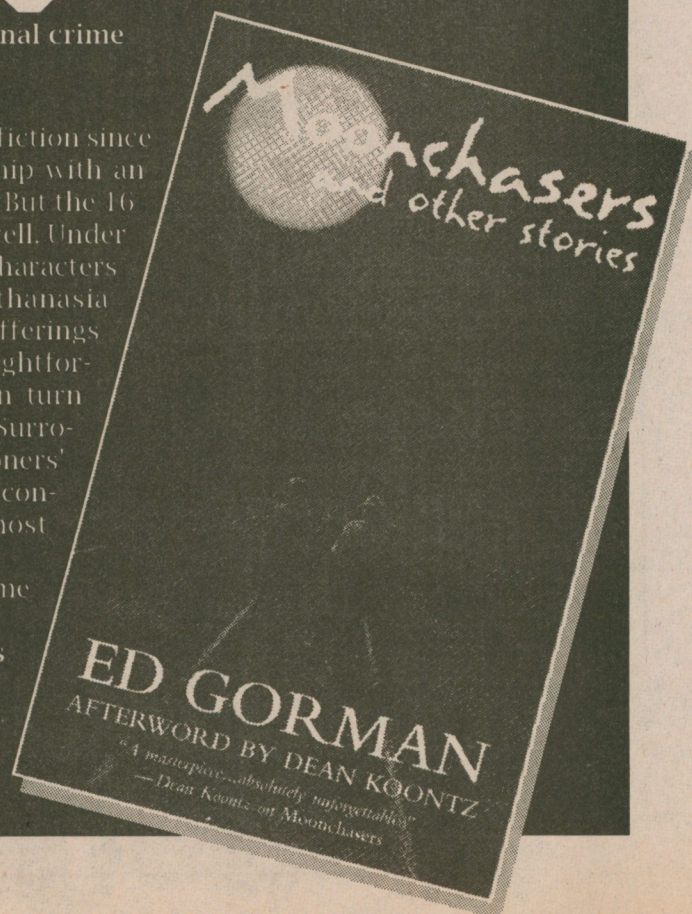
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AFTERWORD BY DEAN KOONTZ

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# Playing Through

by Ralph Gamelli



Illustrated by David J. Grilla

Mr. Wells always woke early on the weekend, arriving at Shaker Farms Country Club while the sun still hung low in the sky and the fairways still glistened with dew. He was accustomed to waking to a silent house, his bedroom just beginning to gray with the new dawn, his wife laying silent and undisturbed beside him. In these ways, this Saturday morning was no different than any other. The only way it was different was that Mr. Wells had not expected to wake up at all.

He swung his feet onto the floor and sat stiffly at the edge of the bed. He remained like this for a time, unmoving, expressionless, until abruptly doubling over as though struck by an unseen fist, tears coursing down his face. But the tears ceased as something in Mr. Wells' mind shifted.

He looked over his shoulder at his wife, whose pillow hosted a large stain. In the grayish light, Mr. Wells decided it was only a shadow. "Don't get up, honey. I'll fix some breakfast and be off to the club."

With an efficiency developed by years of weekend routine, Mr. Wells showered and dressed without waking either his wife or his son. In the kitchen, he sat down to some cold cereal, the newspaper folded on the table near his elbow. It was two days old now and there would be no others delivered. Mr. Wells glanced at the bold headline and another tear formed in his eye. He brushed it away quickly. Like the paper, no others would follow it.

Mr. Wells finished his breakfast, pausing once or twice between spoonfuls when the cough he'd gone to bed with last night returned, and before leaving the house poked his head into his son's room. Douglas was only nine, but Mr. Wells looked forward to the day when they boy would be old enough to take a caddying job at the club. They would spend the afternoons with the rest of Mr. Wells' foursome, and Mr. Wells would teach him club selection and how to read the green and hit out of sand traps.

The stain on his son's pillow was even larger than his wife's, but Mr. Wells did not notice it. He smiled at the thought of the two of them walking the course together someday, eased the door shut so as not to wake him, and went out to the garage to fetch his golf bag.

The bag was in the corner near Mr. Wells' workbench. A plaque that his wife had bought hung on the wall beside his tools. Below a colorful cartoon of a golfer trudging his way through gusting, knee-deep snow, it read:

In the blistering heat he refuses to sweat,  
Beneath thundering rain clouds he doesn't get wet,  
Through the mud & the chill & the wind & the sleet,  
There isn't a foe that the golfer can't beat.

She had considered the plaque quite an appropriate gift for her husband, as she constantly marveled at his refusal to let the elements interfere with his beloved game. She didn't know if it was hardness or simple denial, but of all the creatures on earth, she claimed that only the die-hard golfer was so adept at ignoring what his senses told him.

Mr. Wells put his clubs in the trunk of his car alongside his spikes and backed out of the garage. He slowed down when forced to weave around the vehicles that peppered the streets at odd angles, but otherwise he encountered no traffic. He grinned at the people sleeping peacefully in their sedans and mini-vans and sports cars and pulled up to the gas pump of a convenience store.

The store's windows were shattered, the floor littered with merchandise and a pair of legs that extended past one aisle near the back of the store. It took Mr. Wells several minutes to locate the switch for the gas pumps. The cash register had been overturned, the drawer emptied. Mr. Wells placed two bills on the counter and filled his tank with fifteen dollars of regular unleaded.

He drove on.

The only radio stations he could pick up were broadcasting a high-pitched emergency signal. Mr. Wells was soon whistling along with it, although his whistling was occasionally interrupted by brief coughing spasms. As he slowed to pass a car with its door protruding into his lane, he heard a hoarse shout and pulled over to the side of the road. He walked back to the car and found a young woman slumped behind the wheel, her nose bleeding, and the front of her blouse and the steering column dripping with vomit.

"Why did they do it?" she moaned. A single drop of blood crept down the side of her nose like a tear.

Mr. Wells looked for the car that had caused the accident, but it had obviously fled the scene. "You're going to be all right," he assured her. "You weren't wearing your seat belt were you?"

"What could they hope to gain?" She grasped his sleeve feebly, a thick trail of blood trickling from the corner of her mouth. "We must have retaliated."

Mr. Wells patted her hand. "Try to stay calm, miss. You might be in shock. I'm sure someone must have called an ambulance by now." Blood spilled from her ear. "I really wish you'd had your seat belt on."

She stared at Mr. Wells uncomprehendingly, then laughed so explosively that she patterned the windshield with red droplets. The trickle at her mouth turned into a stream and her hand slid off Mr. Wells' sleeve as she toppled over into the passenger seat.

"Yes, just lie down and rest until the ambulance comes. You don't want to make it any worse by panicking." Mr. Wells hated to leave the scene of an accident, but he hadn't actually been a witness and he was sure help would arrive any moment.

It was only two more miles to Shaker Farms. Mr. Wells parked near the clubhouse, retrieved his clubs from the trunk and slipped into his spikes. They made their familiar crunching sound as he crossed the empty parking lot. Mr. Wells loved the sound his spikes made on the parking lot and on the paved cart paths that wound through the course like miniature country roads.

It was early—the sun low in the sky, the fairways glistening with dew — but it was surprising nonetheless to find things so deserted. The practice green was unoccupied, the door to the clubhouse locked. Mr. Wells shrugged and decided to play a few holes and check back a little later, when he was sure to find enough club members to make a foursome.

"Mr. Wells!"

He paused on his way to the first tee. Randy Donovan, his frequent caddie, pedaled furiously past the clubhouse on his ten-speed. He was a freshman who lived around the corner and spent his summers caddying, like Mr. Wells' son would someday. He jettisoned the bike and rushed up to Mr. Wells on rubbery legs.

"They're dead, Mr. Wells. My mother and father. My sister, everyone." He coughed several times, wiping the bloody spittle from his lips.

"You must have been having a nightmare, Randy. My Douglas has them all the time. It's just early. Everyone's sleeping in."

