

SPEC

THE CANADIAN
MAGAZINE OF
SPECULATIVE
WRITING

Premiere Issue
Volume 1, Number 1
Spring 1989
\$5.00





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Alexander

Boy at Heart

by Dave Duncan
art by Rob Alexander

He said his name was Duane, but it wasn't. He came roaring in through darkness and a dust storm, riding his thumb in the cab of a great nine-rotor from Long Slope. The driver had been surprised to be offered money — he usually got chems — but he'd have settled for just the company. The road was eighteen hours of bare rock on the headlights, and that got creepy.

It was also downhill all the way. By the time the glow of the dome came in sight there was a very slow dawn starting in the east, and the sea was close enough to make eyes water and noses itch, even inside an over-pressured cab. On Higginsworld the sea was a hypersaline organic soup, and bad stuff. No one went there.

The loading dock looked about a klick long, glowing like a giant artery under red iridescents. The two men sat in the cab for a minute, letting their ears enjoy the sudden silence. The driver produced a facemask that was supposed to keep the dust out. Dust didn't bother trolls, and there were eight or ten of them loading the next rig, another nine-rotor.

"Don't like those mothers," the driver said. "Don't use 'em back in Lensville. Nor in Long Slope."

The trolls were lowland types, well over two meters high, all orange skin and no neck, eerie in the bloody glow. They had hair on their backs only and their hands hung near the ground. Trolls could follow simple orders, but even sedated they wouldn't tolerate clothes.

"They're all right if they're kept doped," the man said. "They sure scare women, being hung like that."

"The females scare me — 'cos I'm not."

The man laughed dutifully.

The driver pulled on his mask. "Had a bad event up in Cloud Seven, couple of years back. Defective dosage. Blood everywhere."

"People?"

"No. They go for each other. They're naturally solitary, see?"

The man said thanks again for the ride, reaching for his pack. The driver depressurized and the door swung open. The man held his nose as he ran

across the platform. Even one whiff could trigger allergies at that altitude, that close to the sea.

He stripped for the decon, walking through naked, aware that he was being monitored, wondering if it would clean up that touch of foot itch that had been bothering him. His pack and clothes went another way. They would get zapped much harder, to kill anything native trying to hitch a ride, also to disrupt anything illicit he might be carrying, organic or chems. He never did though. Just beer. Real life was fun enough, he'd say.

He found a shirt and shorts in his pack, and a pair of thongs. His travelling gear went into his pack. He was of average height, with no great muscles, but no flab either. His hair was sandy, his skin fair. There were little lines coming around the green eyes now, and just a trace of thickening at the waist. He had a few scars, mostly not visible, some honorable, some not.

There were no questions, and only one warning — no sleeping in public. Private space cost money, so no work, no sleep. He could not imagine why anyone would come to the dome except to work. It was certainly too risky for tourists.

Lugging his pack on one shoulder, he walked out into a big corridor, starkly rectangular and looking endless under pearly iridescents that did nothing to make the long tube seem friendly. Local time was late evening, so there were few people in sight. The air stank of ozone, and a steady subterranean throb told of machinery nearby. He felt confined, and cramped.

Always the same question — which first, food, work, sleep, girl? This time he had only one answer to choose. He headed over to a com and called directory, then set off along the street. Soon people became more numerous. Shirts, shorts, thongs, just like people anywhere. The doors lining the wall were a mixture: private rooms, stores, offices. The deep throb dwindled, but the smell of ozone stayed.

He went up two levels, and stopped at 3-71-34-1116. It was still low-rent area, he thought as he pressed the buzzer.

After a moment a woman opened the door.

"Hi, Suey."

She looked him up and down. With quiet resignation she said, "Oh, shit. I should have known you'd turn up sooner or later."

"Name's Duane."

"Duane, is it? What happened to Don, and Dick, and Dwight, and —"

"Don got ate by a tigerlily up in Cloud Country. Dick got yeast. Rather the yeasts got Dick, I guess. Darryl's down a plutonium mine in Bali Highland, and he doesn't need a lamp now —"

The woman said, "Cut that."

She was not beautiful, nor was she plain. Her nose was too short, and she had freckles. She was tall, and on the slim side, never wore a bra. The face

was collecting little lines too, now. The dark hair was longer than it had been, and needed fixing. Her blouse and shorts were blue, which always did wonderful things for her eyes, but lack of sunlight spoiled the pale long legs; she had great legs. She was holding a scrub brush in her hand — a scrub brush, *fer godsake?*

“Looks like I got here just in time,” the man said.

She bit her lip, hesitating, but her other hand was firm on the door. She didn’t know yet, obviously.

The man reached out and took the brush from her. “I always was better with one of these than you. Got a couch?”

“Just a couch?”

“Just a couch,” he agreed.

“One night?”

“I’ll do whatever you ask.”

“I won’t ask. I certainly won’t ask.”

“Fine.”

She shrugged, and stepped aside. He went in, swinging down his pack and dropping it on the floor.

“I’ll finish the floor... it was the floor? Tomorrow I’ll do a wall.”

“Tomorrow you’ll find a place of your own.”

“Fine,” he said again. There really was a bucket of water. She really had been scrubbing the floor. It was a claustrophobic little cell, colored beige, with one couch and a chair, fold-down bed and table. No windows, of course, but not even a holo... what did you expect, a mountain villa? The other door would lead to a toilet. There was a rug, but it had been rolled up.

“Duane what? Donaldson, or MacDonald, or O’Donnel?”

“How about Donavitch? You like that?”

“You in trouble?” She gave him a straight stare.

He returned the stare. “I’m never in trouble.”

“No. I guess not.”

She should have known that. He had his faults, but crime was not one of them. He knelt down by the bucket.

“Oh, hell! Leave it,” she said. “It’s not too bad. Damned dust gets through any filter in the universe. Breeds allergens — it’s sticky. Seems like Neolithic elbow grease is the only thing that’ll really do it. No, leave it... Duane. God! Couldn’t you find anything better than *Duane?*”

“I’m running out of ‘Ds’.” He dipped and began scrubbing. “Anything else, and I might forget my initial.”

“Leave it,” she said, with a nervous laugh. “Heavens, old friends should have a talk first.”

“We can talk while I do this.”

“Have a drink, then.”

He looked up, surprised. "They allow that in rooms?"

"No." She fetched two packets of beer and handed him one. He drank and laid it handy, but he continued to scrub the floor. Resignedly, she pulled the couch out of his way and sat on it.

"How'd you find me?"

"Not hard. What you going to do when the next wave comes?"

"They say it'll stand. The guys who build it live here."

Concentrating on his work, not looking at her, he asked, "You believe that? You know them personal?"

"Well, at least I don't go outside. It's the guys outside who'd really have problems. Or Underground."

He grunted. "There are rocks big as moons out there, moved in the past. The splash marks are four clicks high on the slope, Suey. You think it'll stand? I don't."

"Big danger's at periastris. That's ten years off yet."

"I looked at the numbers. There's others between. Sea comes over here every two years on average."

She was defensive. "Two point two."

"Why'd you come then?"

"Money."

"Doing what?"

"Day care. Hundred and five an hour."

He whistled. "Who'd bring kids to a deathtrap like this?" There was no answer. After a moment, still scrubbing hard, he said cautiously, "I heard Bill's up in Higheryet." Testing.

"Yes."

She didn't know. Certainly she did not know.

"Money again?"

"Yes. We're going to make it permanent this time, Don."

"Duane."

"Really, this time. One standard, we agreed, and we can save enough. He'd go hyperallergic down here. I'm a trace low on blood count for up there. But one year apart will do it."

"Then what?"

"An orchard in Arcady Springs. Grow pearlfuit. We can live on that, and maybe take in tourists, too."

"Sounds good," he said.

"I promised! We —"

"Yeah. Sounds good, I said."

She moved the couch again, and the rolled-up rug. "And you? What brings you here — Duane?"

The man lifted the bucket forward and glanced round the floor. "I'm

going to box myself in here, aren't I? Me? ...money, too, I guess. Maybe I'd like to settle down, too."

"You?" she scoffed. "When the sea freezes."

He sat back on his heels and studied her. "Really."

She colored. "I've promised Bill. It's all over... Duane."

"I understand."

"You hungry?"

He was broke. He lied. "No. Ready for bed? Let me finish this?"

"I feel awful, watching you do that, and you come all this way. You just get in?"

"Yup. But it's good practice... for when I go domestic, too"

She looked away. "You should have thought of that sooner."

"I've thought of it quite a lot lately."

"You'll never go domestic... Duane. Duane?"

"Call me whatever you like."

"I've called you plenty in my time, haven't I? No, be Duane by all means. I think it suits you."

She rose, and walked into the bathroom, and closed the door. After a minute he heard her blowing her nose.

He'd never known her so vulnerable. With no push at all he could have her tonight.

He didn't push. He slept on the couch.

* * * *

Next morning he felt he could handle a whole troll for breakfast, but the prices in the teria scalded his eyeballs. He settled for a cup of coffee.

Then he set off on a survey, mapping the landscape from the evacuation modules on the roof to the mine doors in the basement. This was the only source of nickel on the planet, an ancient astrobleme, but every time the crust shifted it was likely to catch a tsunami. The wrong combination of suns and tremor was going to wipe the damned things away, and everyone knew that. One day they'd mine nickel with robots, but right now there weren't enough of them. So they used suicided instead.

So the pay was out of that world.

He stood for a long time at a com beside the hiring office, watching the list unroll. The hourly rates looked like annual salaries.

Evacuation module maintenance? That'd be the safest. Quick getaway. It was also the worst paid.

Wages outside were incredible. Even a little wave would take those suckers. It'd need a big one to crack the dome.

But all he needed to do was save a hundred grand or so. So the real fast getaway came with the high pay, right?

Suey had obviously not worked that out. Day care would be close to the

evacuation modules, and so poorly paid. She had other skills that would have fetched more, let her leave sooner... but then it was astounding that Suey would have come here at all, or that Bill would have agreed. How much to buy an orchard in Arcady Springs? Damned if he knew, but five-ohs should be plenty.

He wondered what a *torch* did. If the pay was tied to the danger, he died twice as often as anyone else.

He went in and was surprised to find a desk and a real woman. Either decisions were made on intuition, or else they were better forgotten. Computers kept records.

"You need a torch," he said.

She looked at him sourly. "Ever worked on one of those before?"

"Sure. Little one."

"They only come in one size." She pointed across the room. "Show me. That sim over there."

The man walked over and sat on the bench. In a moment a complete wrap-around holo had him in a cab, with a screen before him displaying the rocky wasteland beyond the dome. He stared thoughtfully at controls that must have come off an InterGalactic Firebird Jumbo.

Then the woman's head and shoulders came through the wall. "Want a quick refresher?"

He turned on his best winning smile. "Please."

Five minutes later he walked out of the office. Things were going to be exciting. He had blown that test utterly. A troll could have done better on that sim than he had, but he had been hired. Evidently the pay for torchers wasn't high enough.

* * * *

The suns were up, and would be for two or three days yet, so he got his learning done in daylight, on bare rock under an orange sky. The dome towered over the ridges like a rising moon.

He was to build dykes. It was all based on good computer analysis, they told him — a system of angled groins to deflect the force of the waves. Yes, the water might be a klick or two deep when it came, but it was velocity that mattered. These groins would turn the main thrust away from the dome. It sounded like a load of chems to him, but he needed the money. Scrapers dug out valleys, pushers shaped the rubble into ridges, and torchers fused it. He was into the lava business.

Too little heat and the dyke would not be strong enough; too much and it would melt and fill up the ditch, and the computer was awfully fussy about the exact profile. He soon picked up the knack — he was a natural knack-picker. Torchers got top pay, but that wasn't because the work was difficult, nor because of the tsunamis. Anyone outside was liable to catch those. The

extra zing for torchers was other torchers. Point that fusion blast at anything — *anything at all* — and it melted. So a torcher who got slightly out of line with his buddies would get deep fried, or fry them.

Some rocks were vesicular, and they exploded in the heat. Some configurations could deflect the blast back at the equipment.

He'd worked almost every mechanical contraption on the planet in his time, but he had never really needed big money before.

He had never really sweated before, either, he decided, and yet the cab was cool enough. He was surprised to find himself still alive at the end of the shift, and he felt like he'd earned the money, every mill of it. He hadn't killed anyone, but his nerves were jangling so hard that he could hear them.

When he'd showered and changed and found his way back to Suey's little beige box, she eyed him oddly and asked what the hell he'd been doing.

Stoking, he said; a nice safe inside job, but tiring. She did not ask what stoking was. She was tight as a fiddle string herself. "You going to hunt up a room now?"

He glanced at the couch. "One more night? I'd rather take you dancing. Dancing would be all right, wouldn't it? No harm in old friends going dancing."

She hesitated, then said dancing would be fine. She was waiting for him to push — waiting for it so she could say no. They always danced a storm together. Saying no would be harder after dancing.

They danced a storm. They ate and they drank a little; they danced more, but the roar of the music and the press of the crowd pretty well stopped them talking, and they both preferred that. Their bodies spoke for them, appeals and promises in every move. When they got back to her cell, he'd lost all the jangled feeling and was hankering pretty bad, but he turned the couch so its back was to the bed, the way he'd had it the night before. He arranged a cushion as a pillow again. He enjoyed the puzzled look in her eyes.

He wasn't going to push yet, although she was the best sex there was. He'd never found any other to match. But he had to hold off until he'd decided whether to break the news first, or after.

"You still haven't told me why you came," she said.

"Yes I did — money."

"You never cared for it before."

He sat on the couch and kicked off his shoes. "Thought I'd start saving up, buy a hoverhome. They'll go anywhere. That way I can have my wandering and a place of my own too."

Her eyes narrowed. "With a little woman in it?"

"Hope so."

"Me, maybe?"

"A guy can dream."

"No chance! Have you any idea what it costs to operate one of those? You couldn't go anywhere in it. You're just not practical... *Duane*. Secondly, that's not a woman's idea of settling down. A woman wants roots, not tumbleweed. Neighbors. A place to raise kids. And thirdly, I've promised Bill. We really mean it this time... *Duane*."

"I understand."

But she hadn't finished. She got louder. "You came hunting me again? You think you can break me up again? And put me back the way you like me again? And then walk out again? And good old Bill'll be there again to pick up the pieces again? Well, not this time! The sucker's had enough. I've promised Bill, and this time it's for real."

"Sure. I'll find a room tomorrow."

She'd promised Bill before. And now there was no Bill.

"I mean it!" she shouted.

"Yes. But you're thinking of Don, and Doug, and the others. *Duane's* different. Now get into bed and put out the light. It's late."

"You'll stay there! On the couch!"

"I promise."

Pity, though. She was the best there was, and he was really hankering.

* * * *

He lived through the next shift, too, and he felt less jangled afterwards. On the way back to Suey's he stopped at a com and did some calculations. It looked like he had a decimal eight probability of saving five-ohs before the job killed him. That was assuming that the data he was getting were real — the numbers might be cooked as much as the rocks.

When he walked in, the first thing he saw was that she'd had her hair cut short, the way he liked it.

Then he realized that she had the bed folded down and was sitting on the edge. There was an open suitcase on the floor, with clothes piled in it and all around. She was pale as a corpse, and the look in her eyes would have boiled lava faster than his fusion torch. Blue-blue eyes with red rims.

So she'd called Higheryet.

He wondered which had come first — the call, or the bed, or the suitcase?

He walked over and knelt at her feet. "I was going to tell you tonight."

"Oh, sure you were. Sure! But you were going to have a little screwing first, weren't you?"

"No."

"Yes you were! Otherwise you'd always wonder."

"No. I wouldn't do that."

She was only just holding back the tears. "Then why didn't you tell me right away? That was why you came — to tell me? So why didn't you? They said it was you who stopped them newsging me when it happened. Three

weeks, for God's sake!"

He started to reach for her, and turned the motion into a feeble gesture. "I came as fast as I could. Yes, I came to tell you. I thought it'd be kinder than a com call."

"Three weeks! Three effing weeks!"

Why couldn't she see? "That made no difference, Suey. He died instantly, when the roof fell. He was dead. There was nothing you could do."

"Then why didn't you tell me when you got here?"

Good question! He stared at his knees for a while.

She sniffed and wiped an eye. "Waiting for me to ask for it, were you? Sure I would, were you?"

He stood up. "Maybe. Believe that if you want. Could be true."

"Swine. Contemptible swine."

"He was a good man, Suey. A better man than me."

Now her cheeks were shining wet. "You're damned right he was! You're a no-good, a drifter. You always were and always will be."

"That's the truth, and believe me it really hurts. There's another truth, though. It's me you love. He was always second choice." A good man, maybe, but Bill had been astronomically dull, predictable to ten decimal places.

"No!"

"Yes," he said. "You have better times with me. And I told you: Duane is different. If it's Arcady Springs you want, then we'll do that. We'll earn that orchard together, here in the dome, and then we'll go to Arcady Sp—"

"And have you around about ten percent of the time, maybe?" She shook her head angrily. "You've got the itchiest feet on Higginsworld. I want a man around, and kids. Kids need a father, not someone who blows in now and again like an eclipse. Not you."

How could he make her believe? Perhaps this wasn't the time to try. "There's no Bill now to catch you. I won't leave you again. Ever. I'm ready to settle down too, Suey. I'm getting older! That was why I came. I swear it."

She tried to muffle the sobs and they became coughs, and she almost choked. "Then why didn't you tell me as soon as you got here? You wanted to prove that you could take me again! To prove that Bill was second choice, not you. When you were sure of that, then you'd have told me."

He reached out and stroked her hair. "But you'd have been sure of it too."

She put her face in her hands and said nothing, just wept.

"Wouldn't you?"

"M-maybe."

"This time I stay. I swear it, Suey. For always."

"How can I believe you? How many times do I get gulled?"

"How much for that orchard?"

She made a sniffing sound, and then took a deep breath and looked up at him, a very tiny hope dawning, maybe... "Quarter of a million?"

Ouch! He walked over to his pack and picked it up. "I'll go find a room. I'll be back when I've got that much."

He had his hand on the door before she said, "Stop!"

"What?"

"Don't be a damned fool. Come and comfort me."

He dropped the pack and went over to the bed.

He didn't have to push. She pulled.

She was always the best sex there was, and this time she was desperate. It was incredibly good. Stupendous. Well worth the journey.

* * * *

The next night they went house-hunting and found a room large enough for the two of them. They spent all their spare time in it, catching up on what they'd missed.

A few days later, one of the torchers got out of line. It wasn't far out — the blasts didn't even singe the cab, but there was enough lateral neutron flux to cook the contents.

It wasn't Duane, and it wasn't Duane's fault, but he was still badly jangled when he got back to the room that evening.

Suey gave him an odd look and said, "Stoking?"

"Yeah. It's real tiring."

"What the hell do you stoke? And where?"

"Down at the insemination clinic."

Expressions flickered across her face, and he knew them all — her *That's-Disgusting* expression, and her *What-Are-You-Hiding-From-Me* expression, and her *When-Will-You-Grow-Up* expression. Then she laughed, for the first time since she'd heard about Bill.

They went dancing again, and afterward the sex was long and slow and very sweet. Maybe they were both feeling more mortal than usual.

* * * *

The dome's nightlife wasn't too bad at all. There was dancing and ballcourts and watersports. They made a few friends in a shallow sort of way. Even without leaving the real world, there was lots of fun to be had, and Suey had no more desire to trip than he ever had. He lied quite a bit, to keep her thinking he had an inside job.

So the present was great.

