

edited by Algis Budrys

tomorrow

No. 2

SPECULATIVE FICTION

\$4.00

GEOFFREY A. LANDIS • ROBERT REED • VALERIE FREIREICH • OTHERS



tomorrow

SPECULATIVE FICTION

Publishers:
THE UNIFONT COMPANY, INC.
Box 6038
Evanston, IL 60204
708/864-3668

Editor and Art Director:
Algis Budrys

Production Manager:
Kandis Elliot

Editorial Address:
tomorrow
SPECULATIVE FICTION
Box 6038
Evanston, IL 60204

Unsolicited stories, as well as sample illustrations, are welcomed. We regret we do not accept poetry or nonfiction, or cartoons.

Unsolicited manuscripts and art must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope to ensure return.

Subscription Information:

6 issues...\$18.00, basic rate

First Class, Canadian and overseas add \$1.00 per issue; U. K. and Australian subscriptions add \$3.50 and \$4.00, per copy, respectively, if Air Mail is desired rather than Surface. Other countries, write for rates.

Single copies, \$4.00 U.S., \$5.00 Canadian and overseas. (See above for Air Mail rates.)

Lifetime subscriptions are also available; \$200, basic rate.

All figures are in U.S. funds.

For Advertising Information, write:
The Unifont Company, Inc.
Box 6038
Evanston, IL 60204

EDITORIAL



An interesting thing happened. Pulphouse needed a little money, and we had a little money, so from now *Tomorrow* is being published by The Unifont Company, Inc., which is essentially my wife and myself.

It's not quite as cornpone as it sounds. My wife has been the top-notch staff assistant to the executive vice president of a rather large company for years. As such, she has come to know a very great deal about many aspects of business. Edna, whom some of you know as the nice lady who hangs around me at conventions and at writing workshops, is a different person at work. Equally nice, but quite different.

And I have been, among other things, operations manager of a rather diversified publishing company, a position to which I attained by taking the usual preliminary steps. So I'm not quite limited to the things you have seen me do in SF.

But none of that is as important as the fact that very little about the magazine has changed. The cover price has gone up from \$3.95 to \$4.00, which is a change that was going to happen anyway. (It has to do with discounts to stores; easier to figure them now.) Other than that, nothing has changed; our rates of payment remain the same, and we smile cheerfully as we write the checks.

There will be a number of issues after this one — perhaps an infinite number. In this, we're helped by not having a national distributor. We don't want one; for one thing, it means having to have an off-sale date, and consequently having an increasing number of stale issues. Instead, we sell to individuals, by subscription and by single copy, and we sell to specialty stores. If you want a copy of Issue One, for instance, the chances are you'll find it on sale beside this issue. If you don't, your store can order it or, if you choose, you can get it from us direct. It also means, by the way, that if your store doesn't stock copies, you can direct them to us, and we'll take care of it.

Contents are not a problem. We have in inventory a number of stories I'll stack up against anybody's. And we have illustrators who can hold their own, at least, with anyone's. Our covers, as you can see, are not a problem either. So we're apt to be around for quite a while.

As far as advertising goes, we probably won't have as much as Pulphouse got, even after this issue. On the other hand, we're not geared to *need* advertising, and every page without an ad means an extra page of story. (I have the quaint idea that what spells success or failure for a magazine is the quality of the stories and illustrations, and very little else.) So it is with some measure of pride and confidence that I tell you about Unifont. It is not a new company, being the house that brought you Rand McNally's *Bicycles...How They Work and How To Fix Them*, years ago, and having done other spot jobs from time to time. It is new to speculative fiction...but I'm not.

I think, at bottom, that editing a speculative fiction magazine is just about the best job in the world, with the possible exception of publishing a speculative fiction magazine. Stay tuned.

— Algis Budrys

tomorrow

SPECULATIVE FICTION

April, 1993

Volume 1, Number 2

NOVELLA

- THE TOOLMAN by Valerie J. Freireich 48
He had been bred to observe, report, and not get in the way of the humans. Also, to die young. But he was very clever, and he did not want to die.

NOVELETTES

- DO I KNOW YOU? by Robert Reed 6
John-john was sent from the Earth to Forbestown for, basically, trivial reasons. For a while, that was all right with him.
- IN THE MEMORY OF PRINCE EDWARD by Susan Allès Blom 39
Prince Edward had a truly terrible memory. And nothing could be done about it. Still....

SHORT STORIES

- EXPLOSIONS! by William Scarff 2
He had a vision, and then he had another. And perhaps more.
- EXPERIMENT OF MANN by Chloe Bolan 21
One of the six was cuckolding him. Of course, all six were clones of him.
- IN THE YEAR OF PURPLE FLOWERS by Geoffrey A. Landis 30
She was a girl from fairyland. He was a boy from Chicago. And for a little while, they met.
- DECEMBER MORNING by Eolake Stobblehouse 37
It was a simple question, with a simple answer.

ARTICLE

- WRITING, PART TWO by Algis Budrys 27
How to do it a little bit better.

"Explosions!" was suggested by a cover painting by Paul Lehr, copyright © 1993, Paul Lehr.
Illustrations by Hilary Barta, Charles Dougherty, Kelly Faltermäyer, Peter H. Francis, Bob Hobbs,
Judith Holman, and Peggy Ranson.

EXPLOSIONS!

William Scarff

Illustration by Bob Hobbs

He had a vision.

He had begun to get them frequently.

One of them showed him a terrible morning



It befell the humans that they lived, at this time, on a world made up of water and islands; great, gray, ragged, rock-rearing islands; cold, spuming water. Only at the height of summer did the water gentle to a degree, and turn bluish. The rest of the year the wind moaned and shrieked in the island rocks, and wore away the soil that was not sheltered. For half the year, in all but the southernmost latitudes, it fell snow and sleet. And it happened almost all the islands were northerly.

Even on the Equator, hard freezes occurred in the night at the height of the warm season. The rest of the year was very hard for a man to stay alive; in summer, it was merely difficult. And the women pinched their mouths, and endured, and did not speak much.

It came to a certain man that they lived with needless inefficiency. He counted up the people as speaking a dozen or more tongues, calling themselves a score or more of separate nations, keeping for themselves whatever resources they had and, except for a few trade goods, which really gave no more than a hint of what they really had, sharing nothing. And Thorvald Karssens thought that this was wrong; that if he could break this...insularity...all would profit.

He did not delude himself. The insularity would have to be broken; no gentler method would do. He had sailed from island to island all his already long life, trading what he could, shaping lies to fit very care-

fully, so that he could trade at a decent profit, and he had no illusions left. He weighed his plans for a long time, and put his money by, and spoke to his fellow captains by ones and twos as he happened to anchor in the same ports. Finally, at the end of a particular year, he spoke to a score of them at the traditional rendezvous just before they quit those given waters for the winter. This was at Portholm Estuary on Traina, Queen of The Seas, which in truth was just an island like the rest, somewhat bigger and certainly more northerly than most others.

"Gentlemen," he said, and hid his smile at the word. "Gentlemen, we have to take thought together now to what I have been saying to you separately. Life is harder than it could be. Let us bind these islands into one political entity, let them share and share alike, and let us have the carrying trade."