"Your car was the first to pass my house since yesterday afternoon. I hoped you would come here."

"It's the weekend, isn't it?" Mr. Wells grinned.

"We're the last ones. They all got sick and died. And now I'm sick, too."

"There must be a bug going around. I'm coming down with a bit of a cough myself, but I'm not about to let it slow me down. What do you say we get in a few practice holes before the others get here?" He handed Randy his clubs.

"Mr. Wells?" Randy looked around helplessly but saw no choice but to sling the bag over his shoulder and join Mr. Wells on the first tee.

Mr. Wells sliced his drive into the right rough.

"What are we going to do, Mr. Wells?"

"Don't worry, Randy. I think I can still reach the green in two."

Randy obligingly followed Mr. Wells off the tee. He handed Mr. Wells the seven-iron when he asked for it. Mr. Wells swung hard out of the rough. Weeds and long blades of grass sprang into the air and Mr. Wells' ball fell just short of the green.

"Mr. Wells, do you think the hospitals are still running?" But Mr. Wells was already on his way to the green. Randy rubbed his shirt sleeve across his bloody upper lip and strove to keep pace, his legs beginning to tremble more under the weight of the bag.

"Pitching wedge, please." Mr. Wells took the club, swung down softly on the ball and lofted it onto the

green, fifteen feet from the pin. Soon he was crouching down to line up his par putt. "What do you think? Breaks to the left half a foot or so?"

Randy was too busy vomiting into the greenside bunker to respond.

Mr. Wells leaned over his putter, sweeping the head back and forth until he got just the right feel. "Always keep your wrists stiff during the putting stroke," he advised. "A smooth, steady pivoting motion, remembering to accelerate through the ball."

Mr. Wells missed his par putt.

Randy picked himself up, desperate not to lose contact with Mr. Wells, who hit a perfect three-wood off the second tee. Randy dropped the club as he tried to place it back in the bag but felt too dizzy to bend over and pick it up. He shambled mindlessly after Mr. Wells.

"Think I'll go with the six-iron from here," Mr. Wells said, plucking a few blades of grass and studying which way the breeze carried them.

Randy swayed on his feet, unresponsive, so Mr. Wells found the club himself, took a practice swing, then landed the ball on the back of the green.

"I can't see, Mr. Wells." Blood was pooling in Randy's eyes, flowing freely from his nose and ears. "I don't feel good." He lay on his back on the short, soft fairway grass.

Mr. Wells knelt over him, stroking his brow. "That's it. Lie down and go to sleep. You'll be as good as new in the morning, just like Mommy. You'll see. Maybe I'll even take you out onto the course tomorrow and start teaching you the game. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Randy Donovan's chest rose in rapid, shallow movements. A thin red bubble grew between his lips like a child's party balloon. He tried to talk but only produced a gurgling sound as the blood poured into his lungs.

"Goodnight, Douglas."



Mr. Wells pushed his birdie putt to the right, but sunk the following three-footer for par.

As he stepped from the green the still, morning air was filled with the rising sound of an approaching engine. A military helicopter cleared a cluster of treetops, circled vulture-like over Mr. Wells, and set down on the wide stretch of grass between the second green and third tee. The air displaced from its decelerating blades buffeted Mr. Wells like a stiff autumn wind.

Three men in bright biohazard suits dismounted from the main body of the helicopter, two of them approaching Mr. Wells while the other jogged over to the second fairway.

"Are there any more of you around?" the officer in charge asked Mr. Wells. He had waited a few moments for the engine to quiet enough so that his voice, coming through a tiny microphone on his helmet, would be heard.

"No, I'm early. Everyone else is sleeping in."

"You're the first one we've been able to find," the officer said. He wore a pistol on his hip, the other held a rifle. "Have you developed any symptoms?"

"Do you think he may be immune, sir?" the rifle bearer said. "Maybe there's hope for a vaccine after all."

The other waved him off. "How do you feel, sir?"

Mr. Wells grinned at them dreamily as the artificial gale tossed his hair about his head. "Fine. Fine. I just made par."

The two men exchanged glances.

"Sir, why are you out here at a time like this?"

Mr. Wells' grin expanded. "I know what you're thinking. It's too windy to play. But wind or heat or..." he bent over as his morning cereal splashed onto his spikes. "...rain or mud or sleet, there isn't a foe the golfer can't beat."

"He's delirious, sir. Should I put him out of his misery?"

"Let him be."

The third member of their party was back. The officer turned to him. The man shook his head.

Mr. Wells looked off in the direction from which the man had returned. "He'll be all right in the morning. I'll take him out on the course with me."

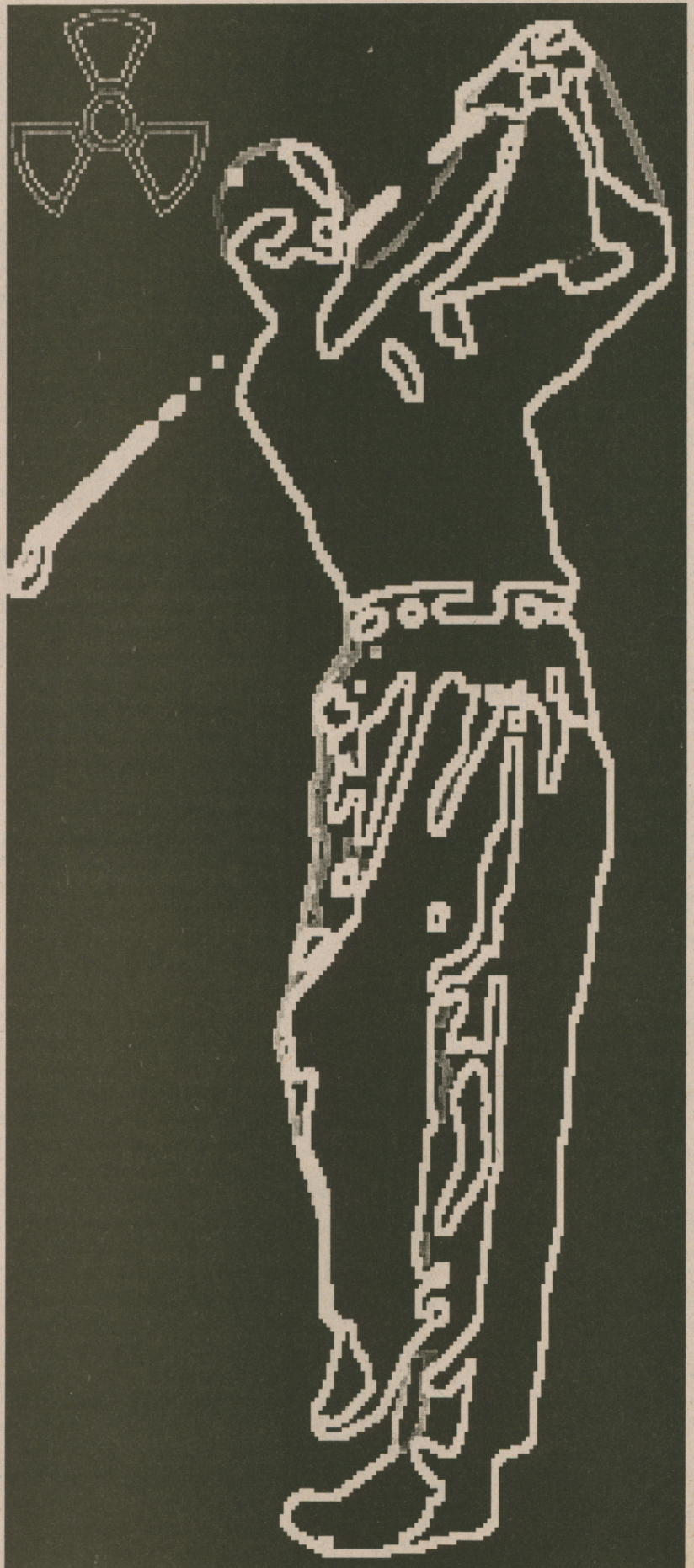
The officer nodded. "I'm sure he'd like that."