The past was good too. They had lots of laughs over old times, when she'd been with Don, or Doug, or Dwight, or Dick, and of course other people, like Meg and Ann and Harry. And Bill.

But the future... Why did women always want to live in the future? Why did they always want to discuss it in bed? After? Just when man wanted to

lie on his back, feeling dreamy and pleased with himself, a woman had to talk about the future. They all did — he'd never found one who didn't.

And the job. There were never enough torchers. He started to do overtime, and that paid double. Another guy got roasted, and half a dozen quit. The pay was raised, then raised again, to draw in more crazies. The money was piling up like he never could have believed.

Then he got promoted to torch boss. That meant more money and more hours. It meant less risk, for he was not in line to get roasted any more. Now it was his job to keep those other zombies in line, to stop them roasting one another.

Twelve of them. A dozen suckers depending on him.

It began to get to him. He started drinking seriously, and he'd never done that before. Eventually he found he couldn't keep up with Suey in bed, and he'd certainly never known *that* to happen before.

* * * *

The tremor arrived just as he came off shift, and it rattled the dome, knocking people down. The PA started spurting soap so fast that he thought it must be an auto: "We have sustained no damage... remain calm... not close to epicenter... ranging satellite will be sending reports shortly..."

He checked that the outside crews were on their way in. Then, like everyone else, he headed up toward the evacuation modules. Like everyone else, he did not think they would be much good if there was a big one coming. Before he reached the top of the dome, while he was trudging along a wide corridor, trying not to hurry too obviously, in the company of a lot of other people trying not to hurry too obviously, the PA changed to a new voice: "Hear this: We have new data on the seismic event. Preliminary estimate sets the magnitude at twelve point two on the Richter scale, which is minor for the Higginsworld, and the epicenter was well inland. We anticipate no significant tsunami. We repeat — there will be no tidal wave from this event. The emergency is over..."

But the next morning the outermost dyke had gone, just gone. Two hundred meters high and ten clicks long, fused to solid glass, and there wasn't even any rubble. All the hollows were full of green slime, steaming in the sunlight. There had been a tsunami, then, even if it had not reached the dome itself. Had he been at work when it had hit, then he would be just gone too. He didn't like the concept.

For an hour or so there was no work done. Duane and all the others sat in their cabs and listened to music while the engineers inspected damage and figured out where to start next. Then the scrapers set to piling again, and the torchers moved in. But the rocks were all soaked, and they began exploding under the flames. It was too dangerous, and he called off his crew. He got a lot of angry shouting on his radio, and black looks when he returned to the

dome. Maybe he'd hurt his career... *Ha!*

File a report... *Ha!*

Damn them!

He found himself back inside with a few hours to kill until Suey finished at the day care. He started drifting along a corridor, sensing the tension. The whole dome was jumpy. Including him. He went looking for fun and couldn't find any. He tried the sim arcades and the watersports, and all sorts of places, until inevitably his feet took him at last to a bar, down in the lowest level, where the miners drank, and the loaders... and the truckers. He should have expected the truckers. It was dark and smelly and noisy. Bars like that were always dark and smelly and noisy — the psychs designed them that way to keep females out and let the males do their bonding. This one was noisier than usual, still echoing from the tremor and that *minor* tsunami.

He had time for four fast drinks before he told a guy to step outside. He'd known that would happen, but why must he choose a totally impossible opponent?

He awoke in First Aid, feeling like shit and every kind of a fool; The impossible opponent bothered him. He never picked easy ones, but he was not usually quite so suicidal.

Surprisingly, his card was still in his pocket. As he paid the tab at the com, he checked his credit. It was more than he'd expected.

Bill had left her something — she'd never said how much.

He glared at his battered reflection in the washroom mirror — both eyes swelling, nose bent, and sandy hair caked with blood. *Blood on the sand*. His face looked terrible, but the rest of him felt not too bad... just a minor tsunami.

How did he explain it to her, though?

He told himself it didn't need explaining. It needed excusing.

Excusing was her job.

But she'd kill him. She'd shriek, cut him off for a few nights. Nag. He'd known that all along, of course.

He went back to the bar and got a beer. He bought one for the totally impossible opponent, who had no cause to bear a grudge and was justifiably proud of the job he'd done on Duane's face. He showed it to a few of his friends. They awarded it a nine point seven and made room at their table.

One of the friends was a trucker, just heading out for BRC Mountain. Interesting place, BRC Mountain, everyone said — fifteen kilos high, sulfur mining, active caldera.

It felt like a nudge in the ribs.

No explanations and no excuses.

When the trucker went to the washroom, Duane followed. "How much?" he asked.

The washroom was just like any other men's room in the galaxy, smellier than most. The trucker glanced around as though wondering if it were bugged.

"Can't," he said. "Company's cracking down. And you're not the first, Panda Eyes. That tremor left a lot of guys... trembling?" He grinned, showing big teeth, brown-specked from too much fluorine.

Duane fished inside his shirt and pulled out his mask. He'd smuggled that in from the machine shop earlier, when he came off work. "I walk out there with this on. Just me and no baggage. No one'll notice."

The trucker began to look thoughtful.

Duane named a price.

The trucker's eyebrows rose. "When?"

"Five. Make a call is all. I can spell you, too."

"Now that IS illegal. Okay... Ten minutes?"

"Five'll do."

He went over to a com and drew enough cash to buy the trucker, and also enough to make up a new pack for himself when he got to BRCM, plus a couple of sandwiches. That still left at least a small orchard, and he transferred it to Suey's account. He felt good about that. Duane had been different — none of the others had ever left her any real money. Do her more good than Bill ever had.

Message with one hour delay: "Darling, this place is too dangerous. You go on to Arcady Springs and get set up. I'll join you there real soon. Love, always. Daniel."

* * * *

Under the red iridescents, the trucker was checking out his rig — a twelve rotor job. The man had never seen one that large.

He had a mask, so he did not need to run across the loading dock this time. He walked all around the rig, admiring it. He was careful to avoid the trolls. Trolls were safe enough, but it did not do to jostle one. Trolls had bad reflexes if they got crowded... naturally solitary, they were.

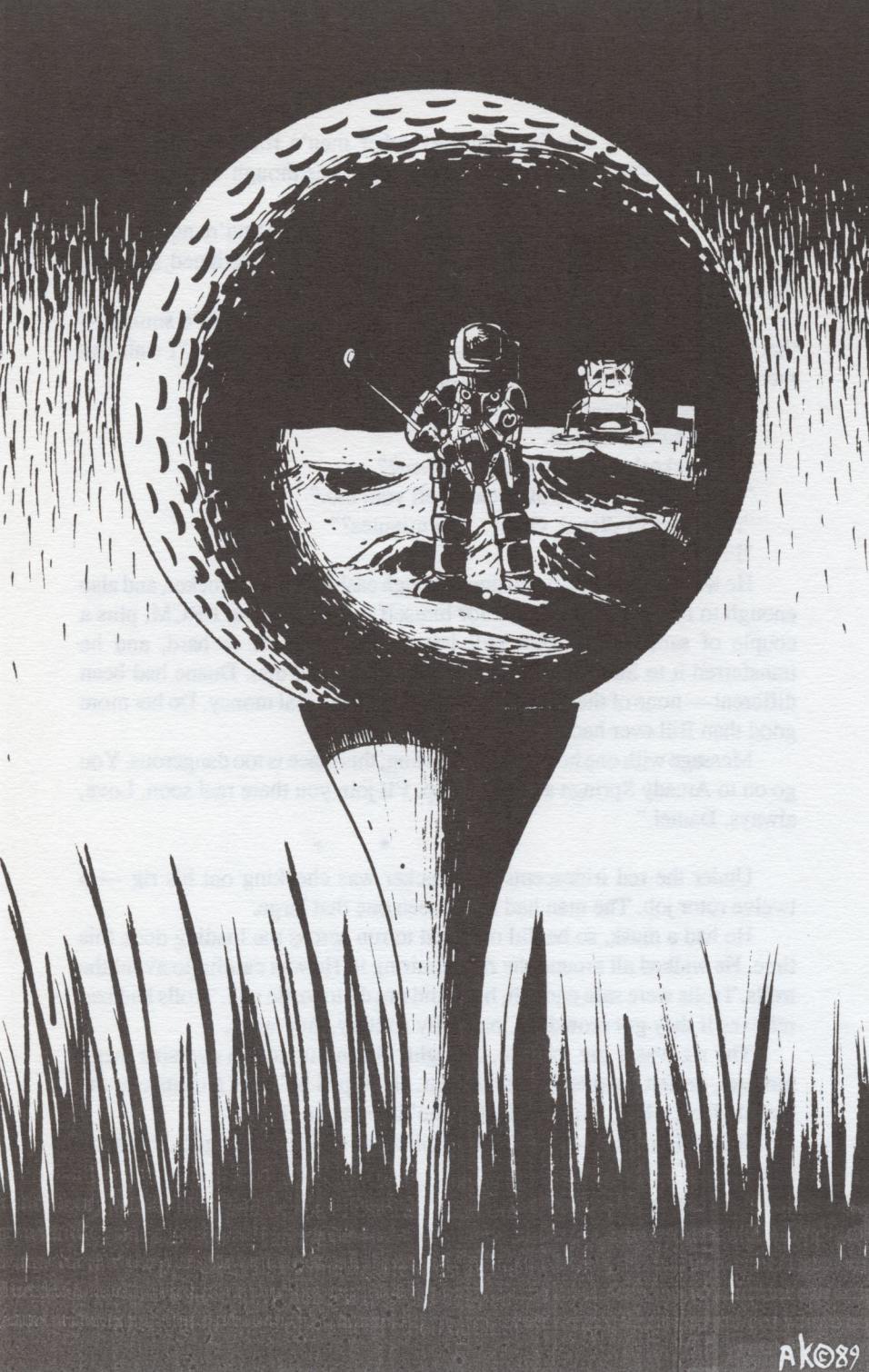
The rig was a big johnnie, all right. Gazing up at the oversize metal monster, he felt a shiver of excitement. He hoped he'd get a chance at the throttle for a while, wondered what she'd do on the flat.

BCR Mountain — good sport. Girls, likely. Just fun girls. Nothing serious.

No responsibility.

The trucker unlocked the cab door for him, and he scrambled up.

Soon he was on his way again.



“Fore”-Eight-Sixteen

by H. A. Hargreaves
art by Adrian Kleinbergen

Really, Miss Grayson, it was mainly Hartley’s baby. Oh, I admit we’re all a bit different, always have been, but Hartley’s the initiator, the idea man, and the driving force that’s gotten us into and out of a lot of zany things. This golf deal is just the one that made the headlines. Well, let me tell it my way, right? Then you write your article and I’ll check it.

It actually began way back in 1971, when we four were grad students renting one house here in Edmonton. We’d been out for a quick eighteen holes at the . . . Yes, we were golf fanatics even then. Anyway, when we got back we had the usual postmortem over beer, and right in the middle we heard this little tidbit about Alan Shepard screwing on his number 6 clubhead and lofting a ball off the moon.

We had a good laugh over it — all except Hartley that is, who got a vacant look on his face while the rest of us jabbered. “Wow,” he finally said, or some such, “imagine what a drive that must have been.” Now all of us were long-ballers back then, you know, all power and no finesse, but with Hartley it was an obsession. I remember saying something like — yeah, but we hadn’t the fare to Moose Jaw much less to the moon. Hartley, though, went very intense, a sign that meant complications for all of us, so we let him rave about long drives for a few minutes and then tried to take him off the subject. At least that time we succeeded, but he did get in a last crack about breaking the four-hundred yard barrier. Hell, I was happy with a rare two-fifty in those days.

Nothing came of it then. We finished our degrees, and split up after three or four farewell parties that should have killed us. Bill went east to study corporation law, Jim took his cartography skills to an oil company in Calgary, Hartley went to NASA by way of M.I.T., and I stayed in Edmonton doing designs for a new little firm. Yes, it’s now Global Microchip Ltd. My, you do your homework, don’t you?

Well, then Bill came back to a coal company as senior legal beagle, Jim bought a warehouse full of old exploration data from the oil company and set up here as a consultant for independents, and I traded some patents for a third

of the microchip business. Naturally we bought memberships at the Valley View Club and played a threesome. Couldn't get a steady fourth. But finally, when the big cuts hit NASA, back came Hartley to research lighter-than-air transport. He has the controlling share of Northwest Transport Ltd.

That was 1981, ten years later almost to the day, and we wasted little time before we played thirty-six at the Valley View to celebrate the rebirth of the foursome. Afterward we went to Bill's penthouse for beer, and watched a drive of over three-hundred-and-sixty yards at the Westchester Classic. All the commentators did was admire it in the passing, but Jim scratched his chin and said, "Remember Al Shepard, Hartley?" It was as if all those years of brain-sweat, booze, women and golf had never been. Hartley got that look again, and the rest of us groaned. We were in our thirties, after all. But Hartley had changed a little. He smiled around at us and said quietly, "I haven't forgotten. Been working on it now and then, down at the space labs." Then he clammed up, and the rest of us let our chins hit the floor.

No, it wasn't till 1991, when Slam Steed hit his five-hundred-and-sixty-five yard tee shot at the Gerald Ford Invitational, and the controversy boiled over into a donnybrook, that Hartley finally made his move and suckered the rest of us into the craziest deal a bunch of forty-year-old playboys could dream up. Talk about controversy among the pros!

We got into a raging debate of our own. Bill was all for making the high-reaction ball illegal, I wanted to outlaw the whip-shaft club, and Jim wanted to melt down all platinum-inset clubheads. We nearly came to blows over it while Hartley sat there quietly smiling, waiting till we ran out of steam. At last, during a pause for heavy breathing, he said, "All of you are wrong, you know. Everything you've suggested is regressive, a step backward. What we want to do is take a big leap forward. Something that will revolutionize the game and put the challenge back into it."

From the way he settled back with a smug grin we knew he was all ready with some idea, and that ominous "we" meant the rest of us would be in it too, up to our lucky hats. With a sinking but somehow happy feeling, I realized that life had gotten awfully tame of late, and even though one part of me whispered, "Al, you're getting too old," I knew, and obviously so did Bill and Jim, that we were going to have at least one last wild fling.

Hartley motioned us to the table, while Bill got him some paper and a scribe, and soon sketches were strewn around. "First," he said, "is reduced air friction but better stability. I think I got the ultimate design, but it just isn't enough to make a substantial difference in distance. So what I did was to design and install a mini-jet engine. Fires on impact. I've test-proved it at a thousand yards a drive."

There was dead silence while the awesome fact sank in. But then, legal mind humming, Bill jumped in with, "How could you use the damned thing

for approaches and putts? You know you aren't allowed to switch balls."

Hartley never turned a hair. "I told you," he said simply, "I've been thinking about this for years. Twenty, to be exact. The mini-jet is a plug-in that can only be used once. But the ball is perfectly balanced whether it's primed or expended. You drive with the jet, then play normally till you hole out. At the next tee you replace the jet with a fresh one."

"O.K.," I said. "You've got balance. But that stability you spoke of was for a regular ball. What's going to keep this one in line?"

"Dead on, Al," Hartley laughed, "and just what I expected from you. I've also installed a mini-gyro that runs off the jet. You can still hook, slice, or fade, but no more than with a regular ball, relatively speaking. It compensates exactly for the extra power and distance."

Last Jim spoke up. "What I can't see is what course in the world you'd play it on. That is," and his face turned a little pale, "unless you want us to cough up and build our own course." For a moment, I'm certain, all three of us thought the same. But what Hartley had in mind was nowhere near as simple as that.

"No way," he barked indignantly. "That would defeat the whole purpose, which is to rescue golf from going the way professional basketball did. There *are* other courses that will do; that's where our foursome is ideal." Then he straightened up. "No more questions, please. It's time to get down to work.

"The play is," he went on, "to use not one course but three: the three right here in our river valley within a four kilometer stretch. We'll rotate a hole on each for the full eighteen. That's where you come in, Jim. You have to make a 3-D map of the area, down to the last detail, to fit those new aircraft viewers." He waved off Jim's spluttering question about how we'd carry them with a flat, "We'll improvise, if necessary.

"Now Al," he pushed a sheet toward me, "you've got a harder job. I've made room in the ball for the micro-chip location beacon. But remember the delicate balance. You build it. After all, you'd need help to find any ball at a thousand yards. And you'll also want an inconspicuous version to clip to the top of each flag pin. We're not likely to have a line of sight."

Last he looked long and hard at Bill. "Two things for the legal department. First, I want you to pull some corporate strings and get hold of four Jefferson Personal Propulsion Packs. The Pentagon seems to think they're for the sole use of military personnel." He slapped the table. "Dammit, when we designed them at NASA we said they were too useful to be left to the generals." He shot a finger at me. "Note, Al, they have a twenty-two channel direction finder built in. Why, you'd think I'd thrown that in just for us." He looked wolfish. "Think! Eighteen holes, three other players, the ball."

Bill buried his head in his hands and muttered, "Why not give me something hard?" Then he looked up and whispered, "Oh no. The second thing."

Hartley smiled sweetly, which if anything was more ominous than his smug smile. "Well," he sighed, "where might the ball take us, accidentally?" More prophetic words were never spoken.

You know of course that we got the packs, Jim produced the maps, and I built the location beacons. We worked out all the kinks on Jim's ranch, while his manager, foreman, and hands all politely looked the other way and kept their mouths shut. If I do say so myself, we knew to a yard where everyone was, and could land with a foot on either side of our ball. As for accurate drives, we were soon dropping them close enough to our green for a standard approach or chip. And Jim's maps were things of beauty, taken from aerial shots and detailed down to the shrubs and flower beds. A bonus was that Jefferson had since built viewers into the packs, as well as infra-red scanners for night "hopping." Not that we needed those right away: there was a fair amount of light after the course closed, on our long northern summer nights. And surprising enough, all of us were still in good enough shape so we had absolutely no trouble getting the hang of "hopping" with a bag of clubs.

The night of our first round was beautiful: clear, calm, and a bit crisp. We'd decided after long study what rotation we'd use, and so had set out earlier to slip the beacons onto the proper flag-pins on all three courses. The Riverside and Victoria were easy, being public, and the Valley View was our own. Jim, ever practical, clipped a map to a board and strolled onto each course to cap the pins. No one gave him a second glance.

Then, at ten-thirty, on the deserted Riverside ninth tee, we stepped up and drove. Oh, how we drove! Each ball went up and up, with a fade to the left, out of sight over the bridge and the Riverside Flats. As we followed, soaring discretely through the valley parkland, we were brash graduates again. All four balls had landed in the Legislature grounds and were easily found. But here we made one revision in the original plans and fitted new jets for the second drive. Again, it was a thrilling sight as those four balls disappeared over the approach to the High Level Bridge, with enough power to clear the Royal Glenora buildings. Sure enough, all but Bill's dropped onto the fourteenth fairway of the Victoria. Then as Bill settled after his ball, into the trees on the far side, two figures burst out, clutching clothes and running madly for the River Road. It was funny enough from where we stood, but when Bill had played out and told us what the young couple were doing, and their reaction as he literally dropped in on them, we doubled up with laughter.

That night nothing came of it, but after the brilliant success of our first round we kept surprising people, some of them doing quite innocent things,

and eventually the stories of flying men carrying golf bags were taken seriously. Even at that, we might have gotten away with it longer, until we had everything arranged to meet the press on our own terms, if Jim hadn't hooked one into the Waltherdale power plant and Bill hadn't lofted one onto the Legislature Rotunda. Jim barely got his drive away and "hopped" the fence a foot ahead of the security guard, who gave an extraordinarily accurate description of him and the pack to police and newshounds. But it was Bill, balancing precariously on the Legislature roof, who was caught on the backswing, so to speak, by a professional photographer out to take a "post-card" night shot. The picture, blown up in all its glory, went international. Well yes, Miss Grayson, maybe it was better publicity than we could have drummed up ourselves.