Thorvald Karssens was a heavy man with a curling red beard, a scar that ran from his right forehead to his right cheek and thence disappeared into his beard but left a white streak in the red, and he dressed himself in accouterments to match. He looked like a pirate, and probably not too bright a one, since pirates did not have to be. Appearances were perhaps deceiving; the scar was genuine enough, but had been caused by a whipping sheet-end that had broken loose in a storm, not a dagger. Far more important, Thorvald Karssens would do almost anything rather than dirty his hands in a brawl.

Illustration copyright © 1993, Bob Hobbs. All rights reserved. Story copyright © 1993, William Scarff. All rights reserved.

Of course, sometimes brawling became necessary, but he tried to minimize such occasions. Also he would do almost anything rather than betray the fact that behind his pale blue eyes, which alone were sufficient to stun many, lived not so much a killer as a diplomat. Or so he thought.

He thought of himself as a simple man, Thorvald Karssens, and if his crews tended to fall silent at his approach, and go about their tasks quickly, why, that was merely a measure of his simplicity.

"Gentlemen," he said again, pacing back and forth in his main cabin, having invited the other captains aboard, "Do you agree with me?"

There was a general murmur, from which eventually rose the voice of Claus Lomax, captain of the most successful trading vessel after Thorvald Karssens'. "How bind?" Lomax was a beetle-browed, pale man. His brows were knitted in an attempt to gain an understanding. He, too, had been sailing the islands a long time, and if there was one thing he knew—as all the others also knew—it was that generally any given island detested all the others.

"Suppose," Thorvald Karssens said, "Suppose they had a common enemy?"

"What do you mean?"

Thorvald Karssens turned to a cabinet, opened a drawer, and took out a sheaf of the sort of drawings that boatbuilders used. Smiling softly, he spread them out on the table in front of the other captains. They showed a vessel with a sharply upward-curving bow, as was common, but more masts than was common, except that the masts were low. Similarly, the architects seemed to have multiplied the number of embrasures along the top of the hull, but had made them quite small. Otherwise, it was not much different from any other trading vessel; respectable speed, respectable carrying capacity, respectable defensibility, with presumably a twisted-hair spear-throwing machine behind every embrasure...though these

would certainly have to be quite small, in a vessel of these peculiar proportions—

And then, finally, one of the captains took thought to the dimension figures inscribed on the plans, and gasped. "Great God, Karssens, you are joking! But Thorvald Karssens shook his head.

"No, I am not joking," he said. "The vessel is very large. Large indeed." And the ship in the plans took on rightful dimensions; the many masts towered high above the deck, and that deck lined with full-sized spear-throwing machines and catapults, that deck a full fifteen hundred feet long. "She will carry a crew of four hundred," Thorvald Karssens said. "Mostly to work the missile-throwing machines."

"You will never build it!" Claus Lomax declared. "And if you did, sea wrack and cross-current will catch her, beam winds will push her where they will, and—"

"Ah, no," Thorvald Karssens said softly, "they will not." And he went on to explain to the captains, and most of them eventually stopped looking at him like he was crazy. One or two of them chuckled, if a grim, buzzing noise can be called a chuckle.

Then it was time to tell them their share of the cost. And Claus Lomax' voice once again rose above the din. "You *are* mad! You want us to give you our crews, you want us to give you our sails, you want us to contribute money to the building...what do you *not* want?"

Thorvald Karssens looked at Lomax with a sense of weariness growing in him. "Lomax," he said softly, "come step out of my cabin with me for a moment." And Lomax, frowning, curious, did so. The cabin door shut behind the two of them, and no man saw Lomax again. Thorvald Karssens came back to the cabin alone, after a very brief absence, and explained:

"Gentlemen, I am determined to carry out this plan. Let me put it plainly: I am *determined* to carry out this plan." And there was that in his voice, and in his eyes, which brought

an end to all discussion. The fleet of trading ships sailed out of Portholm Estuary on the tide, with Thorvald Karssens' lieutenant holding the command of Claus Lomax' former vessel, and though that crew grumbled at first, the lieutenant explained it to the loudest mutterers, and no more was heard from them.

It was the last of the summer days, down near the Equator. For once—and probably for the last time this cycle—the ocean was relatively calm. Trygve Blomskjold bent to the oars of the ancient rowing-boat, while Old Man Larvis poked the long pole forward. "Slowly!" the Old Man hissed. "Slowly and softly." And the rowing boat crept forward.

They had left Macredie Basin at dusk, and all through the long night Trygve had rowed them steadily on, in the direction of Palmer's Island.

Palmer's was an anomaly; a superficially large island which actually concealed a gigantic bay within itself, being the remains of a volcano. Other than the bay, which was miles across, the island was a shell, with steep cliffs on both the seaward and the inward slopes. Also, sea birds from many islands made their rookery here, so that uncounted generations had bred and nested, and shat, upon the cliffs. Consequently, no one lived there.

The guano on the cliffs was an important resource, used to make fertile the sparse fields of many islands. But because of politics, only one island held it at a time, for a period of a month, before giving way to another. And it was not Macredie Basin's turn, nor would it be for months to come. Trygve and the Old Man were thieves, then, and did not expect much mercy from the temporary titleholders if they were found out. But they had come upon a discovery so rare and wonderful that they must risk it.

The Old Man's pole touched something. "Stop!" he cried softly. "We are here." Trygve rested gratefully on his oars.

The Old Man scrambled back to the midships of the rowing boat and

raised the false bottom, working in the dark by feel. Then he fished out two shovels and handed one to the boy. "Come on!" he said. "We haven't much time." He turned to the looming cliff. "And remember to dig past the surface. It's the stuff underneath, right down at the bottom, that we want!"

"Yes, I know," Trygve uttered to himself. "I know." Had it not all been explained to him, as well as the Old Man, when the vision struck the being whom they cared for? He clambered forward, beside the Old Man, almost choking on the stench, and found a crevice—in the rock itself, or likelier in the caked guano—in which to jam the anchor rope. Then he fell to with his shovel, as the Old Man was doing with his, working his way past the puffy surface, and the older, more solid stuff, until he did get to the guano that had been on the cliff so long as to encourage a gradual transformation into saltpetre.

This he loaded into the hidden compartments, as did the old man, and closed them over the shovels carefully, and cast off, and rowed out to sea, and as the dawn broke washed all traces of their real cargo off the outside of the boat, and spread their nets, and began to catch some fish. And it was only by chance that they drifted across the relatively narrow opening into the interior, and stared.

"A monster!" Trygve said awestruck, his mouth hanging open. "A monster lurks inside."

Old Man Larvis peered. "A ship," he said. "It's a huge ship, still a-building!" He turned to the boy. "Row, son," he said in a desperately calm voice. "Row for home as fast as you can!" And he looked apprehensively at Palmer's Island, waiting for small boats to put out to intercept them, ready for people on shore to bombard them with arrows, looking at as much as he could, and praying they would get away.