Mr. Wells looked past them to the third tee. "Do you mind if I play through? I'd like to get in another hole or two before my foursome arrives."

"Not at all." The officer motioned to the others. "All right, back in the chopper."

The blades spun faster and louder again. The helicopter rose and sped off, its roar diminishing.

Mr. Wells hit a decent drive, shouldered his bag and caught himself watching the helicopter shrink into the distance, its engine finally swallowed by the returning silence. Despite his resolve, he felt his eyes well up again. Mr. Wells brushed the blood from them and started after his ball.







An author of considerable note, David hails from Eugene, Oregon. His story "Tooth Or Consequences" also appeared in The Best of Pirate Writings.

# the clandestine phallusy

by David Bischoff Illustrated by David J. Grilla

I pulled out of the drive-in window of the Gary, Indiana fast food joint and parked. As I ate my Double Cheezy Whammyburger, secret sauce wasn't the only mystery on my mind.

A Manuscript, Gretchen had said.

An ancient document.

Filled with the secrets of life.

As a journalist and a seeker of truth, I figured this could be just up my alley. The end of the Millennium was coming. People were searching. I know. I've seen the Want Ads.

She entered my rented, out of breath, blond hair smelling of life and perfume, big chest heaving.

"Hurry. Let's get out of here. I'm being pursued."

As we drove in the direction she directed, I said, "What's happening?"

"It's just so exciting," she said. "Tonight's the night! Doctor Adamson is translating!"

That sounded very positive.

"Who was chasing you?"

"Ministers. Rabbis. Elementary school teachers. People who want to suppress the Manuscript. Hurry. Turn here. I'll take you out to the dig."

As we sped off into the big Midwestern night, the smell of manure wafting over endless fields, she explained.

"A farmer was digging a well. He found a hermetically sealed mayonnaise jar, with a message in Sanskrit. He had it translated. It said, 'Dig Deeper'."

Gretchen is a philosophy instructor at the Gary Indiana Community College. She has no academic degree, however her department is very philosophical on that subject.

"We got a crew of archaeologists and a bigger backhoe. We found *another* hermetically sealed mayonnaise jar. We dated it. It was from 69 B.C."

I was stunned. That was before Christ was born! The implications were astounding! Why, this could be the greatest American spiritual archeology discovery since Marconi showed Joseph Smith those gold tablets and the Moron religion was born! (Note to fact checker: check these facts.)

"Dr. Adamson says that the Manuscript contains three insights into the very nature of reality. Or something like that. He had to go back and get his Sanskrit dictionary."

We pulled up to a farmhouse, parked, and Gretchen led me inside. Sitting at a table was a bearded man with thick glasses, a magnifying glass and big book labeled *Sanskrit Made Easy*. In front of him was a large piece of yellow paper, with writing scribbled on it.

"Who's this?" the man demanded hoarsely.

"It's my journalist friend and a seeker of truth."

"Oh of course. Come and sit down. I am finished with the translation of the First Insight. Let me just get my phrasing correct."

We sat down and Gretchen explained that the Doctor had already translated the title of the manuscript. It read:

THE UNIVERSE'S ATTITUDE TOWARD ITS DENIZENS

"Wow. I see what you mean," I said. "This could spell it all out!"

"Let's hope so. Professor, what have you got?"

Deep eyes peered up at us. "Astounding." He began to read.

"The First Insight is: 'The Universe is a Joke.'"

The cosmic paradigm seemed to shift around me.

"Profound," I said.

"Yes," said Gretchen, blinking her baby blues. "Oh my! Yes of course. A juxtaposition of incongruities! *Precisely*. Great wisdom."

We talked excitedly as the Professor scribbled madly with his magic marker, tongue poking out the side of his mouth in pure concentration.

"What a coincidence!" I said. "I believe I've heard that before."

Gretchen raised an exquisite eyebrow and nodded sagely. "Yes. And you *know* what coincidences mean, don't you?"

"The Dawn of a New Age," I said. "Synchronicity. People asking themselves, Why? To say nothing of Who, What, Where and When."

Her breasts heaved with emotion and she gazed longingly at me. "Yes. Yes. Oh yes!"

Amazing. She was attracted to me, and I felt attracted to her.

Another coincidence!

Before we could have simultaneous coincidences again, however, Professor Adamson separated us.

"I have the Second Insight! And it is more astounding than the first." He put his glasses on again. "I shall start at the beginning again. 'The Universe's Attitude toward its Denizens. One: The Universe is a Joke.'" He paused dramatically. "Two: Fuck 'Em if they can't take a joke."

I could feel the very warp and woof of the collective unconscious waffle. Shivers ran down my spine. Pure excitement shown in Gretchen's eyes.

"There's so much Energy in those words!" she said.

"I think I understand." I said. "The Universe is saying that we, as its children, must find the joy and childlike playfulness in its fields, or, like Adam and Eve, we will be cast out of the Garden of Life into the Outer Darkness of Doubt, Insecurity, Death and Taxes."

Professor Adamson scratched his head. "Well. Whatever." He set to work on his translation.

Gretchen and I gazed at one another. I could feel

our energies rejoicing together. Blending. Cavorting. Caressing. Licking. Fondling. Sucking. Giving freely of essences, rather than stealing.

Afterwards, I offered her a cigarette. She accepted.

"Yes. There it is." The Professor finished scribbling and looked up at us, accomplishment shining in his face...and something more. "I have the Third and Final Insight."

Gretchen held my hand, and I thought, What a wonderful coincidence that we humans all have hands!

"THE UNIVERSE'S ATTITUDE TOWARD ITS DENIZENS" read Professor Adamson. "One: The Universe is a joke."

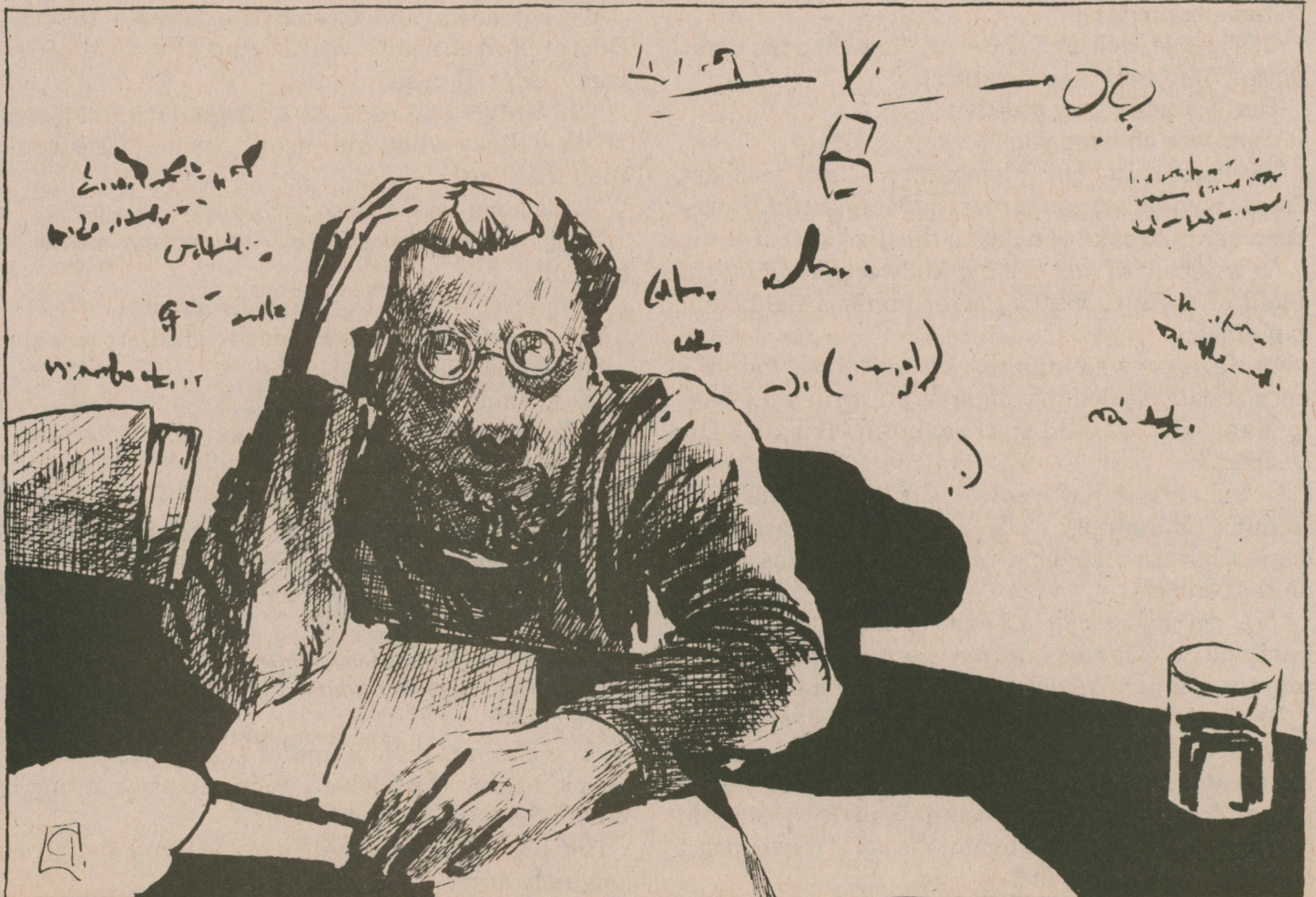
"Two: Fuck 'Em if they can't take a joke."