The rest you know. We never even faced prosecution before North America went mad over the idea. For once the pros jumped in first and worried later about haggling. So now there are twenty-four inter-course tournament. No, the name wasn't our idea. Oh, Hartford too? Twenty-five then. In two years!

Regrets? Hell no! Bill's working full-time with the PGA on right-of-way, trespass, even the furor with the FAA about courses near airports. Jim has the contract for maps used in all tournaments. Hartley and I have all the patents on the ball. Mostly, though, it's been the satisfaction of restoring a real challenge to the game. One thing did bother us; the average duffer couldn't get into the action. But we're getting the costs down now, and we've persuaded Jefferson and the Pentagon to release a basic pack to the public. That should end the pro-monopoly.

And though we hadn't intended it yet, Miss Grayson, I suppose this is as good a time as any to break the latest news. Yes, a real scoop for you. You see, we've perfected another ball that flies accurately up to four kilometers. We intend to give the phrase Inter-State Tournament a whole new literal meaning. Then, who knows . . . how does Coast-to-Coast grab you?

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In the Dry Lands

by Eileen Kernaghan

i

The gods of this southern country have no eyes.
In the blind streets they wait,
in courtyards walled against the sun.
Moon-bland, immaculate as stones
they smile and stare,
accepting blindly
the service that men do them,
the sacrifice
habitual
as sun and dust.

Their eyes look inward to the sweet
waters and the cool sea-gardens.
The stars turn smoothly in their sockets.
Men ask no more of them.

ii

Nightlong above the hills, above
the raw towers of my country,
the eyes of the Goddess burn
like ice and fire.

There at the wind's back, in the night
cave, our perilous mother
weaves from our blood leaf, tree,
flesh, bone,
and from our veins, from our rich
deaths, the rivers run
like skeins of silk.

Looking - Glass

by Ron Stewart
art by Gordon Snyder

In the year of Our Lord 1743, at the settlement of La Havre, Acadia, the death of one of our parishioners and the events subsequent to his interment have prompted me to write this letter to you, hoping that it finds you in good health and arrives with God's speed. We are in great trouble, for there are demons among us.

This is a most disturbing tale, and I shall attempt to tell it from its beginning, yet alas I confess that I am not sure from whence the root of this monstrous evil comes. My lay brother, Arnault, and I were summoned to the bedside of Gaston Seguin, innkeeper, to hear his dying words. What follows is his tale.

* * * *

It is with great trepidation, now as the final hour of death draws near, I shall relate the strange events of that night forty-five years ago, the consequences of which have subverted the underpinning of faith a Christian upbringing bestowed upon me, of the covenant of men and angels, and the peace and promise of resurrection to eternal life.

He was a stranger, with face drawn and pale, not from life's trials, but from a greater horror, which I must now share. I remember most of all his eyes, slate grey and distant as if veiled. There was about him a perfume, not of honest men, but a strange aroma, a mixture of sea and of cinnamon, perhaps the scent of trade winds and spice islands. I did not fear him then.

It was October, the final gasp of the dead summer, winds that sweep across deserted fields to rattle weathercocks, a week of the waning moon. I wandered through a dusk which lay draped and dying, across rustling stalks of frozen corn, with Taffy, my setter, to attend to some of the small things that fill the long day of an Acadian innkeeper. We wandered across the slope skirting the marsh, east, toward the silent river.

It was Taffy who gave the first clue to the stranger's presence. She stopped, testing the air, making a great commotion. Her hackles were up as she sniffed the breeze. She continued a great hubbub and looked fearfully toward the shadowy trees of the distant bog. Concerned, I turned and was able

in the falling light to discern a figure making its way up through the willows. I chided Taffy for being taken in by what was surely a riverman making his way from a hasty evening mooring to the comforts of our fire, our stopping-house being long established and well thought of by the travellers of the river. Taffy, seeing I had no intention of retreat, abandoned me to my foolishness, and with a howl, ran for the safety of the coach-house.

I waited alone as he ambled up through the pasture and across a cornfield, knocking aside the standing stalks. Then he stopped to peer over his shoulder toward the dark trees from whence he came. Perhaps he was not alone, I thought, but could see no light or companion following. He had upon his back a chest, of the type sailors carry. It sat heavy on his shoulders, and he shifted his weight as he continued his climb toward me. As he drew near, I could make out in the last light that swept the hilltop that his clothes were of a strange cut. His boots, scuffed and heavily worn, were black as the devil's heart.

We were alone with the shadows that night. Few travellers ply the waters when the gales of October blow. He maintained a stony silence throughout his meal, hunched at his table, peering out the window into the darkness. This was not unusual. The rivermen were, as a rule, a quiet lot, keeping to themselves, not partial to outsiders. It was all the same to me; if a man wished to chat over ale, I was happy to oblige and refill his tankard. If not, who was I to complain? A man's thoughts are his own.

His face was white and taut. At first I put it down to drink, yet as he sat alone, I saw it was a greater Something which furrowed his brow and dragged him deeper into his cup. I brought his bottle in silence, as he motioned me to sit.

He told me a tale which seems, as the years unfold, ever more sinister; yet it is true, just as he told it that night. It is that certainty which fills me with dread as the grave waits deep and yawning for me.

His was such a wild, improbable tale that I scarcely know where I should begin. He told of devils and demons and of the dark places he had been. He told of distant shores and strange things never seen by Christian men.

He said the world was more mysterious than I might imagine, and that we float like leaves upon a great silver river. Our everyday world is nothing more than a reflection upon the surface of a deep pool. It is in this pool where all our yesterdays, all the yesterdays of all creation, finally come to rest. Our lives merely ride along on the current; being born, we are passed along from eddy to eddy, until we die and our souls settle into the darkness of the years, only to be renewed, cast up on some distant shore to be reworked by the stream, turned over and worn smooth, as if they were stones.

He spoke of the secret places of the silver river, of the pools where childhood dreams sleep, and of the voices which called to him. He spoke of



GORDAN SWYDER ©1989

jasmine-perfumed cities and ancient mountains of beryl, where every morning star and every wish draped its crystal, and death was a stranger. The children of the jasmine city sang in the silver river and never grew old, but tarried in the depths, casting dreams as one might toss a pebble. He could still hear their singing. He had tarried there, tasted honeyed visions and slept among the poppies. But all things have a season; all too soon, it had been time to go, to enter the dark places of the river, slip past the watchful demons to cast about the deep pools, searching for yet another Eden.

He said there was no Heaven, no Almighty watching over our dark passage from birth to oblivion. There were only the demons of the river, who lurk below the silver surface of the pools, waiting to snare the unwary soul, as a silent trout pulls a green dragonfly into the darkness.

It was blasphemy, I told him, to speak of such things. I told him of the teachings of the good sisters and prayed for his soul; yet I feared it was already irrevocably lost. I felt sure that the Lord himself would strike this sinner dead, here upon my very doorstep, and I told him so. He did not seem disturbed at the idea, and threw his arms toward the rafters and called upon the Almighty to smite him where he sat. I confess I was worried for my taproom, not being certain what the Almighty might choose to unleash upon this mad sinner. But it seemed that the Lord would choose his own moment to strike, and it would come soon enough. But I will speak of this in good time.

It was not the Almighty whom he feared. This strange man, who would curse the angels, seemed to fear only looking-glasses.

As he told his tale, punctuated with demands for more drink, he had tossed a bottle at a small mirror in the corner. I had reproached him for this act of wanton destruction, as he sat in silence. At my suggestion that he pay his tab and leave, he tossed a handful of heavy coins over the back of the bar, evidently thinking better of his action, considering that the night was now full-blown, with the wind beating about the gables. It was a small trifle; I shrugged the matter off.

At the end of the taproom is a huge mirror. As it had cost a great deal of money, it was our custom to keep it draped to prevent accidental breakage should one of our patrons feel the need to throw something. Considering the fate of its smaller cousin at the hands of this madman, it was well he did not know of it. I found it ironic that this stranger spoke of his dread of looking-glasses, scarcely ten feet from the largest mirror in this part of Acadia.

He told me he feared the night, for it was between set of sun and daybreak that the demons and devils which lurk in the silver river move close to the surface of the stream, watching, hoping to snare the unwary. He told me every looking-glass was a portal, and at each there were the watchers, peering in, hiding just behind the glass.

He said he knew all of this because he possessed a treasure in the form

of a magic charm, an amulet which would allow him to slip like a shadow into the depths of the silver river, through the portal of a simple looking-glass. It was then that he showed it to me. He was wearing it around his neck, as one might wear a crucifix, on the end of a slender golden chain. It was then that I became certain of his madness.

It seemed unremarkable. It was just a silver shilling, very old but otherwise quite ordinary. To claim that this simple coin would enable him to move through the centuries was nothing more than the fabrication of a lunatic.

I thought it foolish to ask for some demonstration of the power of his magic talisman. It would only needlessly anger the madman. No doubt his great treasure was nothing more than a small coin he had managed to steal from some guard, or perhaps found in a gutter. I was sure at this very moment men and dogs were fast on his trail, there being no doubt at all in my mind that he had escaped from the asylum at La Havre. It seemed a small thing to let the lunatic believe whatever he wished. The Good Lord had seen fit to deprive him of the faculties with which other men are blessed: those of common sense and an understanding of the Scriptures. I was sure that God would not take offence at the ravings of a fool. I would keep this madman talking until he passed out, and in the morning I would fetch the authorities. This was nonsense he was talking, Father! There could not be devils that lie in wait behind silver looking-glasses! He said they waited for him, these demons of the dark places, waiting to slip out of the looking-glass to steal his soul, to punish him for his trespass of the centuries, to destroy him for betraying the secret of the looking-glass.

I did not believe him, then.

He had become very agitated as he told me his fantastic tale, no doubt inspired by the great quantities of ale he had consumed during the fabrication of this outlandish yarn. He made me swear I would not let him sleep this night; we must stay awake until dawn. He was very tired and very drunk as he rambled through this outburst, and one could hardly be held to an oath made to a man mad with drink and lack of sleep, so I promised I would respect his wishes.

It was late. He had worked himself into such a state he could no longer fend off the opium of exhaustion. The rum and ale, combined with his lack of sleep, finally dragged him down. He collapsed in his chair, unconscious. It was only Christian that I lay him out in the taproom with his sea-chest and cover him against the night's chill. I retired to my own rooms aloft.

I do not know how the devils found him, but I heard his screams. I rushed from my bed to peer through the doorway toward the taproom. There in the darkness beneath the indifferent glass, I saw them, Father, dark shapes; like shadows they moved, the black fears that God had overlooked when He made

the world.

Like dark dogs they worried and fought over his body, their screaming growing ever-louder. A demon larger than the rest drew back, and I saw that it held aloft the magic shilling. Suddenly, they grew silent, and only the moaning of the stranger could be heard. From out of the folds of his cloak, the large demon drew a great hammer and an iron spike, crimson and still glowing, as if just drawn from the devil's forge. With a single blow from the terrible hammer, the glowing spike was driven deep into the brain of the stranger, pinning his magic shilling to his forehead like a moth on a collector's needle.

In the east, the sun began to rise. As a shadow retreats before a candle-flame, the demons slipped away into the great glass. Then, as I heard the first cock's crow, all grew silent — the night had ended.

I caught up my axe and smashed the huge mirror. From the taproom, I brought the stranger's sea-chest. It was filled with strange gold coins. I took not a sou for myself, Father. This was the money of the devil! I wanted it only out of my sight. Careful not to touch the cursed shilling which still smouldered against the stranger's skull, I stuffed the body into the sea-chest and dragged it into the field. I buried him, chest and all, at the base of the oak. Then I prayed.

But I could find no relief in my prayers, Father. Every night, I am sure these demons wait for me. I have prayed ever day to the Blessed Virgin. I have built a shrine, and give all my goods to the glory of God. Yet I can find no peace. I fear that God does not hear. I do not know what lies beyond. What is to become of me now that I am old? Will my soul descend into the depths of the silver river? Bless me, Father, for I am old and perhaps the Almighty has forgotten his servant, Seguin.

* * * *

With that, the old man died. Brother Arnault and I did not know what to make of this wild tale. We prayed over the body, lit candles, and the following afternoon, we made preparations for the interment. It would be a simple service; none would be present but Arnault and myself, Seguin having no friends or family that we knew of. It was while Arnault was digging the grave in the field that I noticed the depression which marked the site of the murdered seaman as indicated by Seguin.

Most Holy Father, what was I to do? I did not know if the murdered man had been a Christian. But after some reflection, I thought it wise to provide a proper service for the seaman, and to put to rest this monstrous tale of demons and devils, lest it spread and infect our community. I thought it right to confront these demons where they lay. So I instructed Arnault to open the second grave.

Would it have been right to leave the gold in the ground? If this story was

true, perhaps the gold of the stranger could be put to use in the service of God. There are still many heathen to convert, and the devil lurks behind every tree.

It took only a few minutes to expose the rotting sea-chest. It was exactly as Seguin had described it. When we attempted to remove it from the damp, clinging earth, the lid came away in our hands, revealing the horror within. The yellow bones were crumbling to bits among the gold coins which filled the box to bursting. On the musty skull the black shilling was spiked above the eyes, dark and evil. That much at least of the tale had been true.

It was only with the greatest difficulty that I restrained Brother Arnault, who, transfixed by the sight of so much wealth, fell to his knees and began to paw the remains like a ghoul, filling his pockets. It was only after repeated stern warnings that we were not here as jackals to rob the dead, but to do God's work, that he reluctantly ceased. I had to reproach him many times before he surrendered the gold pieces. He picked at the earth with his shovel and muttered to himself oaths which I chose not to hear. I have no doubt that this was the hardest thing poor Arnault had ever done. A single coin was more wealth than he could have ever hoped to possess. I pray that a merciful God will forgive these lapses of his faithful servant.

I blessed the bones and arranged them as best I could. The cursed token which had brought about all this ruin, I left interred with the remains in the hope that the evil might be swallowed by the earth and forever pass out of the hands of men. How foolish of me, Most Holy Father! Evil finds its own. The sightless eyes stared back at me from that damp hole as the silver shilling, now corroded to green-black, clung to the forehead like an obscene fungus, enfolding the decaying iron spike that held it there.

I should have watched him. I did not, and so I am responsible for the death of Arnault, and for unleashing the demons which are now among us. I turned my back for but a moment, yet sadly that was enough. As he was refitting the lid, Arnault must have plucked the iron spike from the skull and secreted the silver shilling in his shirt. For a moment, he must have waited to see if I had noticed. When he saw that I had not, he quickly shovelled earth into the grave, covering up his crime. We boarded up the inn, and returned to our mission.

For several days, that evil talisman must have festered in his soul, clutching at him, whispering to Arnault in the darkness. The changes in him soon became apparent. He would slip away to his room, muttering to himself. It was a slow, insidious thing, this rotting of his soul. I had never heard Arnault question the teachings of the Church, yet now he began to ask some very disturbing questions about this world and the hereafter. I confess that I could not answer some of his queries. This seemed to amuse him greatly, as if he were privy to some great secret that I was not.

On the third night, Arnault retired to his room and I later took to my own.

But I was troubled and had difficulty sleeping. It was much later that I first heard the mutterings and strange sounds which emanated from his tiny bedroom. Thinking that perhaps he was in some distress, I knocked and entered the room. But he was not there. I waited for him for several minutes, thinking that perhaps he might be ill. But I checked the mission and the out-buildings and could see him nowhere. I thought at the time that he might have been troubled and simply gone for a walk under the stars. I realize now how foolish this was. His coat was still on the peg, and a heavy frost lay upon the ground. Still troubled, I returned to my bed.

When I queried Arnault in the morning as to his absence, he became extremely agitated and screamed that he had been at my beck and call from sunup to sundown; surely the time of darkness was his to do with as he wished. I thought it an odd choice of words at the time. Nothing more I could say would induce Arnault to speak of it again.

We said no more that day, in fact. He went about his chores with less than his usual enthusiasm, finishing up with the cattle just as dusk was settling over the frosted poplars. He seemed unwilling to be with me, and took his dinner alone in his room.

It was much later, as I was about to retire, that I looked in on him. I thought to say something which might ease the bad feeling which seemed to be growing between us. But, as before, his room was empty.

This time, I knew that something was greatly amiss. There was but one doorway to this room, and I had been sitting in view of it all evening, poring over the records of the parish. Arnault had not crossed the threshold. There was a faint possibility that Arnault could have escaped through the tiny window, yet I confess I could see no reason why he might. I checked the window latch, and found it securely fastened, covered with frost and looking as if it had not been opened for several years. By whatever route Arnault had escaped, it had not been the window.

It was then that I noticed the looking-glass on the wall. Arnault had purchased it several years before, and I had chided him for his vanity. What would a simple Jesuit lay brother need with a large mirror, the like of which might be found in a lady's parlour? Arnault said he bought it so that he would have something to look at which was more handsome than either myself or the cattle. It was Arnault's opinion that the cows and I were equals in that respect. I remember we both laughed over it.

It was only then that I began to think of the strange story of Seguin's madman. Until that moment, I had thought it merely the yarning of a rum-soaked seaman having a bit of sport with a young, over-imaginative inn-keeper. How wrong I was!

I went to fetch my lantern. By its light, I closely scrutinized the surface of the looking-glass. I confess, I did not have the slightest idea for what I was

searching. It seemed to be a fool's mission, I thought, as I looked into the silver glass, seeing my own reflection peering intently back. It was only when I turned at an angle and looked along the surface of the glass that I noticed a difference. There seemed to be a shadow moving through the silvered depths, as a great fish might stir the water with its passing. It happened only once, and try as I might, I could not repeat the occurrence. I was sure it had been nothing more than a trick of the light. Seeing that there was nothing more I might accomplish, I sat upon Arnault's bed to reflect upon his strange disappearance. I was not pleased with this turn of events, and planned to have stern words with Arnault when he returned, for having worried me so.

He never reached home. It was just before dawn that I awoke to the screaming. The sight which greeted my eyes, Father, was beyond my faith. The monstrous tale of the madman was true. Arnault was trying to return through the mirror but was trapped by a multitude of devils and dark demons which fought and clawed at him as he tried to escape his silver prison.

The howling of the demons was matched by my own as I rushed to the assistance of my stricken brother. Arnault was frantically beating at the shadows with his battered hands, and screaming that I must run and get away from the glass, to hide until morning. Arnault still clutched in his fingers the magic amulet which had brought about his ruin. The evil glass was no longer silver, but the color of ink, and reeked with the stench of hell, a pestilence unleashed upon the world. Like bloated corpses, creeping horrors spawned of nightmares drifted up out of that coal-black sea to claim the soul of Arnault. At that instant, he threw the charm out of the glass, to me. Then he was gone.

The silver looking-glass heaved and boiled like a great cauldron as Arnault slipped from sight like a stone dropped in a bog. Slowly, a change came over the glass and it returned to its former state, calm, silver, serene. It was only then that I saw sunlight streaming through the window. The night had ended.

I want to be strong, Father, but I hear them in the darkness. Arnault is gone, and I am alone. I will secrete this message in the cache along the river in the hope that it will reach you. Even as I write this, the silver shilling hangs about my neck like a millstone. I have looked into the glass. They call to me, Father. I have touched the secret places where the heart weeps. I have drunk of the silver river. Perhaps I am already theirs.