And oddly enough he saw nothing hostile, and they did get away. It was as if in a dream; dawn on the eastward face of the island, dawn of

a sort in the interior, so that the giant ship's ribs and planking were barely distinguishable, touched by only the first fingers of light making their way down from the crater rim, and no sign of anything menacing, in the pink, blue and golden light, only the distant wink of a piece of fresh planking lifted off the deck of the supporting barges, turned so that it caught the light momentarily, and then vanishing as it was positioned over the ribs and hammered into place, its end toward the two in the rowing boat and so invisible.

So it was that I learned of the ship. I lay in my chair on Macredie Basin, snarled legs covered by a mat, twisted spine awkwardly placed, misshapen skull tilted up at the sky by my wry neck, and listened as the Old Man recounted what he had seen and Trygve could barely remember to unload the saltpetre. Old Man Larvis came and went in my field of vision, sweat on his visage, beard sprouting whitely against his sundarkened face. And as he spoke, the vision grew in my mind.

Not the way the saltpetre vision had grown, coming in the night, awakening me with a cry of agitation, causing my eyes to start and my mouth to drool, and to hear me cry out: "Explosions! Explosions!"

No, this was at first just a building up of details as Old Man recalled them one by one, and when he was finished I lay hoarsely in my chair and said "Hurry, Trygve! We must hurry much more than I had thought," for now the other sort of vision was upon me, and I saw Thorvald Karssens, indefatigable and driven and red, red, and gold flowing on the water, and the great raised bow of the thing rearing up and up, terrible, and frightful, and awful. I drooled and whimpered; I pissed myself, and became incoherent.

"It's very simple," Thorvald Karssens said to his lieutenant. They were standing side by side on the raw wooden deck of *Leviathan*, watching the sweating shipbuilders below applying the first coat of paint

to the hull. Thorvald Karssens waved a hand at the crest of land that towered above them. The men who had been there, barely distinguishable from outcroppings—a guano-gathering party—were still there. Thorvald Karssens laughed without much mirth. "They can do nothing to us from there. And they have told everybody. And that rowing boat we saw one morning has told everybody. I venture to say that word of this vessel will reach every man, woman and child on every island with the spring migrations. And how can they ignore us? No, they must come to us, and fight us, and so we do not even have to come out of this anchorage! It is perfect; perfect."

The lieutenant nodded respectfully. He continued to oversee the men installing the spear-throwers and the catapults. Hundreds of spear-throwers. Scores of catapults. And how could any vessel hope to pull up to the flanks of *Leviathan* and send boarding parties aloft, or do any other significant form of damage? No, the ship would win everything, and the exhausted islands lose, and when the normal ships of Thorvald Karssens sailed into their harbors, the shadow of *Leviathan* would loom behind every one of them.

There would be peace...Thorvald Karssens' peace, and the world would be different forever. The lieutenant presumed it would be better. Certainly it would be better for the lieutenant, provided only he kept his place well in mind.

"Sir," the lieutenant said sincerely, "I cannot see any flaw in your plan."

Thorvald Karssens smiled. "Yes. That is true." The lieutenant could see no fault in his plan. More important, neither could he. He leaned over the side, and watched the crews at work, supervised by their captains. Overhead, other crews were spreading the sails he had requisitioned, leaving each vessel with only one suit remaining. Within the ship, provisioners were laying siege-goods by, and other men were tirelessly fletching arrows the length of a man and the breadth of an arm. Yes.

The dawn sky was patchy blue and cloud. Trygve Blomskjold and Old Man Larvis led the small fleet of rowing-boats around the end of Palmer's Island. They spread out across the opening, at last given respite from the rising sea that had battered them and numbed their crews. Not a man on the boats but was huddled inside every scrap of clothing he could find, and even so their hands were chapped and numb on the oars. But they had made the trip; all of them had made the trip, and now they were in position. I was very proud of them.

Thorvald Karssens saw them and broke out in a smile, albeit a grim one. He stood forward on the deck and observed the oncoming rowing-boats and said to the gunners of his forward spear-throwers: "Put a couple of shafts into the water fifty feet in front of them." He could not take the rowing-boats seriously, of course; he assumed larger vessels were hiding just outside the mouth of the island.

Cranking their skeins of hair to three-quarter torque, the gunners complied; the blocks slammed forward, and the shafts leaped out of the spear-throwers. They whirred over the sea as though suspended on springs, and spat into the water. "Reload," Thorvald Karssens said. He watched to see if the boats halted their progress toward *Leviathan*. But I had told them that they had to keep coming, and as quickly as they could; that this was the safest way, though I did not lie and say it was absolutely safe for all of them. And they kept coming, with the dawn breaking fully behind them on that cold morning, and the sea tossing them even inside the harbor.

Thorvald Karssens leaned well out over the side, his body protected by the almost vertical bow, as he had intended. "Very well," he said after a moment. "Shoot to hit." With a small part of his mind, he regretted the angle; if *Leviathan* had been anchored a little to one side of the other, he could have brought more spear-throwers to bear. But he did not really think it important. Most of

his thinking had to do with the bigger ships he was sure were waiting for him to be distracted. As if he could ever be distracted.

The blocks slammed home again, louder, at full torque. The pair of spears whined over the sea.

At the same time, bowmen rose in the forepeaks of the rowing-boats. They carried recurved metal bows, and their arrows were fat-bodied, tipped with a conical packet rather than an arrowhead. Each packet fumed a little. And at Trygve's shout, half command and half despair at the oncoming spears, they loosed.

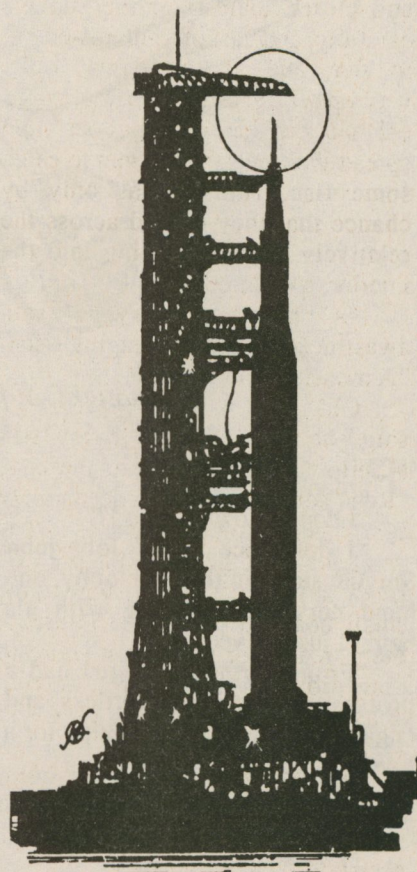
A spear took Trygve in the chest with a crackle of splintered bone, and went crashing on to sink his boat, too, and I regretted that more than words can say; I shall not ever forget him, my Trygve, nearly the first of my servants. But also the arrows from the boats were in flight, and while Thorvald Karssens laughed to think that they were actually trying ordinary arrows on *Leviathan*, the forepeak of his ship suddenly exploded!