He took a drink of water.

"Please," cried Gretchen. "Don't keep us in suspense!"

"Three," quoted the Professor. "Hell. Fuck 'Em Anyway."

And, deep in my heart of hearts, I heard a tiny "Amen."



Continued from page 33

starting point of reference, except the assumption that our sun appeared. Complex 3-D computer imaging programs were decades away, so any three dimensional reproduction of the star map would have to be done painstakingly by hand.

Enter Marjorie Fish, a third grade schoolteacher from Oak Harbor, Ohio. Intrigued by the Hills' abduction case, Fish decided to try to make sense of the map. Although a member of MENSA, Fish was not an astronomy expert. [She had only one college astronomy course to her name.] But she took it upon herself to attempt to recreate the star map in its original three dimensional glory.

Using beads tied to a three foot square wooden cube to represent the stars, Fish decided to map out all the stars within a 32.6 light-year radius from our sun. This was easier said than done. Back in the 1960s, precise data on stars' positions were far from readily available. After trying countless local, state, and university libraries, Fish hit a road block. The books that held the data were either unavailable or available only on a "need to know" basis.

Eventually in 1968, a librarian at the Ohio State University's Perkins Observatory took pity upon her and allowed her to copy the star data she needed. But this was a blessing in disguise for Marjorie Fish, for she had literally thousands and thousands of stars to choose from. After mapping only a mere 256 stars, she compared it to Betty Hill's drawing. The elusive arrangement of stars failed to reveal itself in the cube, no matter at what angle Fish viewed it.

Soon, she realized an easier way to develop the map. Until then Fish had been building the star map with every known star in the sky. It was suddenly clear that this was not the logical approach. If the map were, in fact, a trade route for an alien civilization, it would make sense that they would be only visiting worlds that could support life—worlds like their own. Plus, if they were visiting Earth, she could assume that Earth was at least similar to their home planet.

Fish discarded any data for stars that would have no Earth-like planets. That meant young, hot stars could be discarded, for any planets orbiting these stars would have a molten surface. Unstable stars with variable heat fluctuations were a no-go, for such extreme changes in temperature would either scorch or freeze any potential life. Massive red giants were too cool. Fast-spinning stars probably didn't have planets. And binary stars (two stars in close proximity that orbit each other)

would assault any surrounding planets with lethal temperatures extremes and unstable gravitational fields.

After paring down the list, Fish found herself with only 62 stars left. Each one was of similar temperature, brightness, and age of our own sun. Fish quickly went to work, mapping these stars. Once they were in place, she moved around the model with Betty Hill's drawing as a reference. Miraculously, a group of nine stars suddenly appeared in the same formation as was shown on the Hill map. The stars identified were our sun, Alpha Mensae, Tau Ceti, 82 Eridani, 107 Piscium, 54 Piscium, Gliese 67, and Zeta 1 and Zeta 2 Reticuli.

The most important stars on this map were Zeta 1 and 2 Reticuli, a double star system only visible from the Earth's southern hemisphere in the constellation Reticulum. According to Betty's map, Zeta 2 Reticuli was identified as the visitors' home world.

Searching for support of her amazing discovery, Fish took her model to Dr. Walter Mitchell, Jr. of the Ohio State University's Solar Lab. She didn't tell Dr. Mitchell the origin of the map, but instead asked him to endorse the accuracy of her interpretation of the stellar cartography. Instead of a scathing criticism, Dr. Mitchell returned a respectful note, which said, "Your offer to tidy up the model is most welcome, though our class has already been intrigued by one look at it.... [E]ven if it may have a few imperfections (which I have not yet found, by the way)..."

Upon publication of Fish's discoveries, she instantly came under attack by skeptics and the scientific community in general. The biggest hole that was punched into the star map was new evidence in 1981 that showed Zeta 2 Reticuli was a binary star. For years, the scientific establishment used this excuse to debunk the Hill/Fish star map. After all, this violated one of the original criteria for Fish's choice of stars to map. However, in 1987, new research was done on the Zeta Reticuli star system, revealing that Zeta 2 Reticuli was in fact not binary after all. (For details, see *Astronomy and Astrophysics*, vol. 177, pp. 204-216.)

It turns out that Betty Hill was right, after all.

This was not the first time Betty's star map challenged known science and won. When Fish developed her three dimensional model, a small group of three stars existed in the corner that she couldn't identify from the known star lists of the day. However, we must remember that the sky has an awful lot of stars. Even today, we have not catalogued all of them. At the time Fish built her model, even fewer had been identified and catalogued. It turns out that the three phantom stars

in the corner of Betty's map *did* exist—only they were not discovered until 1969, five years after she drew the map.

Betty Hill was right again.

The most recent turn of events with Zeta 2 Reticuli is the recent discovery of a planet orbiting the star. On September 20, 1996 [exactly 35 years after the Hills' abduction], the Extra Solar Planets Encyclopedia announced a discovery of a Jupiter-sized planet orbiting Zeta 2 Reticuli. [It is curious to note that within four days of publishing this data on the Internet, the Extra Solar Planets Encyclopedia rescinded this finding with a flimsy excuse of misinterpreted data.]

The Zeta 2 Reticuli planet was found at an orbit of 0.14 AU—with one AU, or astronomical unit, equal to the distance between Earth and our sun. At this distance, this planet's surface would be hot enough to melt lead—not exactly a candidate for potential life. However, where there is one planet, there are probably more.

Bode's Law, a law of planetary mechanics, states that planets form approximately twice as far from their sun as their nearest neighbors. For example, Jupiter is about 5.2 AU from our sun; Saturn, the next planet out, is about 9.5 AU from our sun. If you apply Bode's Law to the Zeta 2 Reticuli system with the discovered world as the benchmark, its fourth planet will fall close to Earth's orbital distance (1.12 AU). Take this into account with the fact that Zeta 2 Reticuli is slightly hotter than our sun, and you will see the distinct possibility that the fourth planet can sustain life. Also, keep in mind that while Zeta 2 Reticuli is about two billion years older than our sun, any life on the fourth planet would be far more advanced than our own.

Was Betty Hill right again?

Nuclear physicist and UFO expert Stanton Friedman put it best when he said, "There can no longer be any doubt that the Barney and Betty Hill kidnapping by aliens *did* occur, and we now know exactly where those particular extraterrestrials originated from, thanks to the inspired and intensive research by Marjorie Fish." Friedman continues to remind us that the lines on the star map are designated trade routes.