A Helping Hand

by Lyle Weis
art by Marc Holmes

She ignored the stares from the other shoppers as she rushed to the stairs, almost dragging her young son along behind her. The expression on his face, a mixture of fear and pain, probably made people think she was about to shove him into a corner and beat him senseless. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

They clattered down the stairs. She held his hand tightly while guiding their flight to the bottom. Halfway, she urged him, "Only a little further, honey. We're almost there!"

At last. But suddenly, she pulled him up short and stood, dazedly, staring. There, on the door, hung a hand-lettered sign:

*"Washroom temporarily out of order —
use washroom at north mall entrance."*

Her son, a small blond-haired boy of four years, squirmed and tugged at her hand. His voice was urgent, begging.

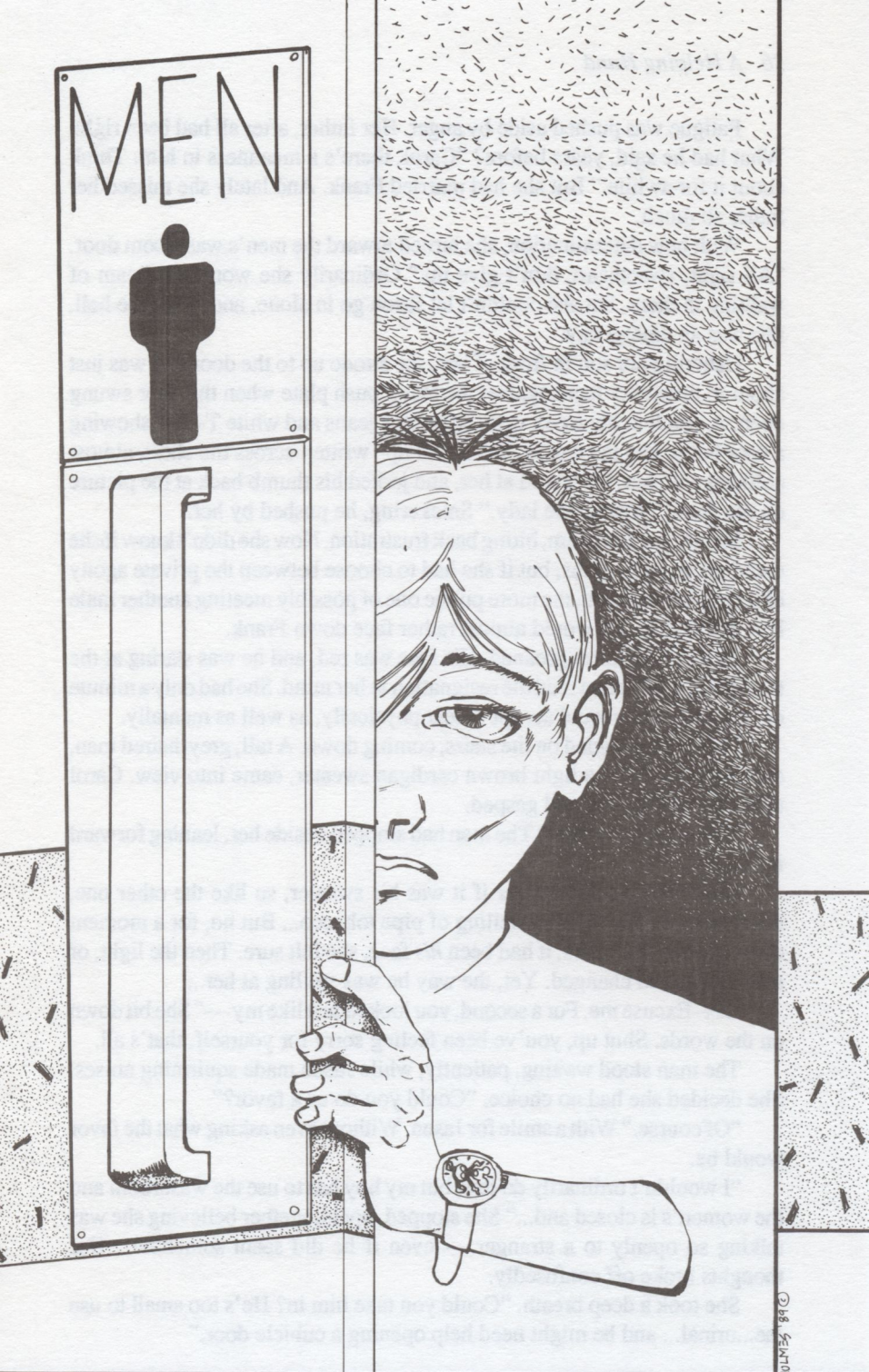
"Come ON ! Mommy !!! I really gotta go!"

His mother looked at him, then back at the sign, muttering a curse upon the owners of the mall. After rushing all the way from the video rentals shop, to *this* end of the mall, which was in the opposite direction of the washrooms in the department store, to find the Women's closed. She glanced at a matching door a few feet away, one with a black silhouette of a male on white plastic background: of course, no sign there.

"Honey," she bent down to explain, "the sign says it's closed. We'll have to go to another one."

The boy's face tightened in panic and he pleaded, "No, Mommy, it has to be now!" Tears, not quite spilling over his round smooth cheeks, welled up at his eyes. "I promised Daddy — no more accidents." He shook his head firmly, rapidly.

I know, I know, she answered silently. Suddenly, she felt very tired, exhausted. It was almost 5:30. Frank would be home, waiting for the roast in the oven to finish. Waiting for her and Jason. Waiting by now with — what? — his third scotch already after work. If Jason came home with another pair of wet pants....



Fatigue was pushed aside by anger. Her father, after all had been right. What had he said, years before? "Carol, there's a meanness in him. Think about it for awhile." But she had married Frank. And lately she missed her father so much.

With new determination, she turned toward the men's washroom door. "All right, sweetheart, don't give up." Ordinarily she wouldn't dream of walking in there, but she couldn't let Jason go in alone, and, what the hell, this was an emergency.

Ushering her son in front of her, she strode up to the door and was just about to thrust her hand against the metal push plate when the door swung open. A youth in his teens, dressed in blue jeans and white T-shirt showing a beer bottle and the words "Suck 'em up" written across the chest, almost collided with her. He leered at her, and jerked his thumb back at the picture on the door, "Wrong one lady." Snickering, he pushed by her.

She shrank from him, biting back frustration. Now she didn't know if she could go in. Ridiculous, but if she had to choose between the private agony of facing her husband, the more public one of possibly meeting another male like that inside, she would almost rather face down Frank.

Beside her, Jason groaned. His face was red, and he was staring at the tiled floor, as if he had read the resignation in her mind. She had only a minute or two before he would accept defeat physically, as well as mentally.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, coming down. A tall, grey-haired man, dressed casually in a light brown cardigan sweater, came into view. Carol took one look at him and gasped.

"Is anything wrong?" The man had stopped beside her, leaning forward in concern.

Later, she would wonder if it was his sweater, so like the other one, familiar to her touch and smelling of pipe tobacco... But no, for a moment coming down the stairs, it had been *his* face, she felt sure. Then the light, or something, had changed. Yet, the way he was smiling at her...

"Ex-Excuse me. For a second, you looked just like my —" She bit down on the words. Shut up, you've been feeling sorry for yourself, that's all.

The man stood waiting, patiently, while Jason made squirming noises. She decided she had no choice. "Could you do us a favor?"

"Of course." With a smile for Jason. Without even asking what the favor would be.

"I wouldn't ordinarily do this, but my boy has to use the washroom and the women's is closed and..." She stopped, not altogether believing she was talking so openly to a stranger — even if he did seem somehow... Her thoughts broke off confusedly.

She took a deep breath. "Could you take him in? He's too small to use the...urinal... and he might need help opening a cubicle door."

The older man studied them both for a moment. "Why, of course," he answered. "Come along, son."

He held out his hand to Jason, pushed open the door and the two of them disappeared inside. It's all right, she told herself, I have a feeling about him. He's a gentleman. We're lucky he came along when he did.

* * * *

The man's hand was large, yet felt warm and comforting. Jason glanced up at the stranger, but could only see the side of the tall man's jaw and chin. The boy walked quickly, stiffly, his stomach and upper leg muscles clenched against the pressure of his bladder.

They crossed the brown tiled floor in the direction of the toilet cubicles. Their footsteps echoed against the pale brown walls. Jason was only vaguely aware that they were alone in the washroom.

The man pushed back the metal door of the nearest stall, guiding Jason forward with a hand on his back. Immediately Jason began pulling his corduroy pants down in the front — zippers would come later, when things were less complicated, his mother said. Then he stopped, though he could already feel the first warm drops forming on the end of his penis. He looked around at the man.

"Do you need some help?" the man asked, leaning forward a bit, Jason shook his head. "Could you close the door, please?"

"Certainly." And the metal door clicked shut. In the same instant, Jason tugged the pants and undershorts down and a powerful jet of yellow water arched forward, some of it hitting the back of the seat, but most of it, on target, churning the water in the bowl.

Jason panted in relief as the tears came. "I made it," he whispered to himself. "I made it. No accident this time."

He stood silently for a few moments, while the urine flowed more weakly, then dripped to a stop. Sighing, he pulled his clothes up, pushed the chrome lever down. He stepped back against the door and watched in pleasure as the toilet rushed and roared and once more the water was clear and clean.

When the toilet stopped flushing, the washroom was once again silent, and Jason closed his eyes, smiling. He pried the door open with his fingers and stepped out of the cubicle. To his right, four sinks were mounted on the tiled wall. Beyond the last sink, next to the wall, was a mirror.

"Everything come out all right?" The voice came from the mirror end of the room. It was the nice man. The voice chuckled softly to itself.

"Yes." Jason began to turn to leave when he stopped. Mommy would want him to say "thank you." He reversed himself, walking one by one slowly past the open doors of the toilet stalls. "Where are you?"

"Here," the voice said simply, gently.

Past all four sinks and past the last empty stall. Coming finally to stand opposite the mirror, where he saw the man. "Thanks for helping me," he said to the man's reflection. "Oh, that was a small thing," the man's voice echoed from the mirror and Jason turned to look behind him at the man himself. And saw nothing.

Behind Jason was only dead space, a few feet of floor area between the wall and the metal side of the cubicle. He looked forward again. The grey-haired man was still there, a faint smile wrinkling his cheeks.

"Hey, how..." Jason's head swivelled back and forth before he understood. "Magic," the word escaped from his lips. Once in the mall he had seen a magician performing tricks, like making a bird disappear in a hat. An egg had even popped from Jason's ear. Now, he giggled as he stepped up to the mirror. A split second before he reached up to touch the glass, he realized something was wrong: "Where's me?"

The mirror had become completely blank. "Jason," the voice was at his ear now, and he felt hands on his shoulders. He felt the man's face next to his own.

"Jason, are you frightened?"

"No." It was true. The man's voice was soothing, he almost felt sleepy, like at bedtime. "Not any more."

"Why were you afraid before?"

He hesitated.

The hand rubbed his shoulder gently. "Was it," a hand appeared beside his face, pointing ahead to the mirror, "this?"

Jason looked, and the surface of the mirror began to move. The silver calm rippled, convulsed, as out of its depths swam a shape, a creature, a thing he knew....

His father. Twisting, turning, as if coming out of a nightmare, his mouth open, yelling in a silent rage. And then Jason could hear his father's words: "Bad. BAD! VERY BAD, YOU FILTHY LITTLE—"

And Jason could hear something else, as his father reached down to his waist.

Slip. Snick, and a little pop as it cleared the last loop. The belt. The belt was out.

Jason whimpered. "Daddy, please—" His body twisted, feet pushing backwards against the man behind him. "No, Daddy, noooo!" He spun and flung himself into the man's arms.

"There, there. It's all right. You're safe," the man comforted him. "Look, we can make it better now."

No. At first, shaking his head, he couldn't look. But finally he peeked over the man's arm. In amazement, he stared.

Daddy was still in the mirror, but he was sleeping. On the couch, the way

he fell asleep sometimes, an empty glass in his hand on his chest. His eyes were closed, his mouth partly open.

"See, it's not real," the nice old man said.

"Yeah," Jason agreed, but he wasn't so sure.

* * * *

What was taking so long? Jason's mother paced in front of the washroom door. A few moments before, she thought she had heard Jason's voice. If they didn't come out in another minute, she would have to—

The door moved. It opened a crack, then fell shut again with a tiny thump. She heard Jason on the other side, grunting, and the door moved again.

"Heavy, Mommy."

She reached out cautiously, so as not to knock him over, and pushed inwards. "Here you go, honey, Mommy's pushing. Watch out."

As the door swung back, Jason emerged, smiling. He came to her, putting his arms around her legs, hugging. "Made it, Mommy. I made it. No accident."

Relief. She kneeled down, hugged him back. "That's my boy. Well, I guess we better get going."

She turned, holding his hand, and began to mount the stairs. Then she remembered. The kind gentleman hadn't yet come out, and she wanted to thank him for the favour.

"Did you remember to say thank you to the nice man?" she asked her son.

"The nice man," Jason repeated, his eyes dreamy and faraway. "Oh, Grandpa's sleeping."

She faltered in mid-step on the stair. Her hand opened, fell away from his, and she stared at him as he continued up a few more steps.

Over a year earlier. Jason was barely three, and she held him in her arms as she passed the coffin. Her tears wet the angel-fine hair on her son's head, as she kissed and said, "It's all right, honey, Grandpa's sleeping."

Now, the stairwell seemed to have melted away from them, and all she could see were her son's eyes as he turned to face her. "Grandpa?" she whispered.

He blinked once, laughed and shook his head. "No, not Grandpa. I meant Daddy. Daddy's sleeping." He held out his hands.

"Come on, Mommy. Let's go home. Everything's fine now."

In the House of Dust

by Eileen Kernaghan

“There is the house whose people sit in darkness; dust is their food and clay their meat. They are clothed like birds with wings for coverings, they see no light, they sit in darkness.”

— *Gilgamesh* (trans. N.K. Sanders)

In time
 even the blood turns to dust
 lying thick in the heart's channels
 as the dust in these grey halls.
 There are others here, bat-shapes, dim presences.
 The dark spares me their faces,
 their lidless eyes.
 This is no place for mirrors.

My children
 in that other country
 set out spiced meat, wine, honey,
 a feat for shadows.
 Who would think such food, offered in love,
 could taste of ashes?

*Remember this, you who have come naked
 through the seventh gate.*

Remember.

We were not sent here to be punished.

Stone, clay, ash, bone,
 the spare furnishings of my tomb.
 In the end
 even the blood turns to dust
 in this sad room.

THE LUCK OF CHARLES HARCOURT

by Robert Runté

art by Adrian Kleinbergen

should have realized from the first that Charles Harcourt had a charmed life, but that first day I was thinking more about Ed Ferguson than I was about Charlie.

I was coming back from the file room when I heard Ed shouting in Mr. Petrie's office. You could hear Mr. Petrie raising his voice too, but by the time I realized what was happening, it was already too late. Ed came storming out shouting that he quit, that Petrie was a weasel and that the rest of us were fools to work for him. He emptied out his desk, making a big production out of it, slamming drawers and hurling insults at Mr. Petrie. Mr. Petrie just stood his ground and took it because there was little else he could do. You could see he was furious, but there was no point in ordering Ed to get out since that was obviously his own intention. At the door Ed got really nasty, saying how Mr. Petrie even cheated on his mistress, which we all knew well enough, but were shocked just the same to hear it said out loud. It was the most emotional scene I ever remember seeing in any office in which I've worked. We all stood there staring at the office door long after Ed Ferguson had slammed it closed on his career.

We were still transfixed with embarrassment and emotion when Charles Harcourt walked in through the same door. I think we half expected it to be Ed coming back to take another shot at Petrie, or maybe to apologize, and the entrance of this stranger broke the spell. As we turned away to busy ourselves shuffling papers or pretending to hunt for something in our desks, I heard Harcourt ask the receptionist if there were any openings in the company. Mr. Petrie turned back from his office and called out for the receptionist to "Send that man in to see me!" Within the hour, Charles Harcourt was installed at Ed Ferguson's desk.

I don't think Charlie had any really close friends, but we all got along pretty well in the office and we'd often do things together as a group after work. As time went on we all started to notice that Charlie had this phenomenal good luck. I mean, sometimes it would be big things like his being in the right place at the right time to get the job with the company,

but mostly it was trivial stuff.

Like a bunch of us would go over to the bank on our lunch hour, and there would be these horrendous lineups. Ever since they put in those instant cash machines, the bank has cut the number of real tellers in half, and it's just unbelievable during the lunch hour rush. We had this running joke in the office that no matter which lineup you got in, it always turned out to be the slowest moving line. Except for Charlie. Charlie would get in a line with ten people in front of him, when the lineup would suddenly melt away. People would realize that they had forgotten their bank book, or that they had filled in their deposit slip wrong, or that the cheque they had intended to cash was dated tomorrow, or that they should have been in the lineup for new accounts over at the other desk. And Charlie would be there at the teller's window while the rest of us were still nine or ten people back in another line. We soon learned to line up behind Charlie.

Or if we went out to the mall or a theatre after work — it could be the Christmas rush or the most popular play in town — Charlie would always find a parking spot right next to the door. He'd just be driving up when somebody would pull out of the lot, leaving the perfect parking place right in front of Charlie's bumper. Every time.

Same thing if there was ever any kind of office draw or pool going. At first people would sort of pressure Charlie into buying tickets because we figured that everyone should participate, but we slowly learned that Charlie would always win. If it was the sort of thing you could share, like a bottle of wine or something, Charlie always made a point of sharing it with the rest of the office, so you couldn't get sore about it — but it still took all the fun out of office pools, knowing ahead of time who was going to win. And it was no good getting him to buy a bunch of tickets on the principle that as long as he was going to win anyway he might as well contribute more, because he'd simply win second and third prize too.

And you couldn't trick his luck either. Once we tried having an "honourary" first prize of a stack of memo pads and saved the real prize for second place. We'd didn't even tell Charlie what the prizes were, but of course that time he came in second on the pool. It was weird. Eventually, we all just lost interest in organizing anything for the office.

It was the same with dates. Charlie, Norm Wilson and I used to go to one of those photo dating services every once in a while and triple date. We never expected too much, but it was better than singles' bars, and you never know. But of course we soon realized that we did know: Charlie always got the really hot number for his date. I mean, we'd all pick the date we wanted from the photo album but ours would turn out to be losers for one reason or another, and his would always turn out



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to be fantastic. Norm tried switching with Charlie a couple of times after Charlie had made his choice but before he had actually asked for the date, but it didn't work. It just meant that Norm's original choice turned out to be the better one after all. Norm even tried purposely picking a real dog one time to switch with Charlie, only she turned out to be really smart and funny and exactly the kind of woman you've always wanted to meet.

Naturally we all kidded Charlie about it, and he would just look embarrassed and pooh-pooh the whole thing and say how it was all in our heads. I remember one time in the cafeteria, Charlie was standing there trying to tell us that we were making this whole "luck" thing up just to bug him, until we noticed that the cashier had given him \$15 change for a ten dollar bill.

Sometimes he'd get really mad about it, like when a bunch of us wanted him to go in with us on a "Lotoluck Bonus Draw" ticket. He told us that lotteries were "a tax on the stupid" and that he thought they were immoral. When we pushed him a little he started yelling about how we were blowing the whole thing out of proportion, how he was sick of these jokes about his "good luck," and how we should knock it off if we were his friends. I'm embarrassed to admit that Norm kept insisting. Norm said that, as our friend, Charlie should be willing to share a little of his luck with us. Charlie just went nuts. He shouted at us that we weren't his friends at all since we were just interested in exploiting him, and to stop it once and for all, or else! He didn't get to say "or else what" because Mr. Petrie came out of his office to see what all the shouting was about. We all slunk back to our desks. We ended up buying the ticket by ourselves, but of course we just lost.