For I had envisioned *Sudden-blooming Fire!* Sudden-blooming Fire, sure enough, made from saltpetre and sulfur, and charcoal, and my arrows would rain death on *Leviathan*, death!

"Cast off! Make sail! Go to meet them!" Thorvald Karssens cried, reeling about his riven deck. "Quickly! Quickly or we die!"

But Old Man Larvis, in his boat, cried "Loose!" again, and another flight of arrows was on its way. And "Loose," and "Loose," and "Loose," saturating *Leviathan* with arrows, and explosions happened all over the vessel, causing untold numbers of men to die cursing Thorvald Karssens' name, and *bam* masts began to fall with a splinter and a crack and a crash, *bam* sails began to drape over the broken vessel with a flurry and mutter of canvas, *bam* crewmen fell from the mast tops like screaming raisins, and the seas ran red and gold with explosions, beautiful explosions in the morning, *bam bam BAM!* and *Leviathan* went down, down, down.

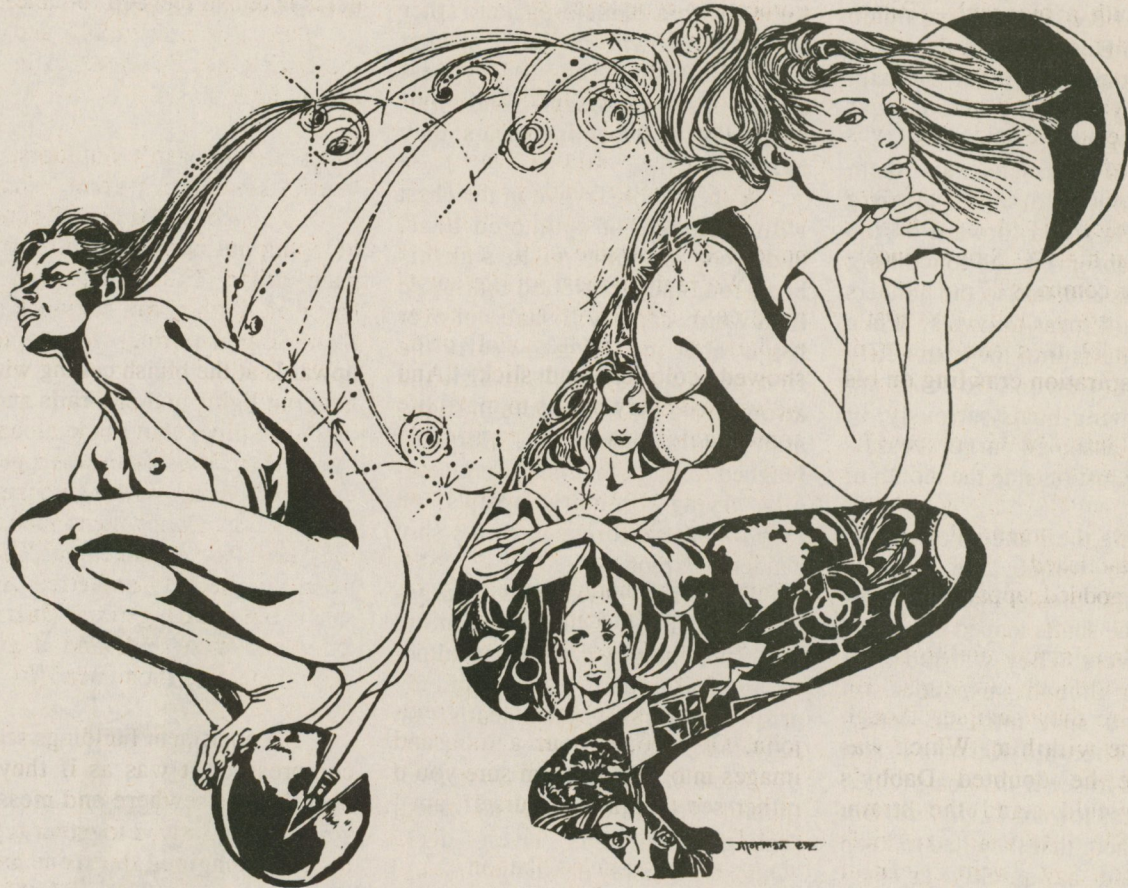
With all hands. And I laughed and laughed, rolling and caroling in my chair on Macredie Basin, drooling, making snot and filling my pants, so happy was I, and today all the islands know what I did, and respect me, and are quick to do my bidding. And they do not know what I will envision next. But I hope I live long enough to envision some method for getting us back out into the stars. Or to live forever. Or both. ■



Do I Know You?

Robert Reed

Illustrations by Judith Holman



He thought, at first, that there wasn't a nicer place than Forbestown

"Pardon?"

"I don't know you, do I?"

"I don't see how." John-john Smythe stood in the tiny lobby, one hand nervously fiddling with his hair. "I just arrived."

"From Earth?" The girl had a professional smile, effortless and engaging. "And you're looking for a home, I bet."

"Yes," John-john managed. "That's it, exactly."

"Your name?"

He told her.

"Well, Mr. Smythe, come with me." She began to walk, looking over her shoulder and adding, "My name is Dabby." They went from the cramped lobby into a cramped communal office. The air was scrubbed and scented, camouflaging the crush of bodies. Antinoise generators produced a rigid hush. Dabby, like everyone, wore sober business clothes. She sat behind a tiny desk and looked at him, her face hand-

some and a lovely natural eye almost matching her double-purpose glass eye. Deep brown hair was cut short. Glassy white hairs were tied into a ponytail and laid over her shoulder. She had an easy confidence, thought John-john, sitting across from her and taking a string of deep breaths.

"A busy day," she allowed.

"Is it?"

"Oh, sure." Touching a button, Dabby caused a projector to unfold. A stubby barrel aimed at him, spit-

ting laser light into his glass eye. He felt the connection being made with his synthetic retina. He was linked with Forbestown's computer net. A second barrel put a thin red beam into Dabby's eye, and she made an audible request, a passengers' manifest appearing to both of them. John-john's name was blinking. Dabby said, "Disclose," and the name led to a second file. His electronic passport, complete with a biography. Birthplace and date; job title, etc. details full of a bloodless authenticity.

"Is this you?" she asked.

No one else. He said, "Yes, yes it is," and nodded.

She labeled the file for future reference, then killed both beams and looked at him. "Is Smythe Incorporated your company?"

"Well...no, actually. I'm just a cousin." He blinked and breathed, feeling perspiration crawling on his scalp.

"Have I heard of the company?"

In other words: *Is it large?*

"We're quite old," he volunteered. Then he amended himself, saying, "Established."

Dabby nodded, apparently interested.

"We manufacture prefabricated structures for cheap buildings." He felt an urge to show samples, though he had none with him. Which was best, since he doubted Dabby's curiosity would stand the strain. "I've come here to study materials made in freefall. We want to learn if they've got applications...in our line of work...."

She said, "That's interesting."

He didn't think so. He had half an urge to debate the point.

Dabby folded her hands before her. "What I can offer you is a modern, spacious apartment. I assume you're single?"

"Yes."