Take into account the fact that the visitors do not appear to be seeking widespread contact with our race, we must ask ourselves what commodity is being traded...

...and how exactly do we fit in?

**Questions or comments?**

E-mail "Surreal World" at [kevin@surrealworld.com](mailto:kevin@surrealworld.com) or visit the website at <http://www.surrealworld.com>



*Allen Steele is a writer on fire. One of the best science fiction writers of his generation, Allen has taken giant leaps in recent years toward being a national best-selling author. His most recent collection, Sex and Violence in Zero-G, is currently available from Meisha Merlin publishing. I look forward to publishing more of Allen's work...in "Warning, Warning" we see the "less technical" side of Allen...*

# Warning, Warning

By Allen M. Steele    Illustrated by David J. Grilla

The first interstellar expedition was doomed from the beginning.

Not because of inadequate technology—the starship itself, an elegantly designed saucer-shaped craft, used a revolutionary hyperdrive as its main propulsion system—but because of lack of forethought. Yet the mission planners were so intent upon colonizing an Earth-like planet which lunar-based telescopes had discovered, against all odds, in orbit around Alpha Centauri that they didn't take into consideration all the variables.

First, there was the foolishness of sending forth a single family. Someone failed to read J. B. Birdsell's paper, "Biological Dimensions of Small, Founding Populations" (Interstellar Migration and the Human Experience, University of California Press, 1985) which postulated, with considerable evidence gained from the observation of isolated third-world populations, that a group of at least one hundred people was necessary for the formation of a healthy, self-sustaining colony. Yet the starship had been built to carry only six passengers, who would be sealed within cryogenic freezing tubes during the four-and-a-half years it would take the vessel to reach its destination. Budget cutbacks were cited as reason for the fact the ship wasn't made bigger, yet the mission planners could have selected a biologically diverse crew. Three single men and three single women, perhaps, or even three married couples. A family of five, plus one unattached male, may have been psychologically stable, yet it also severely limited the available gene pool. A lot of crude jokes were made about the possible pairings among the three children and the ship's pilot.

But that wasn't the worst of it. A saboteur hired by a hostile nation—Iraq? North Korea? Libya? to this day, no one knows for sure—had managed to become a member of the launch support team; indeed, he was the doctor who gave the crew its preflight physical just before launch. Shortly before the starship left Earth, the doctor successfully penetrated the security cordon surrounding the launch pad and entered the spacecraft. A guard discovered him within the ship, but the doctor killed him; his body was later discovered in a dumpster near the pad. The doctor then reprogrammed the ship's environmental control robot to destroy its major systems six hours after launch.

It should have been a perfect crime, yet the saboteur's luck ran out when he was caught aboard at liftoff. Panic-stricken, he revived the family and the pilot from suspended animation, but not before the robot severely damaged the inertial guidance system and destroyed the radio transmitter. The starship's hyperdrive, now wildly out of control, propelled the vessel out of the solar system; no one aboard was sure what happened next, but somehow the vessel caused a wormhole to form, and suddenly they found themselves in another part of the galaxy.

It was only merciful intervention on the part of the family matriarch which prevented the pilot from jettisoning the doctor from the airlock, yet the saboteur—clearly mentally unstable from the beginning, and now a full-blown paranoid-schizophrenic—attempted twice to kill members of the crew before the ship was forced to crash-land on a desert planet.

The members of the expedition tried to make the best of their dire situation. The youngest child, who was something of a prodigy despite his youth, restored the robot's original programming so that it was no longer homicidal. Meanwhile his father and the pilot explored the area surrounding the crash site, and his mother and two older sisters successfully set up a base camp. For a time, they gained the semblance of a model nuclear family, and soon they undertook the task of making their ship flightworthy once more.

Yet the doctor had become increasingly psychotic. When he wasn't talking aloud to the robot or hoarding food rations, he was still scheming to murder various members of the expedition (save for the boy, upon whom he seemed to have an unhealthy fixation). Soon it became too much for them to bear. After a whispered conference with the father, the pilot drew a laser pistol from the ship's weapons locker, escorted their unwanted guest a couple of miles from the base camp and, behind the shelter of a large boulder, shot him dead. The doctor was buried in an shallow, unmarked grave; to the end, no one knew if the name he had given them was his real one.

The execution of the doctor, albeit necessary, nonetheless had a bad effect upon morale. Until this point, the older daughter had been attracted to the pilot, which had been anticipated by the mission planners and condoned by her parents. Afterwards, she became increasingly aloof, not only from the pilot (who in turn

became frustrated when his advances were coldly rebuffed) but also her family. She was the next to die, when a sudden earthquake dislodged a massive boulder and caused it to roll a steep escarpment beneath which she happened to be standing.

The pilot was the sole witness to her death; in the weeks that followed, he fell into a state of acute depression which left him sullen and unwary. Nearly a month later, one of the sixty-foot-tall cyclopean giants who prowled a nearby valley found him while he was tending to a remote weather platform. His remains were discovered the following day, or at least those which hadn't been devoured.

Struggling against shock and grief, the rest of the family redoubled their efforts to repair the starship, yet the odds had turned against them. The alien world, so Earth-like at first glance, had gradually revealed itself to be unrelentingly hostile, and they were woefully unprepared for its abrupt climatic shifts and bizarre life forms.

Yet it was human error which killed the younger daughter. Her brother hand-built a SOS rocket that he planned to launch into space. Just whom it was supposed to attract is an unfathomable question, considering that the planet lay some uncalculated distance from Earth; the fact that his father allowed him to proceed with this project in the first place is an indication of their desperation. Yet shortly after launch, the rocket exploded in the high atmosphere and fell back into the camp as a fireball; although the boy survived its impact, his sister was incinerated.

The boy went into catatonic shock; refusing to speak, refusing to eat, he could only stare straight ahead with blank, dead eyes. His parents decided to return him to cryogenic suspension. Two of his siblings had perished already, and now they feared for the life of their youngest child. So they dressed him again in his silver-foil spacesuit, and placed him in one of the freezing tubes within the ship.

This was a wise decision, for it was only three days later that they were caught in a freak electrical storm caused by the planet's erratic climate. They were attempting to cover the small hydroponic farm when lightning struck the metal tarp pole the father happened to be holding at that moment. He was killed instantly.

In the end, the mother fought a solitary battle to preserve what little was left of her family. With the assistance of the robot, she managed to get the starship back to operational condition; although the hyperdrive was never completely restored to warp capability, it could attain a maximum velocity of .75 light speed. Yet when the time came for her to leave the nameless planet upon which she had been marooned, she found herself unwilling to leave her husband and two daughters. Perhaps this was misplaced loyalty, or perhaps she had simply gone insane herself. Most likely she believed that the expedition had been jinxed from the beginning, and that by remaining behind she would remove the curse.