We didn't bring it up again for a long time after that, though it was always implicit. People would ask Charlie if he was going to the bank at lunch or if he was thinking of driving over to the mall after work, before making their own plans. You tried not to be obvious about it, but I guess we all exploited Charlie's luck in small ways.

Then one day, Mr. Petrie's brother-in-law came over to pressure Mr. Petrie into buying some tickets from their lodge. Petrie didn't want the tickets, and he never got along well with his brother-in-law, so he was pretty put out that he had to buy a whole booklet full of tickets to get rid of the guy. Then the brother-in-law made the mistake of joking how Petrie had wasted his money, because he himself had bought ten booklets and fully intended to win. Petrie was sufficiently petty to sick the poor bastard onto Charlie, just to make sure his brother-in-law lost. Charlie didn't want to buy a ticket either, but of course Mr. Petrie was his boss, so what could he do? Ten weeks later he was duly informed that he had won an all-expense-paid trip for two to the opening night of *The Play's*

the Thing in New York.

As usual, Charlie tried to give the tickets away, but without success. He offered them to me, but as luck would have it, they were for the same weekend as my brother's wedding. He offered them to Norm, but Norm had finally set up a date with that woman from the dating club. After months of trying to get her to forgive him for ever having hinted she was unattractive, Norm didn't want to blow his chances now by postponing it even for a week; and she flatly refused to fly to New York for the weekend on a first date. Charlie offered the tickets to Mr. Petrie, who was tempted since it would greatly annoy his brother-in-law, but his daughter was graduating that weekend, and family came first. Charlie offered to pass them on to Mr. Petrie's brother-in-law, not realizing how things stood, and Mr. Petrie made it clear that he thought Charlie should use those tickets himself, or else.

So like it or not, Charlie was stuck with the tickets. He was, as he confided to me one night, terrified at the prospect.

This was a little hard for me to grasp at first, but I gradually came to understand that Charlie lived in superstitious dread of his own phenomenal luck. Most of the time he simply refused to acknowledge that there was anything unusual happening. He was generally able to dismiss any particular incident with a perfectly rational explanation. After all, it was inevitable that some lineups would move faster than others, and even the best parking spots had to come empty sometimes. Someone was bound to have taken Ed Ferguson's job, just as Charlie was bound to find one sooner or later, so there was nothing unnatural or mystical about bringing the job and Charlie together. And yet, in his darker moments, Charlie had to admit that he had always had unusually good luck.

"I'm still young," he told me, crying into his beer, "but I'm using up all my luck at once! I wouldn't mind waiting in line sometimes or parking at the far edge of the lot, but I can't control it. I try to hang onto it until I really need it, until I'm in a life or death situation and need all the luck I can get, but you can't conserve it. I try not to be so lucky, but I can feel it leaking out, draining away, drying up. I hate when I win something, because it means I'm that much closer to running out."

"That's silly," I told him. "I'd think it would be great getting all those breaks all the time. I'd love to be as lucky as you are!"

"But don't you see," he said, "I'm using it up too fast! I'm wasting it on things that don't matter. Then when I need it, it will be gone!"

"Then the sensible thing to do," I argued, "would be to have a go at some big things now while you still can. Like the 'Lotoluck Bonus Draw.' Why don't you and I split a ticket — "

"No, no, no!" he shouted. "If you win big, you lose big too! It all has to balance in the end. There's nothing special about me. I don't deserve more than anybody else. Don't you see, if I keep winning like this it just means I'm getting my share of good all at once instead of in installments like everybody else. But then I'll have to take the bad all at once too, forever and ever, instead of mixed in with the good like other people."

"Yeah, but if you have the 10 million dollars, you can get through an awful lot of bad luck. A couple of major lotteries and you're fixed for life, no matter what happens after." I confess to a certain self-interest here, as I still had hopes of his going halves on a ticket.

"Someday I'm going to win something big and it's going to use up all the luck I have left. Then no matter how much I win or how hard I try to stay safe, that will be the end."

"Rubbish," I told him. But I began to see why he refused to play lotteries, and why he always tried to get rid of anything he won, and why he was so terrified about the trip to New York.

When he failed to give the tickets away he started to fear that this was *it*. After all, normally he should have been lucky enough to find someone who wanted them right away. So he tried to hide from his doom by ignoring the tickets. He made a blind date for that weekend and went out as if he had nowhere better to go. When he and his date went back to his place, they found a limousine waiting. He hadn't read the contest fine print which explained about the pickup and delivery service. His date was thrilled.

Embarrassed and fatalistic, he allowed himself to be bundled off to New York. He kept a nervous watch on events to see if his luck was still holding or whether things would start to go wrong. It was difficult to tell, however, since the contest organizers had put a lot of effort into seeing that everything went smoothly. The lack of airline delays, the quick limousine ride to the hotel, and the efficient manner in which the desk clerk switched them to a two-bedroom suite, were perhaps more indicative of the publicist's professionalism than Charlie's luck. Similarly, the next day's tour of art galleries and museums, the fine supper at the contest representative's favorite restaurant, and the best seats the theatre had to offer for what turned out to be a terrific play, could all be interpreted as part of the one big win which would shortly exhaust his supply of luck.

Nevertheless, Charlie started to relax. Things were going well, even with Julie, his date. Since he had clearly met her *after* winning the trip, Julie could not be considered as part of the same piece of luck. His luck therefore seemed to be holding. It was only the nagging knowledge that he had been unable to avoid the trip to New York that suggested that

the Fates had something special in store for him.

On the way back to the hotel, however, his driver left the freeway for a shortcut only to have the limousine break down in an unsavory section of town. The driver apologized profusely, the more so for seeing Charlie's stricken face, and ran off seeking a service station.

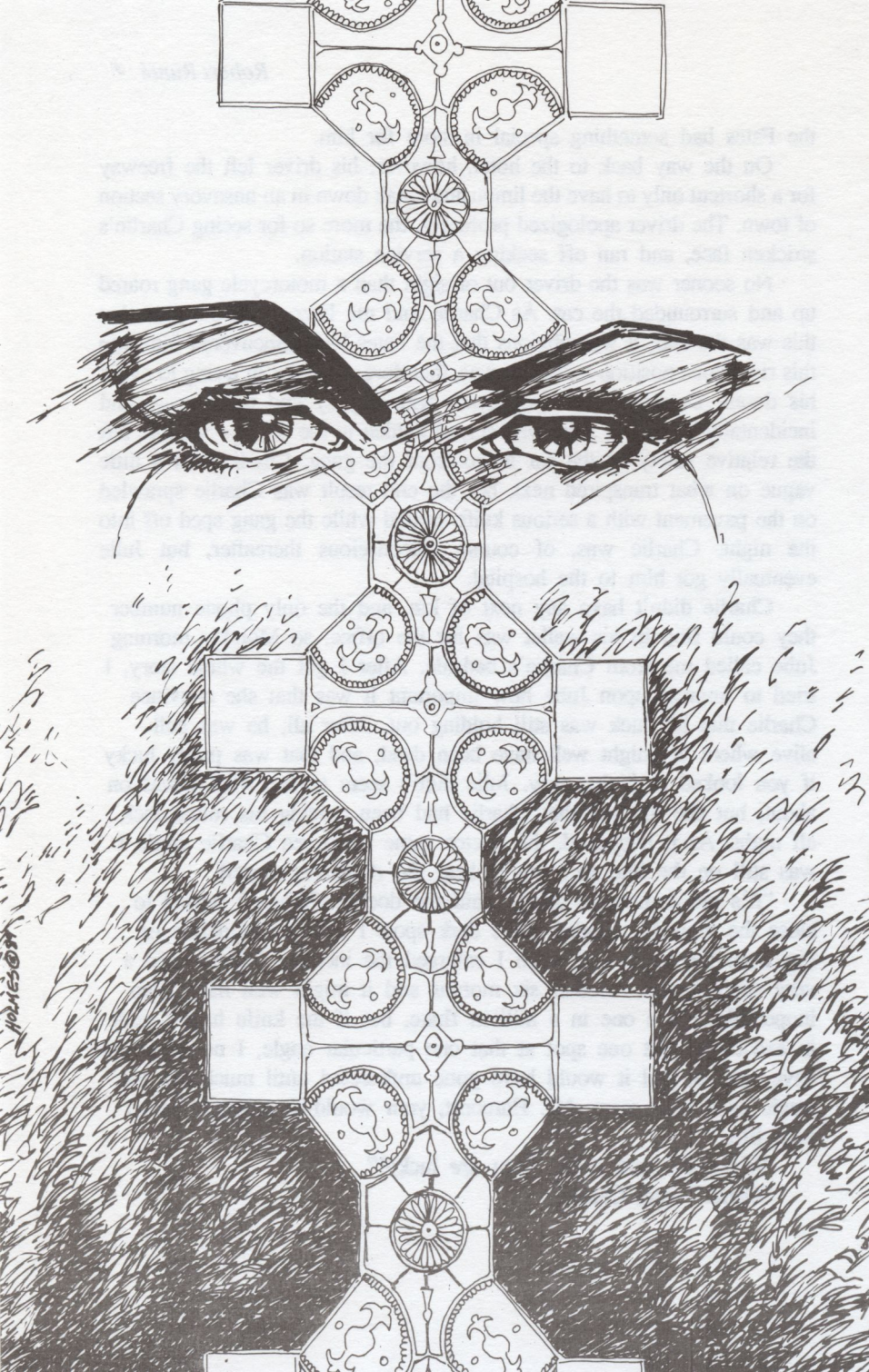
No sooner was the driver out of sight than a motorcycle gang roared up and surrounded the car. As Charlie told me later, he knew then that this was the end. It was obvious that the Fates had maneuvered him into this ridiculous position and there was, therefore, no point in trying to avoid his doom. Determined to face death with dignity and courage — and incidentally to protect Julie who stayed hidden in the limo — Charlie left the relative safety of the car to confront the gang. Charlie was a little vague on what transpired next, but the end result was Charlie sprawled on the pavement with a serious knife wound while the gang sped off into the night. Charlie was, of course, unconscious thereafter, but Julie eventually got him to the hospital.

Charlie didn't have any next of kin, and the only phone number they could find in his wallet was for the office, so Monday morning Julie called me from Charlie's bedside. After I got the whole story, I tried to impress upon Julie how important it was that she convince Charlie that his luck was still holding out. After all, he was still alive where he might well have been dead, and that was pretty lucky if you looked at it that way. Julie didn't seem to see what I was on about, but she did say that Charlie had been cursing his rotten luck all night. As it happened, the doctor came in to see Charlie while I was still on the line so I got to hear the diagnosis myself.

"It's the damndest thing," said the doctor. "When I started to close the wound I spotted some dark spots I took to be debris or dirt from the knife, but when I enlarged the incision I discovered a very nasty tumor. Another six months and it might well have been inoperable. It's a one in a million fluke, but if the knife hadn't gone in exactly at that one spot at that one particular angle, I never would have seen it, and it would have gone undetected until much too late. Ironic as it may seem, Mr. Harcourt, your would-be assailant saved your life."

"My god," said Julie, "You *are* lucky!"

"Damn!" said Charlie.



Her Eyes as Bright as Unsheat'h'd Swords

by Sally McBride
art by Marc Holmes

When he had been a slim, beautiful, topaz-eyed boy, the Emir had believed passionately in genies and lamps and flying carpets. Now he was really just a glorified businessman, overweight, tending to oily skin which made his balding head shine, and possessed of a wife who amid much interest from the Western press had gone to University to study law. Now he was finding it difficult to believe in much at all. He could rub the lamp, but no genie would appear.

Every morning was a fatalistic certainty that his chauffeur would not get him from the palace to his offices in the Parliament buildings without them both being blown sky-high. Today he noticed that his fingers resting on the white leather upholstery were leaving dark prints of sweat, and he carefully placed his hands on his thighs instead, where the charcoal linen of his suit pants would not show marks of tension. He watched the finger prints evaporate, and wondered how many American Express slips his wife was signing today in London, in the elegant, angular Kufic script she affected. She would be buying gifts for the children and for him, and thousands of English pounds' worth of clothes for herself and her mother. Those two left a bubbling wake of giddy clerks when they swept through Knightsbridge, and he was glad he wasn't there to witness it.

The Emir rubbed his temples and pictured himself cross-legged above the hot white city, on a rippling slice of his own dreams. The big limo bowed and veered, probably in response to a sudden movement in the crowd on the sidewalks: behind closed eyes, the Emir saw the city beneath reel as the wind buffeted him and fluttered the jewelled fringe of his carpet. Waves of heat and the scent of dung and spices rose around him in the brilliant air. He opened his eyes and watched the crowds, shadowed on the other side of the tinted Armorglass.

His wife Nuzbayah, her mother, and all the bodyguards, servants and luggage came back a week later. Bayah had a few days before classes resumed and she and the Emir spent some time together in the private

gardens. Her figure, which did not suit the designs of the Italian couturiers she favoured, was magnificent sprawled naked on a tablecloth among flowers, crumpled napkins and empty dishes. She rolled onto her stomach, twining her legs in the air behind her, and picking up the present she'd bought him at an auction at Sotheby's. It was a jewelled peacock the length of her thumb.

Its body was one unusually curved emerald crystal, etched in delicate rows of feathers. Its head was a sapphire surmounted by whisker-thin gold wires each supporting a ruby or emerald chip. The tail, an elegant fan of gold, was inlaid with lapis lazuli and malachite chosen for its resemblance to the peacock's eye-like plumage. Even the claws of its tiny feet were tipped with topaz.

She balanced the bird on its feet on the edge of a heavy silver platter. It perched jauntily, its eyes glittering almost fiercely in the sun that lanced through the oleander leaves swaying overhead. The air alternated in scents of dust and water as the breeze shifted around the garden. The fountains chattered endlessly; the sun squeezed unimagined heat from the tawny sandstone walls of the courtyard.

Nuzbayah plucked the stem from a cherry and bit delicately at its wine-black flesh.

"What has Ta-ta been up to lately?" she asked, her ruby-tipped fingers gently testing each cherry remaining in the bowl. Ta-ta was her name for Taruman, spiritual leader of the people of Izban. Taruman, engaged as he was in a battle to drag the people of Izban back into the middle-ages, aroused the derision of Nuzbayah, woman of the present. Bayah, the Emir realized, had cast aside her veil with an enthusiasm which verged dismayingly on vengeance. In her way she was as stubborn and unseeing as the old Wazir — his queen, his *begum* — passionate, vital, with no sense of history, no patience. His path to a possible future for their country was too slow for her; it was all too slow.

He watched her buttocks firm and soften as she swung her legs, crossed at the ankles to and fro behind her in the air. Her face was carefully serene, symmetrical, and yet her eyes were like a warrior's rowelled heels.

She ate another cherry and lanced her black eyes at him. Did she choose not to understand that her weapons would cut deeper from above a veil, all else but sword-points hidden? The Emir swallowed the thought unspoken. Do you know my thoughts, Bayah? I was brought up in the old ways and it's hard, so hard, to change.

"Taruman is going on some sort of retreat soon," he said. "To the mountains, among the faithful. I, for one, am glad — there is too much unrest in the city. He feeds just enough raw meat to the lion to keep it hungry." Bayah, he thought — leave it alone. Can't you see, my delicious wife, that

your goading makes it worse? Taruman understands his people better than you do, better than I; accept it. Accept the inevitability of time.

Moderation is my burden, he reflected. To me it is the right way; to them it is as meaningless as wind ruffling the fur of tigers. He loved Nuzbayah, he loved his country — its heat, its dust, its colours and smells, its ignorant, passionate people. But did he love what they were, or what they could become?

He wondered if Bayah thought of him still as the handsome, lithe man she had married fifteen years ago. He had been handsome — he knew it from the portraits of himself as a child, a youth, and as a young ruler, displayed in the palace's public rooms and in the echoing, air-conditioned stoned chambers of Parliament. He had learned to fence at public school in England, had learned to speak English like an Englishman, had mastered political science and business administration. He had made friends who had grown up to be as important and as busy and, probably, as unhappy as himself. He would have liked to have accompanied Bayah on her trips to Europe, but it was, more and more, impossible to get away.

Nuzbayah liked to be on top during their lovemaking, with her eyes closed, and her head thrown back till her unbound hair brushed his thighs excitingly. When he was over her, she would push with all her strength against his chest, laughingly begging for breath and sometimes hitting him quite hard. Her panting aroused him; the feel of her trapped under his weight, helpless, frightened him.

"Ah," she said, giving the jewelled bird a push with her finger. It fell backwards into the platter. "Ta-ta will be out of the way for a while — but I wonder what repressions he'll plan on this retreat." Her eyes became distant, and she smiled.

She rolled onto her back, the skin of her breasts and belly dappled with hot golden patches of sun. The Emir ran his hand from her shoulder around the pendant curve of her breast and down the soft ripple of her rib-cage. She didn't move, and suddenly the sun dipped behind the west wall, turning out the lights on her skin as if his touch had thrown a switch. The fountains seemed very loud as he kissed her neck and belly.

In the limousine the next morning he turned the jewelled peacock over and over in his hands, examining the furred depths of the emerald and the glint of glass-filtered sun on gold and ruby and sapphire. The heat was not as intense today, or perhaps the air conditioner was keeping up more efficiently. Bayah had not accompanied him to the city this morning, but had given him a black-eyed look from above white sheets that made him remember the scent of cherries and hot stone. He reached for the car's phone to call Bayah and tell her again how pleased he was with the little peacock.

There was thick, hard noise from under the car. A *crump*, not loud. The

heavy car seemed to give a ponderous hop, then it settled to the pavement with a grinding of metal that made the Emir's hair rise on his neck.

To stay in the limousine or get out fast? His hand tightened on the bird. The cool flow of conditioned air stopped.

Fazzad, the driver, had his gun out and was yelling shrilly, "Get down, get down —"

There was another deep *crump* and the Emir saw Fazzad's gun fly from his hand and bounce off the inside of the bullet-proof windshield. Fazzad's head jerked back, and his arms flew out as his body was driven up and to the left by the force of the explosion. The Emir saw the back of the driver's seat burst into a blossom of white leather petals. The maroon carpet split and disgorged a shrapnel-like swarm of ground-up metal fragments. He was flung against the passenger-side door which sprang open under the impact.

He became aware that he was lying on the roadside in an unnatural position, and could hear nothing. A mob of people surged back and forth, gesticulating wildly, opening and closing their mouths in silence. A few women, with black, shocked eyes above their veils, backed away. The men ran to and fro helplessly.

The Emir dragged his eyes down to focus on the hand which still gripped the bird. The fingers, lacerated and black with blood, were moving convulsively. A tiny crested head poked out and began to peck at his fingers.

The Emir closed his eyes, the smell of burning flesh making his stomach knot. He felt a release in his bowels, tried to move his limbs and could not. Bayah, my queen, he thought, has passion brought us to this? There are two tigers fighting under the hot sun, and now I am not there to spread water on the dust.

His eyes opened again. This time there was nothing to be seen but a panorama of crystalline boulders, like grains of sand hugely magnified. Their rounded angularities of saffron and biscuit and cream stood before his eyes immobile, hot, silent. Around one of them, its exquisite body reflected in the translucent apricot of the boulder, stepped the jewelled bird. Its beak clacked and the feathers of its crest and tail jangled metallically. These were the only sounds the Emir could hear. As the bird came closer he could see that, relative to him, it was now the size of an ostrich, every striation left upon the gold by the jeweller's art now magnified into visibility. yet the bird was beautiful, alive. The gold of its feet flexed; the topaz claws trod nearer to the Emir where he lay.