"Because, frankly, our family units are rather limited." Dabby touched buttons, and the projector threw new images into John-john's eye. His synthetic retina made it all look real. It was as if he were standing in a series of apartments, maybe ten or more. A lifetime of practice

allowed him to focus on details, and he went to the trouble of filing everything in his hard memory, under the name: *Candletree*. John-john prided himself on his careful filing system. Most people were sloppy, injecting digitals and whatever into their glassy hairs and then losing track of most of them. Bad habits and hairs filled with unreachable junk. *What waste—*

"Have you been to the other Forbestown complexes, sir?"

"Not yet, no."

"Of course they have their points, and they're all fine. I'm not saying they're not."

The beam killed again, he watched her with both eyes. Dabby had large hands for a woman, he noticed. Good sized even for a man.

"We're the largest private apartment complex in freefall," she was explaining. A professional pride showed, colorless and slick. "And we've used every means to make life comfortable, yet at a reasonable cost."

He was nodding without paying close attention.

"Have you seen our advertisements? On the shuttle, perhaps?"

He couldn't recall any ads.

"May I call you John-john?"

"Please."

"I could keep lecturing, John-john. Or I could pour a thousand images into you. But I'm sure you'd rather see things for yourself, am I right?"

A tour. It sounded like fun.

"Well, good." Her natural eye was warm and caring, and he felt a twinge in his chest. "Shall we go, John-john?"

His face was damp. It had been a long journey, ill-planned and then twice delayed on the launchpad. Some shuttle problem, thoroughly unnerving. Yet this woman had a way of making him feel at ease. She led him through the maze of desks, asking ordinary questions. What port had he left from? How was the shuttle food? Did he sleep well in freefall? And how did he deal with the boredom?

Some people had watched movies or read books, most of them

using libraries stored away inside their white hairs. But John-john had spent his idle time picking through digitals made throughout his life, trying his best to cling to Earth and his former existence.

He said little of this. They were back in the lobby, and Dabby showed him a warm, understanding look. "Travel can be difficult," she allowed, "but I'm sure you can find a home here and feel comfortable."

Her entire face smiled, and even the dark glass eye seemed to care about him.

Outdoors wasn't outdoors. The illusion didn't come close to working. Dabby was beside him, not hurrying but not letting him set the pace either. The spin gravity was less than Earth-norm, but much more than Lunar-norm. He glanced upwards at the bluish ceiling with its hanging lights and cab-rails and the hair-fine pipes that made cleansing rains. Sometimes there was a gust of wind, strong and favoring no particular direction. Dabby mentioned troubles with "air management," and it wasn't limited to *Candletree*. A nuisance, but not dangerous. "Just a little wind," she said; and it gusted again, making them bend to walk against it.

The apartment buildings seemed compressed. It was as if they had been built elsewhere and measured wrong, then shoved together regardless. He imagined the scene around them: stars wheeling and the Sun wheeling and the Moon nearly as big as Earth, splotched with bright round patches of green. What was Dabby saying? Something about natural light being channeled into Forbestown along glass fibers—minus harmful wavelengths, of course. The light fed narrow strips of grass and ornamental shrubs. They had turned down a narrow pathway made from gray concrete, probably Lunar slag hardened by waterless means. The concrete was crumbling at its edges. The buildings themselves were built from similar material, polished Moon rocks pressed into the once-soft walls. Clinging

vines lent life and vitality. Tailored species, he guessed. Little red fruits grew in bunches, so shiny and bright that they had to be poisonous.

Dabby spoke about architecture, accenting the privacy offered to all tenants. Staircases led to the lower floors, semi-private elevators to the luxury units. Roof gardens. Balconies. Many options, she assured him. Something for everyone.

John-john thought of Uncle Willy. It was Willy's idea to send someone to do research. It was time to make ready for the 23rd century, and all that. But the cousins—the real powers in the business—hadn't seen any purpose in this venture. Freefall materials remained too expensive and exotic for Smythe Incorporated. John-john was selected because he wouldn't be missed, and he was taken aside before leaving, the cousins telling him, "Don't spend a dollar more than needed, and don't stay too long. Send reports and keep the old man happy. All right?"

John-john nodded at the memory; then someone said, "Hello, Dabby."

"Hi, Norman. How are you?"

A smiling face nodded at both of them. The handsome black man wore expensive clothes, his biological hair almost as white as the abundant silicon hairs. Some kind of corporate officer? *Like me...* only John-john wasn't fit to wear the man's hair, him watching the elegant figure step into one of the tiny elevators....

Dabby had pulled ahead. He hurried to catch her.

"How are the States?" she asked him.

"Fine. Good."

"That's good."

"Did you emigrate from them?" he wondered aloud.

"Several years ago, yes." Again the professional smile. Two Terrans meeting a hundred thousand miles from home, and he wondered if she came from somewhere close to his home. But before he could ask, they happened upon several men and women who said, "Dabby!" in unison. She turned and called to each of

them, using first names. It was an odd moment. John-john felt excluded, and he was amazed Dabby could remember everyone. He'd always had trouble with faces and names. People like her were wonders. *Marvels.*

"This is the place," she remarked, starting up a zigzagging staircase made of glass foam and aluminum. "I think you'll like this unit. It was vacated just the other day. An Alaskan girl named Cosmic Truth lived here." Dabby laughed at the name, charm blended with the fun. "Cosmic Truth...imagine!"

John-john found himself laughing along with her.

"Small and reasonable," she said, not meaning the Alaskan girl. "I'm sure it suits your needs admirably."

They entered a single room without furniture, without character, the walls made of some off-colored plaster. The carpet was matted and dark like wine. John-john walked in a careful circle, taking a long look at everything. The kitchen consisted of a tiny microwave and an undersized refrigerator-freezer, plus a sink large enough for washing hands and a sonic scrubber for dishes. The countertop doubled as a desktop, two projectors supplied. In the opposite corner was a closet-sized bathroom with a shower and waterless toilet. The scent of strong cleansers made the air sharp and close.

Dabby watched him without quite staring.

He saw himself in the abbreviated mirror. Genetically predisposed for baldness, he'd kept his brown biological hair with treatments. White and gray silicon hairs seemed to glow in the dim light. They were his hard memory, woven into his glass eye which, in turn, was connected to his natural mind. He wore more hairs than he could fill in twenty lives, but that was the fashion. Everyone bought extra capacity in the way they bought extra clothes and big houses. The intricate wonders on his scalp were symbols, if not of wisdom then at least of rote learning.

Dabby warned him, "You can't expect a familiar sense of space."

He knew that, but the smallness bothered him anyway. Dabby opened the curtains, explaining, "When you live with the universe under your feet, you make sacrifices."

Sunlight, or its facsimile, helped enlarge the room. The neighboring building was close, but some trick of the window made it appear twenty meters distance. They were three stories high, four more stories stacked on top and nearly scratching the blue ceiling. He felt the mass of the buildings. He noticed how sunlight had bleached the wine pigments of the carpeting. He cleared his throat, trying to say one thing, but something else came from his mouth.

"You seem to know a lot of people."