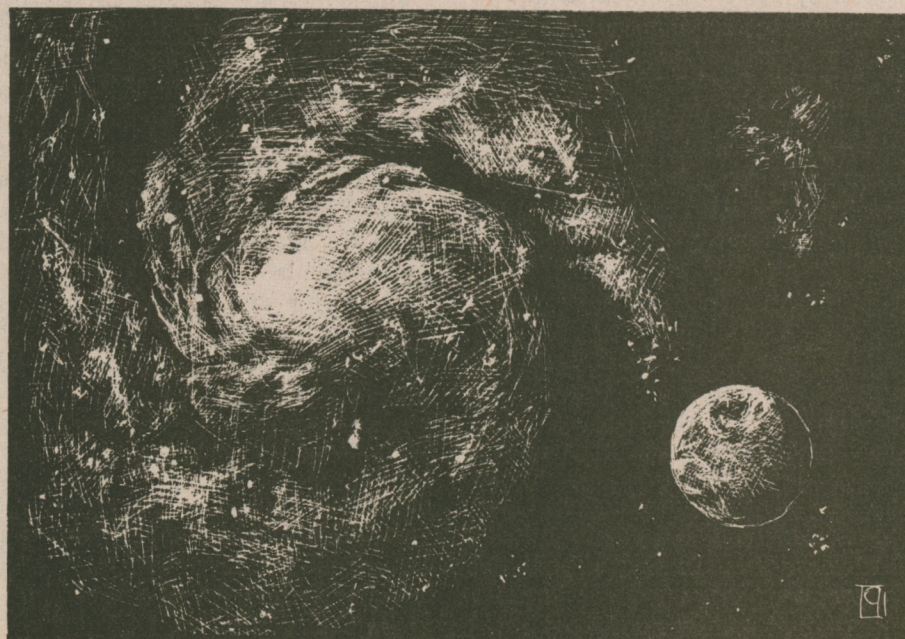
Whatever the reason, she programmed the robot to launch the starship back into space. When the starship lifted off, she was huddled beneath a flimsy tent near the family graveyard, watching as the saucer rose into the monochrome sky. A brave, strong-willed woman, she managed to survive for three more months before she succumbed to starvation.

Once the ship was in space once more, the robot plotted a return trajectory to Earth, based upon star charts and data from the ship's onboard computers. That task took nearly two hours; it's possible that the robot could have done the same job earlier, while the ship was still near Earth, had the doctor not fouled its programming. Yet a job done late is better than a job never done, and once the return course was set, the robot returned to its bay on the vessel lower level, from which it would periodically emerge, once every six months, to check the ship's status during its voyage home.

It was destined to be a long trip. The starship had crashed on a planet in orbit around 70 Virginis, located nearly 59 light-years from Earth. Even a maximum velocity, it would take the ship nearly a century for it to complete its journey.

Within a cryogenic tube on the ship's upper level, the sole surviving member of Earth's first interstellar expedition remained an eternal child. In a perpetual state of REM dream-sleep, his subconscious mind evoked surreal fantasies in which his family, along with the pilot and the doctor, were not only alive and well, but also having spectacular adventures. Locked in suspended animation, he encountered extraterrestrial circuses and intergalactic traders, space hippies and space bikers, frog-headed princes and carrot men and mouthless invaders from the fifth dimension, all utterly strange yet comforting in their simplicity. And through all this, his family was always with him: his sisters ageless and beautiful, his mother kindly and forgiving, and his father handsome and brave. The robot sang and cracked jokes, and the doctor became his guardian and best friend.

The dreams of a young boy, lost in space.



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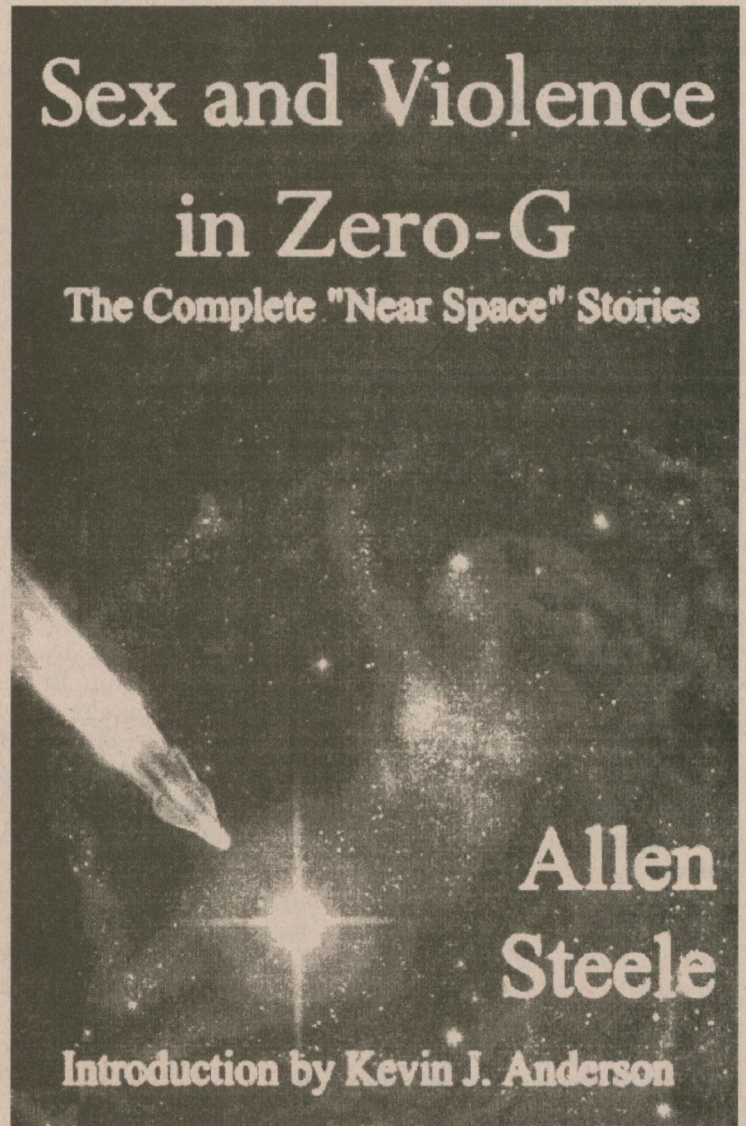
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# Dead Man's Chest

by Steve Sawicki



*Truth be told, if all of a sudden science fiction, fantasy, and horror ceased to exist, the world would still revolve. Babies would still get made, people would die (idiots would still die before their time), scams would be run, Spam would be eaten and time would pass. This is not to say it would not be mourned, just that it is not a significant player in the way the world operates. Perhaps it was at one time, say that period around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of this one, when science and technology were just starting to have an impact. Wells, Verne, Shelly and, you could successfully argue, Gernsback played important roles in the shaping of society through their written works. This is not to be confused with works that are widely read by society, such as Dune, Stranger in a Strange Land, The Hobbit, Foundation, etc. And this is not to say that the genres of the fantastic are any less for it, just that we must maintain perspective.*

*Waiting*, Frank M. Robinson, Forge Hardcover, ISBN 0-312-86652-6, \$23.95 (\$33.95 Canada), 303 pgs.

I have not read any of Robinson's previous books (*The Power*, *The Dark Beyond The Stars*) so I did not really know what to expect. I have seen the movies made from his books but it is not acceptable to expect one to transition well to the other or to base an opinion on an author's writing based on a translated event. What I always hope for in a situation where I'm picking up an author for the first time is an entertaining read and an interesting story. With *Waiting*, Robinson produced both in liberal amounts. This is not to say that there weren't some flaws that had me grimacing.

The basic plot idea is that there is a race of beings living among us who are descendants of Neanderthals. When

Cro-Magnon man came on the scene the Neanderthals were pretty much wiped out due to Cro's ability to speak. (Yeah, I know, but Robinson make it make sense.) Some of the Neanderthals survived by using a natural telepathic ability. To this day they are among us, planning our downfall. (Robinson explains that.)

The main character is Artie, a newsman at a local television station. Artie is part of a group that has been getting together socially since college. When one of the group gets murdered it is only natural that Artie starts to do some investigation. It is through Artie's investigation that the plot slowly unravels. The strengths of this are that we learn along with the main character. The negatives involve the lack of danger such a device ultimately involves for that character. I mean the book can't just end in the middle when the main character dies nor can you jump to a different character. But that is not the biggest issue here. My main problem and one which crashed the book around my head a couple of times is that Robinson sets up a number of scenes where Artie and friends actually talk face to face with the Neanderthal descendants. It is during these talks that the antagonists inform Artie and others of their inherent psychic ability. In fact, the neo-Neanderthals can make you love, can make you dance, can make you sing and can immobilize you. What they apparently can't do is take out a major threat when it is sitting in front of them. Thus, on at least three occasions Artie and group get caught by these ruthless killers and then let go. Robinson tries to get away with this by detailing how the new-Neanderthals are really two separate groups—the thinkers and the hunters. Only the hunters kill. The thinkers do not even know who the hunters are. Strange way to run

a society I think. And why don't these thinkers just detain Artie and friends until the hunters arrive?