A drift of oily smoke obscured his vision for a moment. There was, again, the stench of burning — metal and rubber this time, and flesh. A crackling heat.

The bird turned (*Allah, All-knowing, All-merciful! Lord of the three worlds, who stretched out the earth like a bed, and set the firmament without*

pillars—), flirted its tail and stepped round a grain of amber sand and was gone.

The Emir rose and adjusted the turban upon his head. His embroidered robe swung heavily around his feet as he followed the bird. The taste of cherries was in his mouth, and fountains splashed.

**Lines Written on Learning
that the Universe Exists
Because of a Slight Asymmetry
in the Matter/Antimatter Mirror**

by Eileen Kernaghan

Time, space, constellations, planets

 this house

 this room

 ourselves

flawed symmetries

small scratches in the seamless

silver of the glass

THE STONECASTER

by Jena Snyder
art by Alexandra Hass



he looks like a toad, Spriggin thought as he prodded the dirt viciously with the toe of his boot. A skinny, mud-faced toad. And she smells like one too. I wish Master had never set eyes on her. I wish he'd never snatched her and made her stay with us.

"You're sure she can read my fortune?" the traveller asked, brows at a skeptic tilt. He glanced over his shoulder at the pie stall not ten yards away, and a look of such yearning was in his eyes Spriggin leapt forward and caught him by the sleeve.

"Oh, yes sir!" the boy cried, shock and hurt fairly shining from his grey eyes. "She can see a body's whole road stretched out before him, riches or loss, love or betrayal, honor or misfortune. She sees it all in the stones, and for just one copper penny... she'll tell you what awaits." He grinned engagingly as he steered the traveller away from the pie-stall.

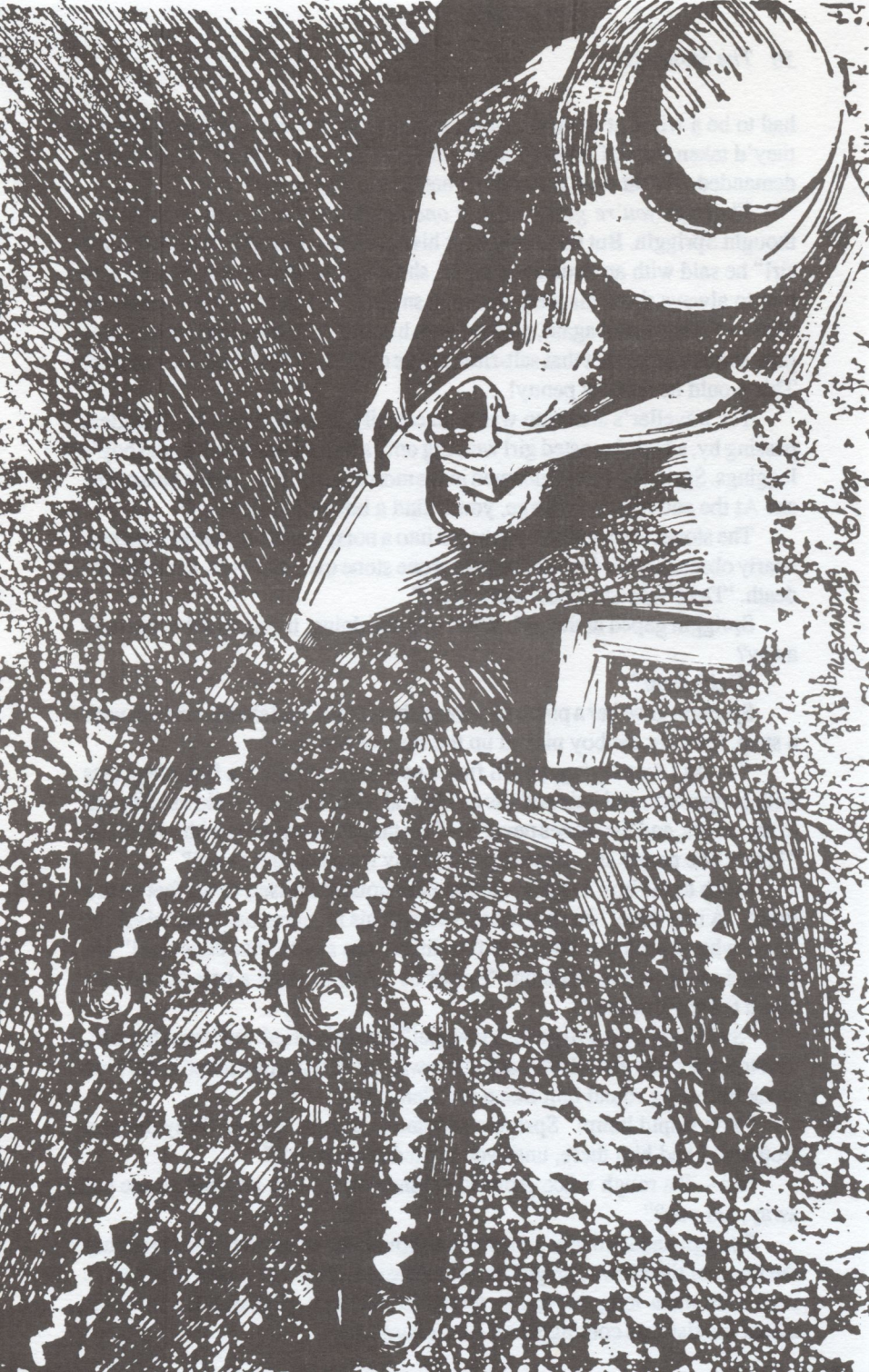
The girl was crouched in the road, oblivious to both man and boy before her. Six or seven, she was thin and sallow, not a pretty child at all. One of her feet was grossly deformed, twisted and clubbed. The traveller wrinkled his nose as he hunkered down beside the girl: she did smell musty and swampish.

Without waiting for Spriggin's signal to begin, the girl thrust a hand into the grubby bag she held, pulled out a handful of small, white, lozenge-shaped stones, and tossed them into the dust.

Prodding the stones, she named each of them in turn. But her speech was as twisted as her crippled foot, and bewilderment spread across the traveller's face as he tried to make sense of the animal sounds she made.

Spriggin could understand the girl's gabbled interpretation, but ignored it in favor of the one he was rapidly composing in his head. *Wealth is always good... And a new love, I can use that... Which is that one?* he wondered. It was hard to tell which stones were face up and which were down, the markings were so badly worn. *There's the one she calls home, and there, the one for death...* He shivered, only just restraining the urge to cross himself. *Won't tell him that!* he vowed to himself. *No copper penny for bad news!*

The traveller seemed mesmerized by the girl. Spriggin had to admit the Master was right: the fools were so repulsed by her they were convinced she



had to be a witch at the least. Since they'd snatched her two weeks before, they'd taken bags of pennies from gulls like this one. "Well?" the traveller demanded. "What does it mean? What do the stones say?"

They say you're going to lose one bright copper penny, my fine sir, thought Spriggin. But he wisely kept his opinion to himself. "Oh, fine luck, sir!" he said with an over-wide smile, showing his white teeth. Master told him to always show his teeth when he smiled. "A long voyage — that one there —" He grinned again, pleased with himself. The traveller's accent was pure south, and wasn't that salt-rime on his dark blue cloak? Sure and it was! This would be an easy penny!

The traveller's attention was momentarily taken by one of the jugglers passing by, a high-breasted girl wearing only a thin summer jerkin and boy's leggings. Spriggin's teeth gleamed in the morning sun. "This is the best news, sir! At the end of your voyage, you'll find a bonny new love —"

The stonecaster suddenly erupted into a noisy gobbling, her stringy hair nearly obscuring her face as she poked one stone over and over, the stone for death. "Deh!" she shrilled, "Deh! Deh!"

Spriggin gaped at the girl. What was she doing, trying to drive the man away?

"Deh! Deh!"

Spriggin gave her a pinch so savage she gasped, and shut her mouth with a snap. Quickly the boy picked up the flow of his lie:

"— As I was saying, you'll find a new love, good sir, a fine sweet lass with copper-colored hair and tits as big and soft as feather pillows! Says so in the stones, and the stones never lie!" He thrust his hand out with a flourish. "That's one penny sir. A small price to pay for such fine news!"

Much to the boy's shock, the traveller hoisted himself to his feet with a grunt. "A new love!" he snorted as he thrust his fat purse back into his shirt. "And what would my wife and five little ones say to that nonsense!" He sneered at the pair in derision. "I must be a fool to think a pair of children could tell my fortune!"

"Sir! Wait! You will go on a voyage!" Spriggin cried, but it was too late. The traveller was already threading his way toward the pie-seller's, his blue cloak billowing round him like a woollen lake.

"You stupid lump!" Spriggin shouted in the girl's face. "Why did you stop me? I had him there, until you started squawking!"

"So —" a rough voice growled behind them. "You let another one get away, did you?"

Spriggin instinctively hunched his shoulders against the slap, absorbing the brunt of the blow. The girl, the stonecaster, wasn't so lucky. She hadn't been with them long enough to recognize the tone of Master's voice that meant his fist was coming down like a hammer.

Her howl brought a smirk to Spriggin's face. *Serves you right*, he thought as he nursed his shoulder. *Should have just let me do the talking, like Master said, instead of trying to do the telling yourself!* He let out a soft *ha!* of satisfaction as she sprawled in the road, blood oozing from her nose. *That should teach you!*

But the Master didn't stop. He hauled her up out of the dust and shook her like a rat, making her teeth clack together, and he slapped her again.

Jesus! Spriggin winced as the big man's open hand caught her once more across the face, and her bulgy frog's eyes went all blank and staring. *He'll kill her!*

Desperately he glanced round, wishing someone would step in. But everyone was clustered at the pie-seller's, staring at something. With a start he recognized the dark blue of the southern traveller's cloak. The man was clawing at his throat, his face an ugly purplish color, and everyone was pointing in horror.

"Sir!" he cried to his Master, not taking his eyes off the growing crowd. "Sir, look! *Look!*"

Grudgingly the Master let the girl slump to the road. He licked a smear of bright blood off his knuckle. "What?"

"Over there—"

The traveller was on the ground now, shuddering and jerking interminably. After a long time, he was finally still. His face, Spriggin saw, was the same dark blue as his cloak. A piece of meat pie was still clutched in his hand, and there was a gravy stain on his face.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" the Master shouted. "Go see if you can lift his purse before they carry him away!"

* * * *

When Spriggin delivered the stolen purse to the Master, the stonemason was nowhere to be seen. He eventually found her hunched in a corner of their tent, one hand nursing her swollen face, the other stirring and sifting the stones hidden in her grubby bag. Her eyes were sullen and ugly. "Come on," Spriggin said with a nod. "He'll be tipping a cup the rest of the day — you can wash at the stream."

She rarely responded to anything he said, but she must have understood, for a moment later she climbed to her feet and shuffled after him, club foot dragging in the dust.

Don't know why the Master bothers to keep her chained day and night, Spriggin thought as he waited for the girl to catch up. *I'd run if I could, but she'd never get ten yards, not with that foot.* Wistfully he gazed at the open field beyond the tents. Something hot and sharp flared in his chest. "I hate him! I wish he'd die, just like that traveller!"

"Spigih?" the girl prodded him in the back.

Quickly he scrubbed his sleeve across his nose. "Come on," he sighed. "It's just over here."

* * * *

That night while Spriggin and the Master slept — the girl's and Spriggin's wrists both chained to the Master's ankle — the girl silently sat up and sought her bag of stones. With a soft exhalation, she withdrew one and smiled, showing her teeth just like Spriggin had taught her. Unlike the smooth, worn stones, her teeth were sharp, and faintly greenish in the moonlight. She closed them gently on the stone, tapping, tapping, and then licked the smooth, hard surface. Her eyes, normally dull, were bright with unspoken merriment.

The Master stirred, sending up a fetid waft of beer-gas, and in his sleep Spriggin buried his face in the blanket. The girl stared fixedly at the snoring man, teeth still clicking on the stone. She tossed the spittle-wet stone to the ground. "Deh," she said with satisfaction. "Deh."

* * * *

Spriggin screwed up his face in revulsion. The tent was almost poisonous with the smell of the Master's farts. Clawing at the door flap, the boy threw it open with a gasp. "Pah!" *Smells like he died last night!* He shook his head as he drew in great lungfulls of the clean morning air.

He felt a tug at the chain on his wrist, and turned to find the girl trying to insert the key into the padlock. "What are you doing?" he hissed. "Quick! Put it back before he wakes up!"

She showed her teeth in the grimace she made for a smile, and rocked her dirty head from side to side. Then, before Spriggin could stop her, she poked the key straight into the Master's cheek.

"No—!" Spriggin cried.

The man didn't move.

It was only then Spriggin saw the livid blotches on his skin, and the way his eyes had filmed over, as if he had an extra lid. He was dead, no mistake. The girl poked the key experimentally into one of his eyes, making it ooze a bloody jelly, and Spriggin snatched it away from her with a cry. "Stop it!"

"Fee," the girl said simply, pointing to the door of the tent.

Spriggin needed no further urging. With a haste born of panic, he threw off their iron chains, snatched the Master's knife out of his belt, and leapt to his feet to follow the girl.

They kept to a steady, if slow, pace for an hour. But as they neared a farm the girl dug in her heels, whining for something to eat. "All right!" Spriggin sighed, and crept off towards the henhouse. He returned with half a dozen eggs, and showed the girl how to suck out the slippery insides. She caught the knack quickly, and after draining her three eggs, clamored piteously for Spriggin's as well. "Oh, all right," he handed them over with a sigh. She was

just a child, after all.

As he watched her crack the shells to lick out the last remaining drops of white, he thought back to the afternoon he and the Master had been out hunting and had come upon her stumping hastily through the woods.

"Well, well, look what we have here!" the master chuckled softly. "A little partner for you, Sprig!"

With her crippled foot she'd been easy to run down, but she fought like a stoat when they did manage to get their hands on her. She bit Spriggin, leaving an angry mark that had swelled and festered for days. *Christ, but she was wild!* he remembered in awe. It had taken the Master's iron knife at her throat before she stood sullenly still, and even then she showed no more understanding or intelligence than a dog, perhaps less. She didn't speak, didn't respond — until the Master found the bag of lozenge-shaped stones she had hidden deep in the recesses of her filthy clothing.

"Is it a purse you've been hiding from us?" he chuckled, "Spriggin, see what's in it."

Bubbles of grey froth curled round the outer corners of her lips while she flailed, but the Master held her tight. Spriggin spilled the stones out onto the ground and moaned in disappointment.

"Rocks!" the Master said in disgust, pushing the girl away. "Nothing but a bunch of rocks!"

"There's something on them." Spriggin picked up the nearest one. "Lines and squiggles."

The girl's muddy eyes bulged, and she snatched the stone out of his hand with a cry. "Wadeh!"

Spriggin stared. Had she said *water*?

"What was that, toad-talk?" the Master sneered.

"Water?" Spriggin guessed. "It means water?"

The girl was touching the stones excitedly, "Hum! Iss! Lek!"

"Get it out of your mouth!" the Master slapped her on the side of the head, making her drop the stone she'd been about to lick.

Spriggin picked up the stone. "This is 'home', is it?" he asked slowly. "And that's 'ice', and 'lake'?" He held the stones up for the Master's inspection. "They must be fortune stones!"

"Fortune —?" The Master stared hard at the girl, then glanced at the red-gold sun so low in the sky. "Get her in the sack," he ordered gruffly. "We've got to get her chained before the sun goes down!" Spriggin was wise enough not to question such an odd remark, and they hustled the toad-girl back to the tents.

That was how it had begun, the girl, the stones, the new game with the marks... Spriggin shook his head. Two weeks and a bag of pennies! It all seemed so long ago.

"Iggs!" the girl demanded, bringing him back to the present. "Iggs!"
 "No more eggs," he held out his empty hands. "Time to go."

Pouting, she clambered to her feet with his help. But before he could take one step, she hunched her shoulders and thrust her head forward, hissing like a snake.

Spriggin dropped her hand as if it had grown scales. "What? What?"

She started shuffling toward the trees as fast as she could drag her crippled foot, and without bothering to ask again, Spriggin bolted after her.

"Hie, there Spriggin!" a voice called. "There's no use running, now! We've come to take you home!" It was one of the jugglers from the travelling fair. With him were another half-dozen men, all eager to extend the hand of charity to two homeless children. Especially when they were such a valuable, paying pair.

Spriggin, all too familiar with the penalties for disobedience, caught the girl by the hand and pulled her to a stop as the band of men reached the crest of the hill.

But the stonecaster wasn't so willing to give up. With a shriek, she bent and clawed up a handful of tiny pebbles from the road, and flung them at the advancing men. Spriggin turned away in disgust. "You'll just make them angry!"

She crammed a half-dozen small rocks into his hand and clenched his fingers shut, shaking him in her fury. The sharp edges of the pebbles knifed into his palm and he winced, tears springing to his eyes. The stonecaster fixed her pale frog-gaze on him. "*FRO!*" she shrilled, spraying him with spittle, and he did.

As the little stones pattered down on the men, one uttered a scream and clutched his shoulder. Another went down as if he'd been speared. Blood was pouring from his forehead. Spriggin gaped, stunned, as the girl flung another handful of pebbles, and two more of their pursuers staggered, one bleeding from the mouth, the other howling as he hopped on one leg, his foot dangling like a fish on a line. Fired by this uncanny miracle, Spriggin let fly another rain of stones. Another man went down, and the remainder of the band turned and fled.

Spriggin clapped the girl on the shoulders and danced round her in glee. "We did it! We did it!" he crowed. "We're free, Toad!"

With a huffing chuckle, she took his hand and pulled him toward the trees. Behind them, three men lay unmoving in the middle of the road. Flies were already gathering to sup on the dark pools beneath the bodies.

* * * *

As the sun crept towards the horizon, orange and swollen, Spriggin began to get nervous. It wasn't wise to be out on the open road or worse, in the woods, once the sun went down. Up here in the north, the Master had told

him, the Trows came out at night, the below-ground folk. The Trows liked to steal nice fat children to drag into their caves, and those children, the Master had said with an evil grin, were never, ever seen again.

"They wouldn't even want me," Spriggin muttered, giving his thin arm a pinch. But it didn't chase away the fear. "Come on, Toad, I want to find a barn to sleep in."

A quarter mile down the road they did spy another farm, but when Spriggin tried to lead the girl across the field, she put up such a shrieking protest, biting and kicking, that he was finally forced to release her hand. "Well, where do you want to go?" he demanded, on edge. The sun was only a halo beyond the looming trees, and from far off in the distance came an ominous rumble of thunder.

The stonecaster pointed toward the forest, her ugly face eager.

Spriggin stared at her in disbelief. "No!"

She tipped her head on one side, her tongue wiggling to and fro, and she tried to catch his hand. "Pees, Spigih," she wheedled. "Pees?"

He backed away quickly, angry. "I'm not staying out in the woods at night, not for you, not for anything!" he called over his shoulder as he started for the safety of the barn. "You want to get dragged into some hole in the ground, that's all right by me. Don't say I didn't warn you!"

She'll follow, he told himself confidently. *If I don't look back, she'll be at my heels in an instant, just wait and see!* The rain began to patter down and he quickened his pace. By the time he reached the barn, his shirt was soaked. The warm, steamy scent of cow dung filled his nostrils, and, his hand on the door, he paused. Was she behind him? No, he wouldn't look. She'd come.