Dabby blinked as if surprised. "I'm sorry. Are you aware of our special feature? I assumed you were—"

"Feature?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." She shook her head. "My fault entirely. I apologize."

Something vague hovered in his mind. Not in hard memory, at least not in any file he could think of requesting. It was something he had heard...on the long shuttle ride, perhaps.

"Everyone knows everyone in Candletree." Dabby made the statement with a matter-of-fact voice. "We recognize faces and first names. Hobbies. Jobs. The kinds of things you'd know about casual friends." She touched her ponytail, picking through the white strands. One strand was thicker, greenish and glittering in the sunlight.

John-john saw it against her big hands, wishing he could touch her.

"A sophisticated new hard memory," she was telling him. "Someday it will be commonplace, but for now no other place has this convenience."

She dropped her ponytail, letting charm work on him. She used her smile and her eyes, and he was glad for her charm. He treasured it. Sometimes nothing was more comforting than another person working hard to sell you something you might not

need. Your will and desires were important enough to tie into knots...and John-john found himself smiling, sighing and ready to believe whatever Dabby said next.

On the way back to the office, in the maze of pathways, they came across another pedestrian.

"Hello...Cleave?"

Dabby stumbled on the name, which seemed odd. Cleave was a tall, angular man. He had a Moon-born look, thin bones leading to a thin, big-eyed face and shaggy hair half black and half snowy white. His eyes were mismatched. The glass eye was a provocative gold, shiny and featureless, and his eyelid had been removed. Some Moon-born people were thoroughly peculiar, he knew. They wore their oddness like an emblem... and Cleave apparently read John-john's thoughts, grinning and giving him a long knowing stare.

Dabby was explaining about some mandatory classes. How to live in space and in Candletree. She seemed preoccupied. Was it Cleave? Why? "The technology is unobtrusive," she managed, "and with practice and familiarity you'll even forget—"

"I don't see how it's done," he interrupted.

"—Forget that it's working."

"Because isn't facial recognition difficult? I mean, isn't that one of the things people still do best?"

"You have to understand."

Dabby shot a winning smile at him, taking control. "A lot of people live here. People accustomed to the best, I should add. But we're pioneers, and pioneers always deal with unique stresses. That's why our parent company has invested in this system. Think! You'll be able to glance at any neighbor's face, in any light and from any angle, and your advanced hard memory will identify it in a moment." Her voice was passionate. A measured, precise level of passion. "This skill enhances the feeling of community. Of being among people you know and in whom you can trust, just as you'd trust any casual friends..."

Who do I trust?

"We call the system BUDDY," she added.

"Buddy?"

"The first initials of its five inventors." She paused before saying, "Don't let the novelty worry you, Mr. Smythe."

"I'm not worried."

A dubious look, then she continued. "Our parent company, Tri-C Industries, has great hopes for BUDDY. Their goal—brace yourself—is to produce a lasting answer to the anonymity of urban life. Imagine a world where everyone knows everyone. Any two strangers cross paths, and they enjoy instant recognition."

An unsettling prospect. Would his home city allow such things? Two centuries of computerization meant privacy laws and engrained taboos. But up here, up among the pioneers, there weren't so many limits. Which was why a lot of corporations came here in the first place. New societies, their plastic customs always evolving—

"When we get back to the office, you can read the standard contract. If you'd like to consider us, I mean."

John-john got a glimpse of Dabby's face.

"We can use your background file for BUDDY," she told him.

He felt uneasy, but for no reason he could name.

"If that's all right, John-john."

"Yes. Fine." He liked the way she said his name.

Dabby walked more slowly, perhaps sensing that patience would win him over. Wasn't she an attractive woman? Looking at her face with more than a casual interest, he felt excitement. *And well-built too...* allowing himself the downward glance. She was talking about the implanting of his new, ultramodern hair. "And we'll need a high-grade holo of your face, naturally. Do you have a recent one?"

"Not really."

"Then we'll take one for you. As soon as we're back, we can make an appointment."

He was thinking about his file—his biography—bringing it from hard

memory and dividing his vision. A lifetime of practice let him walk and study the basic points. Unease had become a dull dread, but still he couldn't articulate his reasons.

"It sounds fine," he heard himself saying.

But again Dabby seemed preoccupied. Distant. She glanced behind them, thinking about something. John-john remembered the Moon-born man, Cleave...seeing the gold-eyed face in his mind's eye.

Thinking:

Not the kind of person I'd forget, hard memory or not!

Thinking:

There's something about that man...!

It took several days to establish his household and take the mandatory classes. Candletree rented furniture to its tenants, charging fortunes, but it wasn't his bill to pay and revenge caused him to fill his little room to bursting. He had a wide bed and dresser and a soft chair, every material made from Belt hydrocarbons and glass foams. He made notes about his furniture and sent them home with his first report. The concretes and foams had Earthly applications. Perhaps someday their costs would drop sufficiently. Who knew?

At night, alone in his new home, John-john slept without dreams or interruptions. The walls were virtually soundproof. He found himself straining to hear the throb of music or shouting...something to give the place a hint of life, please....

Despite first doubts, John-john found himself eager to join BUDDY. His walks about the area convinced him. People didn't smile at him with the same authority that they used on each other. No one said, "Hello, John-john." He was excluded, perhaps an outsider. He found himself putting his face into the freakish winds, ignoring everyone, marching from place to place without a glance at anyone's face.

The orientation classes were taught at home, at any hour, employing the laser-eye interface and a tutor who appeared inside his glass

eye. The tutor was some kind of holo construct, interactive and sophisticated. The white-haired gentleman taught him about the emergency systems throughout Forbestown, plus the sealed capsules intended for cataclysmic disasters. Again and again he heard how water and air were precious commodities. The lessons dragged; the tutor paced at the front of an illusionary classroom. Finally came the information on BUDDY. Files were updated daily, John-john learned. Privacy was maintained by rigorous, proven means. Only first names were used. No last names, nor addresses or phone numbers. And no exceptions were granted, even for Candletree's employees.

"Congratulations!" The tutor's voice was happy, the wrinkled face profoundly satisfied. "It's been a pleasure working with you, son, and I hope you live many happy, fulfilling years in Candletree."

He was early for his appointment at the local clinic. The sole attendant was a drab young man. His name was a mishmash of syllables that covered a plastic tag, and he handled John-john with practiced indifference. First he made the holo portrait, feeding it to BUDDY. Then a single greenish hair was implanted, autodocs weaving its roots into the glass fibers that had been part of him since he was five years old. Final tests were made without him feeling anything, and he glanced at the attendant without expectations, the mishmash name bursting out of hard memory. He read the man's name as well as his sketchy biography. Just like that. He was from Tehran by way of Quebec, an employee of Tri-C Industries for his entire adult life—

"That's that," said his new friend.

"Thank you. Very much, thank you."

The Iranian shrugged his shoulders, then showed John-john to the door. "If you have trouble, call. You'll need an appointment first."

"Good day to you," said the grateful patient.

"Good evening," the attendant responded, the clinic's door closing with a solid hiss.