Overall, I liked the book and read it in a couple of sittings. I would have highly recommended it but for the apparent fatal logic flaws which pop up. Still, it's extremely well written if not well plotted so worth some attention. I'd probably wait until paperback though.

*In the fifties and sixties, authors and fans alike would bemoan the ghettoization of the genres of the fantastic. This was during a time when any diligent reader could read the entire field every year and still want more. This ghettoization dealt not only with low pay for writers and lousy placement of books on shelves but with a general attitude towards the worth of the fiction itself. It dealt with a sense that the genres of the fantastic were nothing better than romances or westerns. Of course this was generalization. Of course much of it was true. To be honest, for every great book that came out there were ten average and twenty bad ones. For every copy of *The Female Man* there were ten copies of *Raiders of Gor*. The entire period generated a lot of heated discussion and much fury and furor. Those involved would like to think that it also led to a more generalized acceptance in the eighties and nineties. I would beg to differ however and think this acceptance sprang more from media leakage than from an academic cave in.*

*Masque*, F. Paul Wilson and Matthew J. Costello, Warner Paperback, ISBN 0-446-60676-6, \$6.99 (\$8.99 Canada), 352 pgs.

Collaborations can be funny things. Sometimes it's follow the leader and sometimes it's a battle of wits. The



best ones—Pohl/Kornbluth, Stirling/Drake, Niven/Pournelle—create something that is more than a sum of the parts. This can be hard to pick up on unless you are well versed in the writings of each individual. With *Masque*, it's hard to say for sure whether there is synergy operating here or not. It's not hard to say that Costello and Wilson have combined to create an unusual future world. This is a world that many will recognize with aspects of traditional SF as well as some cyberpunk flavorings. There's also a mystery and a quest involved so you can consider this an SF thriller as well.

The story takes place in the future where the world has become very corporate. These corporations battle each other for supremacy. One of the main tools used in these arenas are mimes, or individuals who can take on not only the persona of another individual but the body as well. Consider them almost human computers that you insert a disk into and they transform into whomever you want, or whomever you have a disk for. Tristan is one of these mimes and he is sent on an espionage mission to a rival corporation to steal some technology. The promise to Tristan is selfhood, which nearly all mimes want because after a certain amount of changing you start getting corrupted and become a mutant. There's more, of course, including a mime freedom movement, a love angle, parenthood, issues of trust and hope and the fate of the world. SF is nothing if not big in concept.

The novel is well written and takes place at a fairly fast pace. The characters are somewhat lacking in depth and more lacking the further away from the protagonist you get. This is not actually a problem, I just point it out in case you were looking for a character study. Consider this comparable to a James Bond film where Bond has character but three layers removed the individuals become tokens and targets. That's what happens here.

Costello and Wilson have created an unusual world and although the characters move through only a small part of it, there is enough to keep you intrigued. I enjoyed the book and would be interested in seeing more set

in this world. Enough so that I will also be looking for the next book from this duo.

*It is unrealistic to expect that any field, never mind one that so embraces ideas, will remain static. Yet that is where much of the consternation seems to come from. Whether it is a cry about lack of respect or a bemoaning of a particular sub-genre or the death knell cry of mediization, readers seem never to be happy with what they have at the moment but always wanting for things the way they were yesterday. For myself I embrace the change for it brings up new writers and forms and ideas and any field that can't withstand the strain of growth, change, and diversity might not be worthy of existence at all.*

*Fetish Fantastic*, Cecilia Tan, ed., Circlet Press, ISBN 1-885865-13-9, \$14.95, 183 pgs.

Since some of you will want to buy this book but be unable to find it in a bookstore, let me give you contact info right up front: Circlet Press, Dept FF, 1770 Mass Ave #278, Cambridge, MA, 02140. MA residents add 5% tax, everyone add \$3.50 shipping and a signed statement that you are at least 18 years old.

Now, for those of you who are still wondering, this is an anthology of futuristic fiction with a decided kink. In other words the works included here involve sexual fetishes as well as some form of the fantastic. If you're still not sure what I'm talking about you might want to just skip to the next book.

Well, I'm always a little leery when it comes to sex and science fiction or fantasy. The two just don't seem to mix well and whether it's because so many fans supplant sex with reading or whether it's just my own Catholic upbringing I can't be sure.

In any case I should point out that while all of these stories have a fantastic vein running through them the highlight is the erotic nature of that vein. Within these pages we find not only sex but kinky sex. Robots, D/S houses of training, bondage

masters, cyber-machine interfaces, all get good play within these pages. I have to admit that sometimes the content gets in the way of the writing. For the most part, however, the writing is very good and the story is what shines though.

Eleven stories make up this anthology and they are a pretty diverse bunch. I'm not sure what bears more interest, that these are good stories or that they are sexy stories (either of which is somewhat of a rarity in the genres of the fantastic). I should finally note that the sex is fairly graphic in many of these tales and that you might be exposed to practices that your grandmother never told you about. You might learn something and you might just kill a few hours in pleasurable reading. Regardless of your intent the book and the publisher deserve support just for broadening the field. That Tan can edit a book with such good content is a win-win situation for all of us.

*There is a certain fear of the unknown and that certainly reflects itself in the field today. Instead of welcoming the differences that blossom each year on the shelves the field finds itself targeting those newcomers with barbs and bad vibes. Odd behavior indeed. If all that existed were the same old stuff we'd be pretty damn tired of it by now. If you could find only space opera on the shelves you'd be reading contemporary novels today. So why is there so much heat and motion about the changes that waft up every three or four months? Everything is a pattern and a focus with a purpose. Even media tie-ins do good deeds by bringing the new reader into the field. Hell, even John Norman must be credited with pushing the field in positive directions. We're in an ocean and to say that one current is good while another is bad is sheer foolishness. Drift along and grab what you can, for you never know when a wave may crash you onto a reef. If you wait only for the familiar you might just wait too long.*

*Plan B*, Sharon Lee and Steve Miller, Meisha Merlin Publishing, ISBN 1-892065-00-2, \$14.00, 335 pgs.

This is a story which takes place in the Liaden Universe. Since it is apparently

my month to read books or authors new to me this one fits right in. The Liaden universe is apparently a complex place, full of complex people and customs and societies along with many planets and systems. This worried me since I wondered how much I'd miss sort of coming in on the tail end of this. And you should know that there are more than just one or two books in this universe. If you can't find this book in a bookstore, you can get it from SRM, PO Box 179, Unity, ME 04988-0179; or through Lee and Miller's website at <http://www.korval.com/liad.htm>.

So, what is the Liaden Universe and why should you care? The Liaden Universe, as stated before, is a pretty complex place. On the other hand it is reminiscent of those universes created in the sixties and seventies, sort of galactic dark age/new age type systems with technology but with social codes that are chivalric and political systems that rival the industrial revolution. This is all fine and good but it's nothing if you don't have interesting characters moving through it doing interesting things and having interesting things done to them. This time we're with Clan Korval, which has just put Plan B into effect. The main characters are one Val Con and his partner Miri. Val Con is part of Clan Korval while Miri has returned to her home planet Lytaxin. Unfortunately she has returned just in time for a planetary invasion and that's what takes up most of the book. There's fighting, treachery, some twists, some interesting aliens, some new characters introduced, more fighting and enough political maneuvering to make your head spin.

This is fun stuff, space opera the way it should have been written. I'm sure it's even more fun if you start at the beginning. Feel free to start where you may though, I did and I'm not the worse for it. My single gripe? What the heck was Plan B anyway? It never really seemed to get explained. Perhaps it was in a previous book or story or maybe I just got so caught up in the story that I missed it. Didn't seem to affect my pleasure though. Go. Buy. Read. Enjoy.