He pushed open the door and stepped inside, and from the back of the barn came a questioning moo of a cow, a sound that set his mouth to watering. In a stall stood a soft-eyed Jersey, her udder taut and full. He wasted no time setting down bucket and stool and pulling himself a fine supper of thick, buttery milk.

The door creaked open while he was drinking, and he grinned. *Knew she wouldn't stay out there without me!*

"Hie!" an outraged voice cried. "What do you think you're doing?"

Spriggin gasped, nearly dropping the bucket. But when he saw his challenger was only a boy, both younger and smaller than he, his brown face split in a grin. "Just having a little drink," he carelessly replied, and once more lifted the bucket to his lips.

"My Mam will have your hide when I tell her you're stealin' our milk!" the ginger-haired child protested. Beneath his freckles, his face was curd-pale.

"But you won't," Spriggin jeered. He tossed the empty bucket down and swaggered out of the stall towards the boy, fists balled. "I'll box your stupid

ears if you try.”

The younger boy held his ground for a moment, but his lower lip was starting to tremble. “Mam!” he shouted. “Thief! Thief!” and bolted out the door. Spriggin dashed after him with a curse.

There was a muffled, wet *thump!* just as Spriggin was about to round the corner, and he skidded to a halt. Was it a trap? Was the boy waiting to hit him with a staff? Warily he dropped to his hands and knees before he popped his head round the corner.

Directly before him was the boy’s face, eyes wide and staring, mouth open in a baffled expression. His forehead had a dark, bloody dent in it, and shiny grey brains were spilling out of the ugly gash at the centre. Just beyond him stood the stonecaster, a shovel in her hands, a shovel with bits of ginger hair and skin and spatters of blood on the blade.

Spriggin drew in a great, sobbing breath, wanting to scream, but at the same moment a woman’s voice came rolling down from the porch of the house, “Geordie? Did you call me?”

The stonecaster let the shovel fall, and held out her hand. Spriggin tried to back away, whimpering, and landed hard on his rump in the mud. Before he could struggle to his feet, the stonecaster clamped her hand round his wrist and dragged him to his feet. His legs were watery, loose as rope, and he had to keep swallowing, over and over again. As he was towed into the trees, he tried to glance back, but the rain and dark had settled a smothering weight over the fields and forest. The mother called out again, frightened, “Geordie?” And then she must have found him.

* * * *

They took refuge where they could, in a small, dank cave under a fallen willow. Spriggin was so cold he couldn’t remember stopping, but he realized he was crouched before a guttering fire. Toad was nowhere to be seen. Then he remembered. She’d gone out to find food, she’d said. He closed his eyes and hugged himself, nearly weeping with relief. His teeth were chattering, and he was wet through to the bone, but there was a roof over his head, walls around him. Toad would be back soon.

The heavy boom of thunder made him jump, and when a cold hand came down on his shoulder, he couldn’t stop a shriek of panic.

“It’s only me,” an offended voice came from out of the dark.

The boy cowered against the damp wall, unable to find the speaker. “Who? Who’s there?”

“It’s me, Spriggin.” This time there was the hint of a smile in the voice. “Don’t you know me?”

She came closer to the fire, and crouched down so the faint light could illuminate her features. “I don’t know you,” Spriggin said immediately. The girl before him was fair and fresh-faced, the bonniest girl he’d ever seen in

his young life, and she was smiling at him. He shook his head, positive. "I'd remember *you*."

"My name is... Maida," she said. "This is my home, Spriggin." Her smile was luminous, generous. "You were good to me," she said, her voice warm, "and I will pay you back in kind."

"Where's Toa— where's the little girl, the stonecaster?"

Maida tossed her long, golden hair. "Gone," she said simply. "Forget her." It was not a suggestion.

"But —" The words died in Spriggin's mouth, and he shivered, remembering how he had been towed through the night and the rain, Toad's fingers clamped round his wrist like small, furious snakes.

"You're still cold," Maida said. "Here, come sit with me, and I'll warm you."

Gratefully the boy let himself be gathered into her arms, and huddled there like a child. Faces kept flashing before him, the Master, little Geordie with his skull crushed and his brains spilled out in the mud. In spite of himself, Spriggin began to weep, and Maida clasped him tighter, crooning to him in a soft, ancient tongue.

He found if he closed his eyes he could follow some of the words. "I will stay with you always... heart of my heart..." He smiled as he rested his head against her shoulder. Her hair tickled down his cheek like warm rain. "Forever and a day I will keep you close, heart of my heart...." That part was the best, and he hummed along, "heart of my heart..." He couldn't understand it all, but the melody was soothing, and he let himself be lulled to sleep.

Something familiar woke him, a sound he knew, one he remembered but couldn't place for his life. A soft clicking, tapping...?

The wet had burned out of the wood, and the fire burned brighter now, filling the room with light. Spriggin raised himself on one elbow to better see what the familiar sound had been.

Maida was squatting with her back to the fire, and a delicious smell of roasted meat curled round her from the platter she was preparing. Two forked sticks were in place to hold a spit, and Spriggin's mouth began to water. Humming to herself, Maida was rocking forward and back on her heels, almost dancing. Spriggin still could see no source for the faint clicking he heard.

The girl turned slightly as she set a long knife down beside her, and Spriggin was surprised to see it was made of rock, not iron. Almost at the same moment he saw the bag at her belt, Toad's bag. Inside it the fortune stones rolled and clicked over each other as Maida rocked.

Spriggin steadied himself against the wall with one hand and eased himself to a sitting position. Beneath his palm, the wall was cold and damp, not thatch or wood but earth, like the floor. And the ceiling. His mouth dry,

he edged onto his knees, and crawled silently toward the humming girl by the fire.

Finished, Maida sat back on her heels and licked her fingers as she surveyed her work. He was right behind her now, on his knees, stretching so he could peer over her shoulder and see the feast she had prepared while he had slept.

It was the child, Geordie, jointed and spitted on long wooden spikes. His head, discarded, lay staring forlornly at the fire, and it was one of his roasted fingers Maida was licking, Spriggin saw, not her own.

She turned, smiling. "Oh, you're awake!" she said to Spriggin. "It's nearly ready."

He struck her full on the mouth, knocking the pitiful little finger away, and grabbed her by the hair so she couldn't escape. Then, keeping her pinned with his knees, he pulled the Master's knife out of his belt.

"Spriggin, no!" she begged, her voice piteous. "I'm Toad, don't hurt me! I'm Toad!"

He hesitated, swayed by her revelation. But then he remembered the Master's face, the men who had chased them and been brought down in a hail of pebbles, and the poor, baffled child with the crushed skull. "Good —" he said, and drove the iron blade into her chest.

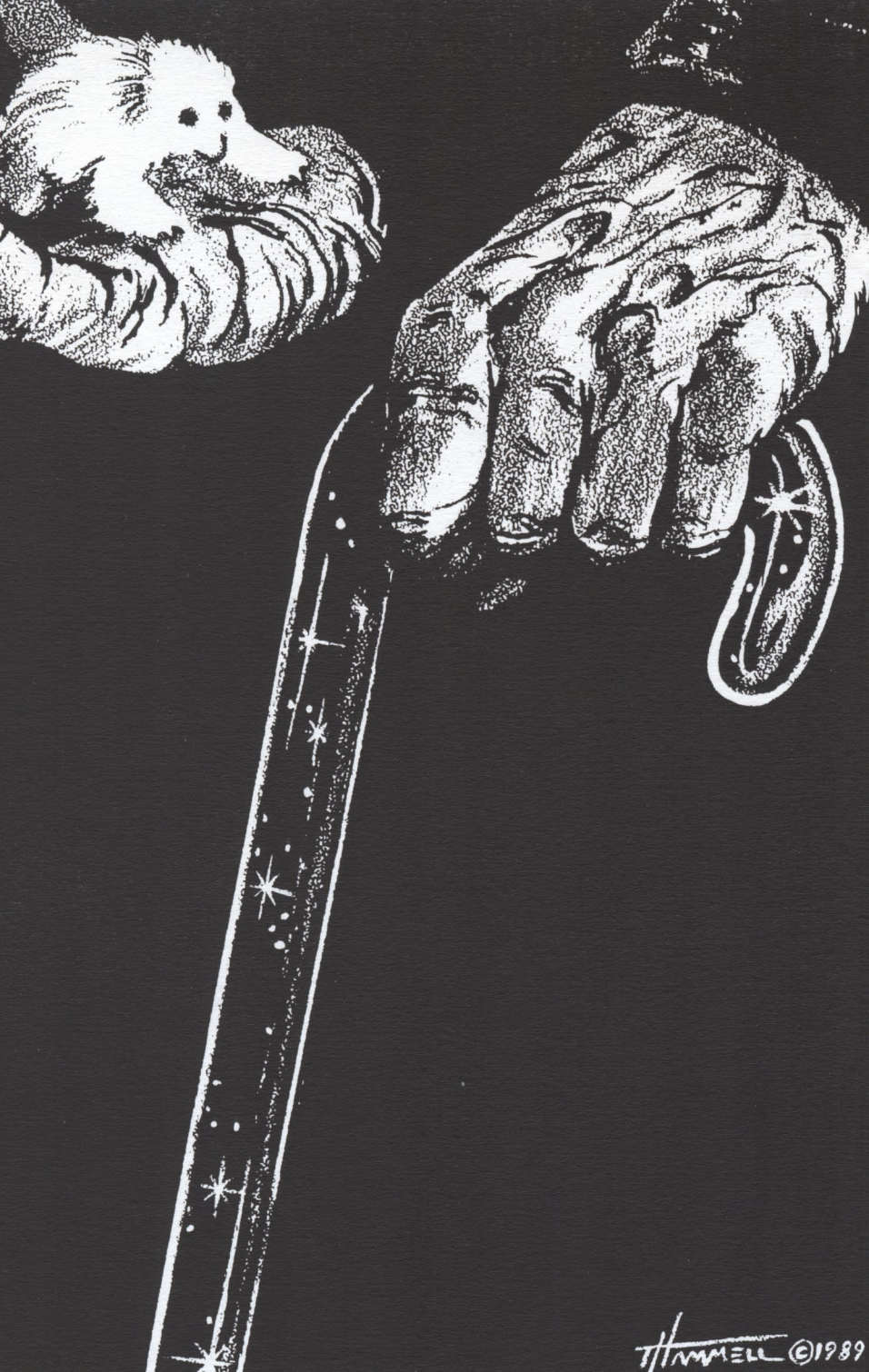
Her eyes bulged, and she clawed at him, tearing his arms with her nails, kicking, but the long blade had gone clean through her to the earthen floor of her cave, and she was spitted there, held fast. After a long time her arms finally fell to her sides. Her knees stopped beating at his back and she began to rasp for breath, blood oozing from her mouth. Her beautiful eyes were glazing over, and she twitched faintly. Spriggin pushed himself off her in revulsion, and backed away.

"Spriggin..." she whispered, bleak sorrow in her voice, "... all I wanted was to ... take care of you...I wanted..."

As he watched, her left foot began to grow and twist even as the rest of her shrank, and her face seemed to cave in upon itself, the pretty flesh melting away until only the scrawny, frog-like child was left. The bag of stones had been torn from her belt in the struggle, and the little white lozenges gleamed in the firelight.







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Duty Free

by Rhea Rose
art by Tim Hammell

The space station was old. The duty free shop's floor and black arc were a slick black, as if they were permanently wet. Light sliced through the forward arc window like a geometric plane, cutting shadow into right angles.

Old Kayden did up the two buttons on his coat and pulled self-consciously at one of the creased sleeves as he entered the establishment. He'd tried hard to fit into the polish and black rubber decor of the circular port. But he'd been alone too long and wore his reclusiveness like an old shirt which no amount of social contact could remove. He steadied himself, afraid he might slip and draw unwanted attention. The quiet rubber tip on his steel cane left foggy kisses on the glossy floor. But someone must have noticed *them* because the marks were never there the next day.

The shop, located in the upper arc of the tubular doughnut, looked out into the hole. A sign of its age. They didn't give shops best locations anymore, too expensive.

Docking lights, industrial mean, poured in from the portal and collided with the floor. Kayden wondered how anyone thought the hole, with its migraine illumination, was scenery worth paying for.

Shadow Hunter had docked swift and neat into the hole. From his stingy assignment billed as the window seat he couldn't have missed the duty free, flagged top and bottom with its light bulb sign flashing on and off, alluding to movement. He and his baggage were only a few station days old. And every one of those days had included a visit to *Habitat's* duty free.

Overhead, crystal mobiles dangled and occasionally tinkled, zapped out shards of vibrant red and green, yellow and blue, signals from tiny galaxies. He was careful not to bump them.

The clerk sat pale and still at a monolith desk, the same wet black, as if it had just risen from the floor; arcane altar and devotee, carefully laid out with golden offerings, ashtray, pen, calculator, earrings.

She sat in the center of the shop, facing the window. He was at the entrance to her left. She made him nervous and he needed to cross her path to get where he wanted to go. The hairs at the back of his head stood out like

beaks. He knew it. Licked his hand and tried to flatten them.

As he moved across the dark plain he glanced casually at the conscious positioning of the items hanging on the arced wall behind her. Rocks. Not just rocks. He knew a thing or two about those nondescript stones, each the size and shape of a man's lung. Each spotted and displayed for its particular irregularity. Selected for its contents. Alien oysters and alien pearls, their inner ores worth far more than any slimy protein's calcified irritant.

Nearly catatonic, bound in silent calculation, he passed her, pretending to be unaffected by her presence. Her tapered fingers danced across the velvet keypad as effortlessly as any blind man's. The other hand manipulated flat white sheets, paper, for authenticity. The paper rustled softly between fingers. Black hair, subtle blue highlights. And dark eye shades. Intelligent look. The light burning through the clear multiplex arc didn't reach her. It fell into the black floor a meter from the bottom of the glossy coffin she used for a desk.

He passed through a channel of light. He dabbed at his streaming hazel eyes, lost under an awning of flesh and eyebrows, with an old cloth he carried in one pocket.

And nearly stumbled over a spidery wine rack.

Still she didn't look. On the far circular wall separating the duty free from the shop next to it, crystal shelving and gold brackets displayed a straight line of six Koalakins, like snowballs, whiter than the paper on her desk.

He glanced at her. If only she'd look then he could relax. He glanced to the camera across from him glaring like the eye of God, ready to blast him at the slightest indiscretion. He wondered if it really worked. Maybe she watched him through it, his image in full view on a miniature monitor just below the surface of her desk.

He picked up a Koalakin. Tiny. It fitted easily into the palm of his dry hand. There wasn't much to the creature. Wispy fur. Round head, two black dots like beads at the front of its face for eyes. Four legs, claws, a round, ball body. If he blew on it, the bearlike toy might float away. His thumb worked through the fur on its belly, exposed a pimply button that he pushed.

The creature came to life, trembling. Claws scrambling, it waddled to the tip of a finger, chewed at a tough nail. The tiny spectacle always penetrated Kayden's defenses. He always refused the feelings, corked them with a deep sigh.

He nudged the creature back into his palm, flipped it backwards in the process. It righted itself on his wrist and slipped up his sleeve. He put his hand in his pocket and shook his arm, felt the Koalakin tumble down into the lining. He fumbled for its button, hoped to turn it off. Found the nodule, touched it and a tiny, muffled mewling began. Touched the button again and

everything came to a stop.

Nervously, he ran his hand by the pocket, felt the tiny lump of a Koalakin, cast a tense glance at the black haired caryatid. Still calculating.

He turned away from the shelf, was halfway past the woman when she spoke, "Is there anything I can show you, sir?"

A drawer slid out from the desk like black ice. "Please take one of our catalogs." A slender, silver brochure lay there. How many times, he wondered, had she stared while he wasn't looking? Had she seen him take the Koalakin? He took the brochure, slipped it into his inner pocket and left, holding his breath, holding himself and his tiny prize.

The next day the shop's arc was shaded. The young woman, busy demagnetizing locks on a few small shipping trunks, gave him a porcelain smile when he entered. Her hair was different, more brown. Warm, amber, honey colored eyes. It was for him. She was changing effects. That was the fashion, wasn't it? Appeal. And in spite of himself, he liked it. She did appeal to him. Who had her last customer been, he wondered?

But she left him alone as he went directly to the Koalakins and took the tiny creature from his pocket and fearfully exchanged it for a different one.

He'd just slipped the new creature into place when he lost the grip on his cane. It crashed to the floor, bounced twice, vibrated.

Then she had it, placed it in his hand. "I'm sorry," she said, sounding genuine.

She selected a Koalakin from the shelf. He didn't look at her, couldn't, shamed that once she saw his eyes she'd see that he'd taken one.

"A bio-mechanical plexus replaces internal functions. It's an engine of sorts. It runs on one hydra cell. The cry's added. Eyes are replaced with obsidian replicas. Standard control threads woven into the brain —"

He'd heard it many times. Having removed himself from the words long ago they no longer bothered him. Now he moved away from her as quickly as he dared, brushed his side pocket and felt the tiny swell of the stolen creature there.

He waited a day before he returned it, too, and took another.

He'd dubbed his temporary home located on the outer rim of the station's lower arc, eight-ball. It had one redeeming feature. Its speck of a window, no bigger than the bottom of a glass, didn't look into the hole. If he'd been able to get a bottom section he would have had the luxury of a floor window, too. Still he could stand up, and there was a separate sleeping area.

The soupy green walls were freshly painted. The interior well lit. He removed the rubber tip from the end of his cane, tapped the floor with the point and watched the entrance to the sleeping section.

A shadow stirred, peered, grew paler as it moved from the back room. Its fluid hulk avalanched toward him and skittered around their tiny enclo-

sure. Like a happy dog the Ming-thraw nearly knocked him off balance, then settled in front of him, quiet, patient.

Kayden relaxed as he gazed into her large, moist eyes. They were intelligent, two dark beautiful worlds that held his reflection and budded delicately from her slender, deerlike head.

The gentle countenance, he knew, betrayed her internal battering. But there were signs. A crusty rim had formed around her eyes. Her milky fur was now soured with dark yellow stains. This place, all the others like it, were too small, too warm. She was meant for frost and chilled settings. He'd known the travel would be hard on her. She wanted it this way. Only she could single out her infant.

He extracted the tiny Ming-thraw from his pocket, pushed its button, placed it in her hair, near the single swell that was her breast.

And watched. The first time he'd had to force himself to watch, since then he'd become resigned to the outcome. The creature clawed blindly through her fur, then fell, thumped to the floor. She fled back to the shadows of the other room. He retrieved the Koalakin, turned it off and brought it in to her.

She'd squeezed under his sleeping bench, forearms over her head, covering her eyes. His back against the wall, he slid down to the floor, sat close and stroked her head. With the cane, he tapped the wall above the sleeper. Explained in thumps and scratches that removed the paint, why they couldn't take away all the infant Ming-thraws. That she'd seen them all, there were no more to bring. He didn't know where else to look.

He felt nothing, except exhaustion. No empathy. He could not share in this latest grief. For that he thought he was evil. He hadn't lived without learning a thing or two about himself. Her wretchedness he could understand. In his life he'd known no other attitude. His misery eventually infected anyone who came too close to him. Her unwitting destruction was nearly complete because long ago he'd allowed himself to love the Ming-thraw instead of turning her out of his life the way he'd turned out everything else. And now, many cold revolutions later when he'd finally convinced himself their companionship, their time together had been the delusions of hypothermia, she'd found him again.

He hadn't the heart to tell her what their search had cost. That he had just enough cash to get her home.