It was evening. John-john returned home and examined the new hair in the bathroom mirror. It felt strange, thick and too stiff, and it was sharp along the edges. He summoned the hair's index, then requested any and all background information. The green cast came from novel crystals that gave it a huge and swift memory. Like all glassy hairs, it was powered by the wearer's own biochemistry, osmotic pumps creating electricity. Whenever John-john linked with a Candletree projector — in a heartbeat — the newest data were injected without him being aware. And try as he might, he couldn't feel anything different about himself. His own mirror image didn't trigger BUDDY. But wouldn't that be a mess, doubly recognizing yourself all the time? Wise inventors....

After dinner and careful consideration, he decided to socialize. He showered and dressed in good casual clothes, then walked out into the strange partial darkness, the lights of thousands of apartments bouncing off the ceiling. John-john accessed a map of the area and navigated towards the central clubhouse. His mood was intense. He felt pleasantly alert. Someone walking in shadows said, "Evening, John-john. How are you?"

Startled, that's how. He turned and caught a glimpse of the face, and an instant later heard himself blurt-ing, "Peter! Good evening, yes!"

Already he was known. It was surprising, but then again Peter tracked ore shipments from the Belt. He was always peering into projectors, and that was probably true for most of his neighbors.

John-john stroked his hair, wondering what momentous events this night would bring. The clubhouse was a two story building at the end of a tree-lined pathway. He paused and breathed deeply before entering the clubhouse.

Immediately he was immersed in noise and colored lights, voices calling, "John-john! Hello! Hi!" He saw

faces and read names—a crush of casual acquaintances—and he turned in a quick circle, waving at everyone equally.

For a little while he lingered, eavesdropping on conversations and listening to the music. But things were too loud and too young, and he searched through the clubhouse's floorplan, finding a large room at the back labeled "TAVERN." He entered, antinoise making a sudden hush. Nobody called out to him, the mood subdued. Private. He chose a tiny booth at the back, ordering a drink from the built-in waitress. Only then did he let himself watch faces, digesting their biographies. A man named Ewles, from United Europe; an old woman named Pat, expert in nuclear engines; twin brothers named Lee and Wing, up from Singapore on an extended vacation—

—but what he wanted was a young woman. Like the one at the bar, he thought. Extremely slender, legs crossed. And sitting alone. Her build and nonathletic legs meant she was Moon-born. She was sucking on a smokeless cigar and drinking a violently orange liquor. Distance and the partial lighting kept him from recognizing her. Names drifted through his eye as BUDDY struggled. Long black hair was shot full of whiteness. She held herself like someone important, straight-backed and regal. Everyone entering the tavern was studied by her big eyes...*Junian* was her name. Thirty-one, he realized. Moon-born and living on investments. An artist of some sort. And with that Junian caught his stare, eyes lingering for a long moment, and he blinked and straightened his own back.

A quick smile. He risked one, then a knowing nod.

And Junian seemed to shrug while turning away from him.

A snub, and John-john tried forgetting it. His drink arrived, and he fell into Junian's pattern of watching new people. The effect was humbling. There were scientists—astronomers and several flavors of chemists—plus shuttle pilots and

officers in the big corporations. And one surgeon from the local hospital, her face and name already familiar to John-john, her health-advice program popular everywhere.

John-john felt unremarkable. Not inadequate, but he assumed these other people would consider him inadequate. He did boring work, working for a tiny company, and why should they spend time and breath on him? The evening's anticipation had been erased—Junian and her shrug had pricked his bubble—and suddenly he felt tired, reminding himself of the work that wasn't getting done. *Not this way...*

Leaving was an easy decision.

The difficult choice was the timing.

John-john finished his drink, careful not to rush. Then he stood as if satisfied, walking out with all the poise he could muster. He avoided Junian's gaze and passed into the lobby, swimming through bodies while making for the door.

Someone called out, "Night night, John-john!"

He offered a quick wave, not glancing at the person; he was bloodied enough already, thank you.

Waterless washers and microwave dryers were stacked inside a closet-sized room below John-john's apartment. The next day, still feeling blue, he found himself on his hands and knees, his face thrust between washers. He couldn't locate a certain sock. His gaze followed a strip of cement to the wall, then lifted, and he noticed a dry yellow piece of Paper tacked to the plaster. It read:

TIRED OF BEING LESS THAN
OTHERS? SICK OF OBSCURITY?
CALL ME! TALK TO ME!
I CAN HELP THE REAL YOU
SHINE THRU!

A telephone number was written ten times at the bottom, the paper torn and bent to resemble ten stubby fingers waving at him. Well, eight fingers. Two had been ripped away.

"The real me," John-john muttered. "Imagine *that*."

He rose, still sockless, and stuffed clean clothes into a laundry sack. As he left his eyes stuck on something yellow and square and taped to a plastic pipe rooted in a corner. He read:

NO ONE IS ORDINARY.
EVERYONE IS ORDINARY.
SEE HOW BOTH STATEMENTS
ARE TRUE, THEN BE SEEN IN
YOUR FINEST LIGHT!

It was a different number, yet the print style was identical. Only three fingers remained for the taking. John-john ripped one of them free, telling himself he was curious. Nothing more. He tucked the slip of paper into his shirt pocket, lifted the sack and climbed home.

Later that night, bored with the research, John-john found the paper and made the call. *What was the harm?* The connection seemed to take a long time, suspicious clicks and pops followed by a distant buzzing. No picture showed on the phone's screen. There was a squeak, blackness, and an eerie sound rather like breathing. An electronic voice said, "Yes?"

"Listen," he began, "I saw your...your advertisement. In my laundry room? And I was—"

"Intrigued?"

John-john gulped and said, "I don't quite know what you're offering."

"Self-assurance, John-john."

He knows my name. He can see me...!

"Would you like to meet?"

John-john asked, "When?"

"Tonight. I've got time."

"Well...where?"

"Your place," said the bodiless voice.

"Don't you think it's kind of late?"

"Nonsense."

John-john didn't have the spirit to debate.

"Hey, I'll do you ten worlds of good." And then came a distinct click, the dial tone returning. John-john felt confusion and then relief, realizing the voice didn't know his address, no meeting possible...

...and with that he sat on his bed, eyes closed. He felt like treating himself to a favorite old digital—his ninth birthday party—accessing it with a string of whispered commands. A head-high floating camera had recorded both sights and sounds. He felt as if he were walking among children, watching himself and his friends riding tired ponies, playing games, and giggling incessantly. Like anyone, most of his hard memories had no value. Were never called upon. But there were several hundred digitals like this one, from childhood and more recent times. He heard his little-boy voice saying, "Come here," and he watched himself sneak a kiss from a pretty eight-year-old girl, both of them oblivious to the camera; and John-john smiled in the present, eyes still closed, scarcely hearing the knocking at his door over the fossilized shouts of children.

The visitor knocked again.

John-john rose and peered through the peephole, recognizing the face at a glance. BUDDY told him what he knew for himself. *Cleave*. The lidless gold eye stared when he opened the door, and a human voice said, "I'm the one. Let me inside."