*If it all disappeared tomorrow the world would not change. I would though. I'd have to scramble to find*

*something else to read. I'm sure I'd sink into mysteries or westerns or maybe thrillers or even the occasional mainstream novel. I'd miss the sense of wonder for sure, and the worlds and the constructed societies and the mental images that I'd create and save. There's only one way to make sure it won't disappear you know and that's to stop arguing about what's killing the field or how bad certain aspects have gotten or how dire things look for the future and just plain go read. Oh yeah, you should probably buy the books first.*

*End of Days*, Dennis Danvers, Avon Eos Hardcover, ISBN 0-380-97448-7, \$16.00 (\$24.00 Canadian), 384 pgs.

Keeping in pattern here this is the second book set in a universe in which I did not read the first book (*Circuit of Heaven*). That said, I did not feel the worse for it although I may have to go hunt down a copy now.

Danvers is a fine writer and a fun one. He writes a near future sort of cyber-punk type of book in a fast and loose style. The time is tomorrow and the world has escaped into something called The Bin. The Bin is a computer controlled virtual reality environment which everyone got downloaded into. Well, not everyone, exactly. The cultish zealots stayed behind. Probably because they knew they'd enjoy nuking the rest of the remaining unbelievers. The only ones besides the chosen are mutant remainders living close enough to the zealots to avoid nuking. Of course the zealots believe they destroyed The Bin a while ago and so live in frenzied harmony. Problem is The Bin still exists and they stumble onto proof of said existence. Now it's a race against the clock to see what happens first, The Bin's destruction or the destruction of the zealots' way of life.

Characters drive all this action: Sam, the son of a zealot soldier; Walter Tillman, creator of the cloned mutants; Laura, a cloned mutant child; and one Donovan Carrol, a Bin made child who yearns for the end of existence and goes around giving lectures as Doctor Death.

If all this sounds complicated, well, it is more or less. Danvers does an excellent job of weaving all of

these factors into a complete whole leading us on a fine adventure full of science and mystery. The ending did a brief fade but I hardly expected Danvers to be able to maintain such a pace anyway.

*The usual disclaimers should come here; these are all my opinions and not, necessarily those of the editorial staff. The editorial staff have enough of their own opinions that can get them into trouble, they don't need mine. No one paid me to write any of these reviews, except for the editor, of course, who didn't pay enough. I do get all this stuff more or less for free from the publishers but it's a heavy burden and comes with guilt and responsibility. Speaking of such, if you wish to thrust free copies at me you can send them to Steve Sawicki, P.O. Box 341, Watertown, CT, 06795-0341. Sending something does not guarantee a review nor even a reading. Not sending a copy does guarantee the lack of a review however. Including chocolate gets you closer, unless it make the book all sticky. I did get bread once with a book, it was stale. If you disagree with something said here, tell the editor. Otherwise, feel free to email me at my most appropriate email address: [reviewer@mindless.com](mailto:reviewer@mindless.com). And, until next time, fantasize safely.*

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by David Livingstone Clink

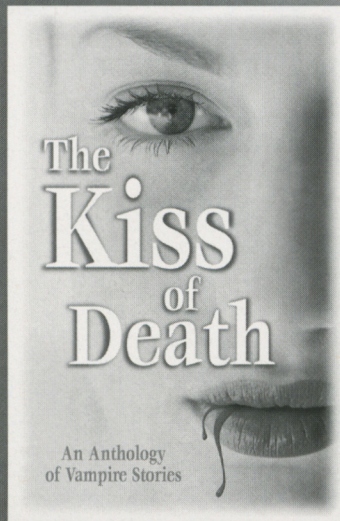
They will scour our arteries and clean our livers and fix our hearts and bring vigor to uninterested organs and remove the wax from our ears and sweat and oil from our skin leaving a preprogrammed scent. They will not, however, do windows.

## AT THE TECH MUSEUM

by G. O. Clark

Slumped in a wheelchair, she watches the Apollo astronauts jumping and skipping around on the surface of the Moon, projected up on the mini-theater movie screen, perhaps wondering what it would be like to be weightless, unconstrained by the forces of gravity, a free floating feather in an infinite sky, the cloudy face of Earth sternly observing her antics.

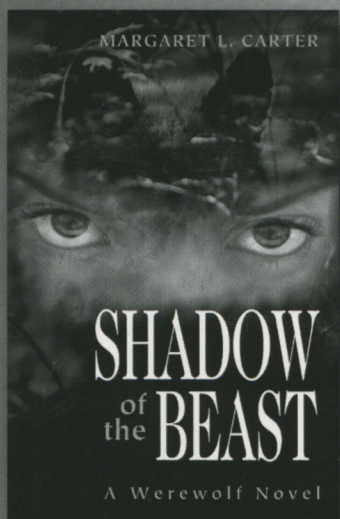
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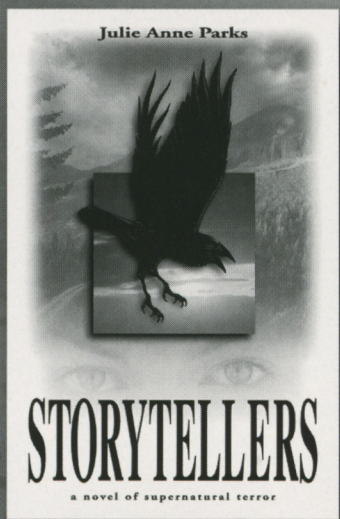
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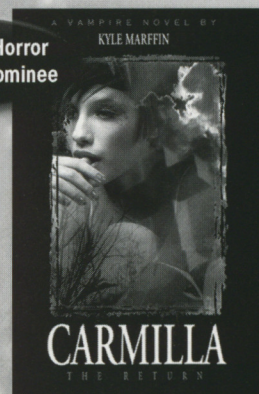


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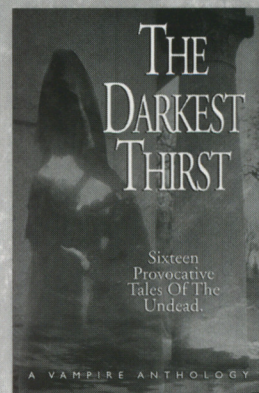


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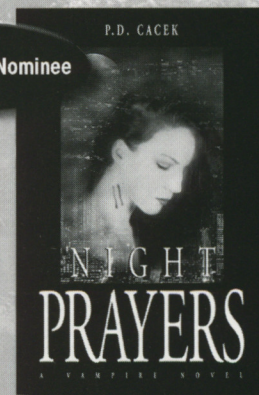
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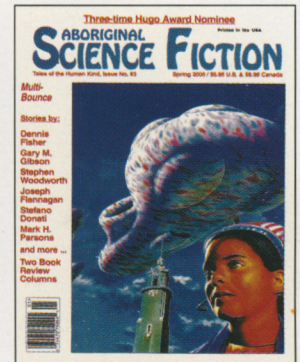
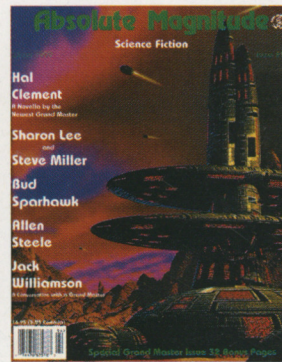
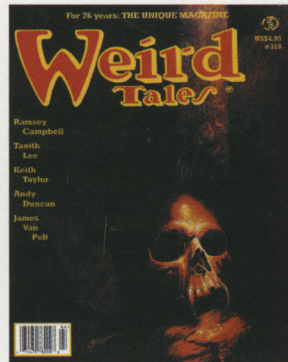
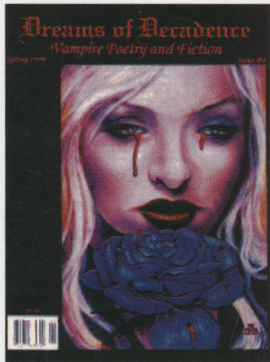
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