He left her, uncomforted and alone, to return the stolen Koalakin and arrange for her departure.

He went to the viewing lounge and stared out at the chips of icy stars. They took him back to a younger time, when he'd been an explorer of sorts. When he'd met the Ming-thraw, loved her and been accused by associates of all kinds of perversions. Even if he'd thought about doing the things others

had claimed of them, and he had, it could never have happened. She was a hermaphrodite of sorts. All Ming-throws were. So, eventually, he left her.

Kayden wondered if he really had been young once?

By the time he reached the duty free again things had changed. A security officer, dressed in blue, strapped with vest and holster, played with the adjustment on her helmet. She stood just outside the entrance, nodded at him as he went in. The crystal shelf where the rest of the infant Ming-throws sat in a row now seemed impossibly far, and the clerk was a moat he couldn't cross. He left.

When he got back to his quarters they were empty and damp with the odor of the Ming-thraw's sour despair. He knew where she'd gone.

* * * *

Several people, mostly station personnel in brown coveralls and tan canvas shoes, had gathered around the shop.

Inside the Ming-thraw was sprawled against the shiny ebony floor, snow on jet. The blue guards let him through.

He got down beside her. Koalakins lay scattered all around her like pieces of herself. She still clutched one of the dead. He pulled it away, examined it.

"Someone's phoned transportation for a stall," the woman security officer informed no one in particular.

The Ming-thraw looked at him. Black skin rimmed her slack quivering mouth. She shuddered and was still.

She wasn't a beast. But they'd treated her that way, as if she were a danger to them. Had he treated her any better, he wondered? He had to let someone know that she was not just an animal.

"It's not dead," the guard said, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

In her own way the Ming-thraw had nurtured him. When he'd been disoriented and lost on her planet, she'd cared for him, brought him out of the indifference that had nearly destroyed him.

Kayden let the guard help him up.

The stall arrived. The two guards lifted the Ming-thraw into the shipping crate.

"Where are you taking her?" he asked, bewildered.

"Earthside," said a man maneuvering the large red, styroacrylic box. One end had bars. The stall barely fit through the duty free's entrance.

Earth.

"She'll be safe. Out here she's fair game. Might be poached or captured for a pet. She's gonna live another hundred years or more."

"She's not an animal. I communicate with her," Kayden said, suddenly desperate.

"We'll let whoever's in charge know that."

They began to work the stall out.

"I owed her," he said. He approached the cage, looked in, motioned for one of the men to open it up.

"Go ahead," said the one in charge.

They'd set the temperature for her. The Ming-thraw lay quietly, still sedated. He lifted her arm and tucked the Koalakin she'd been clutching back into place.

"That's the shop." The man nodded toward the forward arc, to the docked *Shadow Hunter*. "Got to hook her up with an Earth transfer."

Kayden stood back and let them take her away.

"How did she get loose?" the duty free girl asked, a shadowy line formed between her eyes.

He examined the fresh face, searched it for clarification.

Loose? "I knew where to look. I use to sell them. I knew the trade routes. I was sure, *so sure* hers would be here. It had to be. There's nowhere else." He took a deep breath.

"I warned a purchaser and one Koalakin was returned. Maybe that one was hers? I thought you might be — putting something in them, smuggling perhaps."

She collected the scattered Koalakins.

"You knew?" he asked.

"We get all kinds. You may have had every intention of purchasing them. Then again, maybe not. There's nowhere to hide on *Habitat*."

He glanced around the duty free. The Koalakins sat neatly on the black desk. The young woman now wiped the floor.

"Did she have a name?" the clerk asked without looking up.

He pulled the rubber end from the metal stick and played the tip across the glistening surface of the floor, delicately tapping out the Ming-thraw's name, scratching the gloss.

The girl smiled and shrugged.

He went to the desk, rested the cane against the edge of the table and quickly stuffed the creatures into his pockets. He replaced them with some of the money he'd intended to use to send the Ming-thraw home.

The clerk's eyes flicked to the money on the table. "I hope you've found what you're looking for," she said, and resumed her task.

He replaced the rubber tip, leaned for a moment against the desk and looked out at the *Shadow Hunter*.

"I think she found it for me," he said, and wondered what it would be like on Earth.

Honor

by Kathryn A. Sinclair

Lorenzo de Valdes was getting old.

Lorenzo de Valdes was getting old. "I am an old man," he said to himself as he sat down at his desk and surveyed the waves and drifts of paper that covered it right to the edge. He looked beyond it to the ocean of carpet stretching to the ornate office door.

"I am an old man and I do not need this," he muttered.

Lorenzo de Valdes was not really an old man, not so old in years, as he very well knew. His father, Renaldo de Valdes, had lived a good twenty more years beyond Lorenzo's age and had ridden the great stallion Ramon Dos Santos in the Parade of Horses in Seville the year before his death. But his father never had to do battle with nonsense every day. Renaldo de Valdes had had the time to ride his stallion, had ridden with pride until the day he died. While he, Lorenzo, hardly ever rode a horse, but sat behind this desk and signed his name on many pieces of paper.

"Pah," he muttered and shoved back his chair. He arose and limped to the table set under the one window in the room. The window looked out toward the pasture and he gazed at the expanse of green, his mood softening. The mares grazed, dark against sunlight, and off towards the end of the field he could see a white blur. As he watched, the blur moved with sudden speed.

"A-hah, still like a colt," he murmured, and he smiled.

He looked down at the table. On it were placed a wine bottle and glasses. He picked up the bottle and poured wine into a fragile crystal glass. Dark, dark, like blood: like the blood of the bull when the bullfighter's sword pierces his heart, thought Lorenzo.

The wine sent tendrils up the side of the glass as he swirled it. He inhaled its full aroma, brought it to his lips; warmth filled his stomach and chest. He picked up the bottle again and as he poured his eyes went to the familiar label with his family's name, and under it the likeness of a white stallion, tail arched, head alert, dark eyes and nostrils wide. He looked from it to the blur in the field as he sipped the second glassful more slowly.

"Such spirit, such pride, my friend. It is fitting that your picture adorns this bottle of wine which is like the blood of the bull."

Then he shook his head and sighed, set the bottle down and went back to the desk.

Lorenzo de Valdes owned the bodega that produced the red wine; wine that was fine enough to be shipped to all parts of the world. This alone should have been enough: to produce a wine that would bring the world the spirit and pride of Spain. But for Lorenzo, this was not all. In the fields around the Bodega grazed a herd of rare Andalusian horses, pure blooded stock, from which, many centuries ago, had come the famous white stallion which helped develop the Lipizzaner breed. And the finest of all his horses was the twenty-two year old stallion, Marquese de Castellano, the white one frolicking in the field, the same one whose image was on the wine. Both were a source of great pride to the old man.

But one of the things that made his bodega renowned, the wine that gave him such pride, was responsible for the paper that covered his desk. Lorenzo sighed, reminded of duty. He worked through the morning and into the afternoon, doing what had to be done to keep the business running well, doing it all himself for nobody else could be depended upon to run the business with honor. For others it would just be a business. And while he worked, part of him chafed to be out and away with the horses, to live as his father had lived. He was too old to ride with speed and his hip, which had been broken many years ago running with the bulls at Pamplona, and which had not healed well, gave him great pain in the saddle. But to drive the spider, ah, that made his spirit soar. To hitch up the team of ten: the Marquese would be in the front to the left, he the only one with reins, his will and strength ruling the other nine, pulling the other three front ones in a circle, deep flanks sinking towards the ground as he turned in place, hurling the rest into a great curve. Lorenzo could almost feel the jolt of the two-wheeled cart over the cobblestones, see the Marquese guide the team through the tight turns in the narrow and winding streets of town. His heart quickened at the thought.

When he finished his work the shadows were already starting to lengthen, blue across the green of the pastures. The wind had shifted, bringing to him the musty odor of fermenting grapes in the vats. He stood at the window and drained the last of the wine from the bottle while he watched the Marquese bringing in the mares. It was a ritual Lorenzo followed every evening. The white ghost, as it came closer, became a powerful horse; the mares and foals, dark shapes in the dimming light, clustered and moved like a cloud and disappeared around the side of the casa. The sound of their breathing reached him through the open window.

He had one more thing to do before work was finished for the day. Two men had made an appointment; he presumed they were coming about some problem with distribution of the wine. Perhaps something which one of his

sons in Seville could not handle. He went to his office door and opened it. The two men sat waiting and at his appearance they rose.

"Come in," Lorenzo said, "please come in," and he limped ahead of them back to the ornate cabinet that flanked the table. Another bottle, already open, stood inside. His servants were efficient: a good wine should be given time to breathe. He poured two glasses and turned, offering them to the two men.

They stared at the glasses glowing red in the failing light from the window and their faces held a peculiar look. They shook their heads, murmured a refusal. Lorenzo was taken aback. They refused wine? What kind of men would refuse a glass of wine? And the finest that Spain could produce at that. He gained control of his thoughts. Men were not men like in the old days and business had to be done. Things must now be tolerated which his father would never have tolerated. He went behind his desk, placed the two glasses before him on its now clear surface like an accusation, and sat down. He indicated chairs in front of the desk and the men also sat.

There was a silence as they stared at him. He stared back. Then he cleared his throat and twiddled the stem of one glass. They still did not speak.

"So," he finally ventured. "You have business you wish to discuss?"

"Yes," said the taller of the men. "We wish to discuss . . . business."

"It is about the wine?" Lorenzo raised his eyebrows at them, confused by the strangeness of their behavior.

"Wine?" said the one.

"About the wine?" echoed the other.

Lorenzo felt a burning within him. To have to sit trying to talk to half-wits such as these! He felt the urge to rise and order them from his house, but he hid it inside. Outside he smiled, although those who knew him well would have known the smile was forced.

"Yes. You wish to deal in my wine?"

"Oh, the wine! The wine you sell!" and the two men glanced at each other.

"No, no, that is not why we are here," said the one.

"What then?" said Lorenzo, abrupt despite his best effort.

"The Horse," said the taller one.

"The Horse," echoed the other.

"The Horse?" said Lorenzo, taken off stride. "You mean, an Andalusian?"

"Yes," said the men together.

Lorenzo de Valdes was taken aback, mental gears shifting rapidly. The men sat in silence.

Of course, yes, of course. He had been so taken up with his business that

he had forgotten there are other dealings men make, things more real, like horses. He sold horses, a stallion now and then, to improve the health and strength of stock all over the world. He let stallions go to men of honor, but never a mare. Never a mare. That is how he kept his breed pure.

He smiled. "Ah," he said. "You wish one of my young stallions, one of the Marquese's sons. You must explain to me where you are from and what stock you are using before we can discuss this in more detail."

The men looked at him for a moment.

"No," said the taller of the two. "That is not right. You have a misapprehension." He looked at Lorenzo and then got up and walked to the table in the corner. He picked up the bottle and pointed to the label.

"That horse," he said.

Lorenzo looked from him to the seated one, in awe at such audacity. They could not be serious! That horse was *his* horse. The best stallion, perhaps ever, that his family had bred. The horse was just entering his prime. A man does not sell his best horse.

"You must be mistaken," he said. "That horse is not for sale."

The tall man sat down beside his companion. "No, we are not mistaken. We wish the Stallion. We can offer you any amount of money, or almost anything else you might wish."

Lorenzo was insulted. "A man does not let his best horse go to strangers for money."

"I said, any amount of money," said the man.

"No," said Lorenzo, straightening in his chair. "And I will now ask you to leave."

The two glanced at each other.

"There is no amount of money too great," said the one.

Lorenzo was on his feet now.

"No," he thundered, "you do not understand. *No* amount of money. The Brinco is not for sale!" He felt himself trembling.

The men continued to sit. They did not appear to understand.

After a moment Lorenzo sat again.

"What is your interest in the Andalusians?" he asked in a calmer voice. "Perhaps you are confused. I do not sell the stallion, but he has several fine sons who show great promise."

"We do not want the sons," said the shorter man. "If you do not wish great wealth, what can we offer you?"

"There is nothing you can offer," said Lorenzo, speaking slowly as if to children.

There was silence, and then the one leaned over and spoke at some length in the other's ear. The other looked upset, the play of emotions across his face

was very strange to watch. Lorenzo observed with detached interest, his anger now gone, replaced with a rapidly growing impatience with these two horseflies who afflicted him.

The argument seemed to come to an end and the shorter man got up and paced the room.

"The Marquese is a fine horse," he said.

"He is," agreed Lorenzo.

"He is the finest animal on the planet," said the man.

"Yes, he may be the best horse in the world." In his heart Lorenzo felt that this must be so, but he had never confessed such a thought to any man. Pride grew in him and he warmed again to the pair.

"Animal," said the man. "Horse, camel, dog, any beast that works for man. We judge him to be the finest."

Lorenzo felt a momentary confusion. "I would think so; I don't know much about camels and things. I only know horses." And he implied with his tone of voice what his heart said, and that was that horses were the only beast worth knowing.

"We are collectors of a sort," said the man. "We collect animals from all over to participate in great competitions. We wish your horse as the finest of his species, to be a competitor."

Lorenzo looked long and hard at the pair. The silence dragged out in the slowly darkening room. "Who are you?" he finally asked. "Any man who knows horses knows that to buy one of my stallions he must sign a paper swearing to never show the horse in a competition. I have never gone back on that rule, so all men trust me not to change it for others. A man's word must be good. My honor would not allow me to go back on that rule now, even if I sold you one of the best sons of the Marquese."

"Ah, I think I now understand," said the tall man. "You will not betray your word?"

Lorenzo nodded impatiently. He was growing very tired of this and he wished the men would leave, but the long day and the wine had slowed his blood to the point where he lacked the spirit to order them out a second time.

"We can, perhaps, explain then, if you will give us your word as a man of honor that you will not reveal what we are about to show you."

Lorenzo nodded his agreement. Whatever they wished to show him, let them do it and be gone. He didn't intend to gossip about a pair of idiots anyway.

"We are not from this world," said the man.

"Not from Spain. Yes, I guessed that," said Lorenzo.

"No, we don't mean Spain. We mean not from this *world*," said the man.

Lorenzo looked at them. Insane. He knew it! They were both insane.

"I think you had better leave now," he said, preparing to rise again.

"Wait, we will show you. We can prove it," said the taller one.

There was a small pause, and then Lorenzo's heart began to beat faster and the hair rose on his scalp and the palms of his hands were suddenly wet with sweat. Lorenzo de Valdes was a brave man; he had run with the bulls at Pamplona. But now he saw in front of him a thing which was more frightening than even a rampaging bull. Before his eyes the faces of the two men began to drip and run and change into something else, and even with all his courage it was hard not to look away.

"We are not of this world, as you can see," came the voice of the tall one from the face which was no longer a face. "We wear these bodies so we can speak to you without making you afraid." And then the faces of the men folded themselves back into faces.

"We want your horse, Lorenzo de Valdes. We wish to take him with us back to the stars. We are like your horsemen who travel to competitions with their best animals. For those of us who compete in *this* competition, we strive to find the best specimen from any world to go against the other entries."

"Your horse is the best. Think of having your horse compete against animals from many worlds. How proud you would be, and think of the honor for yourself, for Earth." The shorter man smiled at Lorenzo. "For such glory, could you not sell us your horse? And could you not forget your rule?"

Lorenzo sat, still stunned by what he had seen. He tried to think about what they were saying. There was great pride in him at the thought of his horse representing all of the world.

"Will you sell us your horse?" asked the tall man.

Lorenzo thought. He thought of the honor to himself, and Spain and the whole world. Then he thought of his word, which he would have to break. And his word suddenly seemed a small thing, the word of a man. After all, the horse would not compete on Earth, so it would not compete against horses of the men who trusted him. No, the competition was far away; there would be no harm except to himself, for he had given his word. But he could see no real harm in it. He could feel himself weakening.

"Will more of your kind come to buy horses?" he asked. To break his word once for the honor of Earth might be acceptable, but to continue to break it would not be.

"No, of course not. We don't want any competition. We won't tell anyone. With your horse, we'll win; others won't have a chance. But don't worry, if you sell us the horse we'll give you so much money you won't need other customers."

Lorenzo felt suddenly cold. "And if I still will not sell?"

There was silence. The two men looked at each other.

"The rules of the contest say we must pay, but they don't say how much," said the short one.

"Nor do they say the payment has to be freely accepted," said the other. Lorenzo was silent.

"No number of guards could prevent us from taking the horse, you know. It would be best for you if you accept payment voluntarily; we'll have him one way or another."

Lorenzo looked from the one to the other. Their faces were the faces of men, but he knew what he'd seen. There was a new anger in him, hard and silent, but he kept it hidden.

"Let me think for a while. It is hard to contemplate selling a favorite horse; I am sure you understand. Go now and come back at eight. Have one of my servants show you to the stable then. I will meet you there."

The two men, smiling to themselves, rose and left.

Lorenzo de Valdes sat for some time at his desk. He drank one of the glasses of wine and then he sipped the other, inhaled the aroma, rolled the last of the wine around in his mouth. He got up and limped over to the table and picked up the bottle. Lorenzo looked at the picture of the Marquese on the label. A fine wine and a fine horse: two things of which he was very proud. But too much pride could be bad, and now he must think beyond his pride.

He didn't know anything about creatures from beyond the stars, but he did know about honor and they were without it. They would cheat to gain an advantage, and threaten; they had no principles. He had to judge them as he would judge men, and he could not deal with men who had no principles. He shook his head. The money did not matter, but his honor did, and his pride in the Marquese and what the horse could do must give way before that. He must refuse them, but he knew what they said was true. He couldn't set guards to protect the horse; not against things who could hide behind men's faces. He was not a fool.

Lorenzo put the bottle down and went across the room to his closet. In it hung his best suit of clothes, the ones he wore when he used to ride in the Parades so many years ago. The pants were white satin, caught at the knee with ornate clasps, the red jacket heavily padded and embroidered with white and gold threads. He put them on and checked the time. Seven thirty already! He put on the hat. Then he buckled on his sword. The belt was very ornate, but the sword was real and the edge honed sharp. It had been in his family for many generations and had been used to kill more than bulls.

He looked at himself in the closet mirror. In the clothes he stood straight. His eyes had a sparkle in them and there was a flush in his cheeks. He went to the intercom and called the stable.

"Saddle the Marquese," he said. "I am going to ride."

There was one thing that perhaps the men from the stars did not know about Andalusian horses. Before they were used to pull carts, before they were used to ride in parades and fiestas, they had been battle horses. It was in their blood, just as it was in the blood of the bull to stand and fight. He looked at the clock; it was nearly eight. They would be coming soon, confident that he would give in to his greed and his pride, confident they would have the horse from him.

He took a last look in the mirror and fingered the hilt of the sword. He smiled to himself. A man must act as his honor directs, and a fine horse must be given the same privilege.

His spirit was high as he left the room to ride the Marquese.

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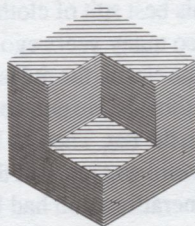
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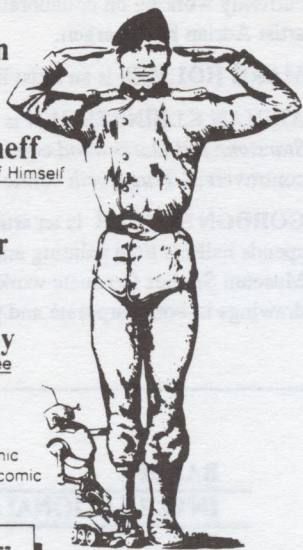
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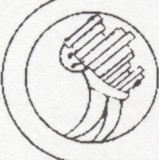
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