Somehow Cleave wasn't a complete surprise. A palpable sordidness clung to him; he seemed the sort to leave notes in laundry rooms and employ electronic trickery. Moon-born, all right. John-john stared at the fine fragile face, golden pins stuck through the eyebrows. The Moon had a heritage of oddballs and radicals, and here stood one of its proud sons. The BUDDY biography was sketchy, mysterious. It offered no place of birth, no records of schools and honors. There was nothing but a general sense of travel and unclear means of financial support.

"What do you want?" John-john inquired.

"I'm here for you," Cleave responded. His voice was calm and measured. "I've come to help you, sir."

"I don't know what this is about," John-john began. "I don't even know why I called."

"Yet I know. Isn't that strange?"

"So why then?"

Cleave sighed. When he wished, he had a caring face. "You want people to notice you. You want and deserve respect. I don't think it's unfair to ask for such things."

"I just joined BUDDY—"

"And it's not the godsend you imagined." The gold eye caught the light. "You're an honest man, aren't you? You told BUDDY the abbreviated truth, and now you're regretting it. Am I close here? You wish you could cause heads to turn, make your neighbors notice you. But who doesn't?"

He felt himself agreeing with Cleave, despite his own caution.

The man's face changed, eyes scanning the room. He acted as if he were taking measurements, plotting factors, already immersed in his strange work. Then he said:

"I knew the girl who lived here before. An Alaskan, very young."

Cosmic Truth. He recalled Dabby telling him the name.

"A pretty girl. Naturally pretty."

Cleave shook his head, some distinct opinion making his features turn hard and a little distant. "She came here to experience life. Her words. 'Experience life.' She thought herself to be adventurous, and fearless...I'm sure you know that kind of person, John-john."

"I suppose...."

"Anyway," he continued, "she was quite shallow, all things considered. A lot of superficial people come across as bold and outgoing, probably in self-defense. Cosmic's problem was that no one took her seriously. She had lied to BUDDY, but in revealing, transparent ways. People glanced at her and saw a spoiled, self-absorbed twenty-two year old child."

"You helped her?"

"Many ways, and more than once." The natural eye blinked. "The BUDDY technology is new and spectacular, and it's full of legal implications and moral pitfalls. I love it!" His teeth were bright, little cartoon faces etched into the white enamel. "They were honest with you, John-

john. Dabby was. They have good reasons to feel secure about BUDDY'S security. Their only problem is the volume of traffic. People come and go from Candletree daily. The system is in perpetual flux, which means there are windows. Opportunities. Someone can enter a file and make adjustments

"You can do that?"

Cleave shook his head. "I didn't say yes. I didn't say no."

John-john folded his hands in front of himself.

"If I were in charge of this place," said Cleave, "I wouldn't give a damn about security. A person should be able to adjust his biography as he wishes. Isn't that our right as humans? We're entitled to invent and reinvent ourselves as we wish, for reasons of our choosing."

"How did you help her?"

"By making her an object of pity. By causing people to feel sorry for her...which in no way or shape or form is what I suggest for you."

What's he know about me? What's he seeing?

"Let's play a game," said Cleave. We'll reappraise and rewrite your biography. No charge. Then you can give me money, and maybe you'll find your BUDDY identity switched. In your case, Mr. Smythe, we can give you the respect of your neighbors and peers...."

The possibility was enticing. John-john offered his guest the lone chair, then sat on the dented part of his bed.

"How do we start?"

"At the start," Cleave giggled.

"Is it expensive?"

The man gestured at his clothes. "Do I look wealthy?"

Not in the slightest, no.

"For me, sir, this is fun and games." Joy showed on the thin face and the mismatched eyes. From somewhere he withdrew a writing pad and pen, the pad set on one narrow thigh. "Shall we begin?"

"I don't know. I mean, I'm really very ordinary." *And content with being ordinary, until lately.*

"Mr. Smythe." Cleave's gaze turned hard, uncompromising. "If it

comes to it, we'll give you back the most precious thing BUDDY stole from you."

"What's that?"

"Your capacity to choose your moments and lie."

It was reassuring to hear the course marked out clearly, with certainty. John-john nodded and wondered where Cleave had learned his last name. Then another question pushed to the front. "What about Cosmic Truth?"

"There is none," Cleave joked.

"I mean...what happened to the girl?"

"Eventually? She went home, I gather."

"Why?"

Cleave stared at him and said, "I don't really know," and shrugged his shoulders, puzzlement laid over a foundation of gray disinterest.

In the next week John-john kept to himself or traveled outside Candletree, making tours of freefall factories, asking people who weren't his neighbors about materials and methods. He threw himself into his work and succeeded in filing several intricate reports, getting no response for his diligence. Not even from Uncle Willy.

Then the bubble burst. John-john was returning from a remote factory, riding alone in the rocket cab; and he found himself staring at Earth—the familiar continents; the pure white clouds; the single nourishing sea. He missed the place as he would miss a friend. Once home, he piped a string of old digitals into his eye and ears. A vacation to Kenya. An early girlfriend modeling a nightgown. His own house, little by Earth standards but suddenly looking spacious, with flower gardens and its footworn carpeting. He even accessed views of his office and job. Besides the snip-pish cousins, the place had its positives. Its mild pleasures. And more importantly, he had anonymity waiting whenever he stepped outdoors.

He was sick of solitude. That much was certain.

John-john walked to the clubhouse. It wasn't so busy that night,

the tavern almost empty. But when he climbed on top of a stool he felt renewed. Alive again. A couple were in his old booth, talking in soft whispers and holding hands. Gene, the engineer, and Connie Lee, the metallurgist. *A handsome couple.* John-john sipped his drink and settled in; and a husky voice inquired, "May I join you?"

He recognized Junian at once, opened his mouth and couldn't speak.

"John-john?" she said. "Have we actually met before?"

"I don't believe so." His grip tightened around his glass, then he said, "Junian," with an experimental voice.

"So I'm dying to know...what's Smythe Incorporated? And what do you do, being Director of Research?"

He answered as Cleave had recommended, supplying nothing more than a sketch to be filled in by his audience.

Junian pulled a smokeless cigar from her purse, saying, "Rebuilding an entire asteroid! Wow!" She had a handsome face for being so wickedly thin. A hand rested beside his hand, her flesh brushing against him, feeling damp and cool. "I'm fascinated. A project like that...it makes me dizzy just contemplating it!"

"It's very preliminary," he added. "I'm doing basic research, that's all." Cleave hadn't picked the lie at random. John-john had had basic architectural courses in school, one teacher being a terraforming enthusiast. She had bored the class with speculations, none appearing on the tests. Yet John-john had dutifully recorded everything, filing the notes in his hard memory. "A resource for the milking," Cleave had told him. And again John-john mentioned, "It's all preliminary, and who knows?"

"Still, you're courageous. Just to think these things takes bravery."

He watched Junian's matching eyes. Moon-born, yet ordinary. Not at all like Cleave....

"Great companies begin with gambles," she assured him. Taking a long pull on her cigar, she winked at

him. "I know how these things happen. You can't play humble games with me."

"And you're an artist?"

"It's my calling, yes."

"Maybe sometime...I could see your work...?"

"Absolutely." She turned off her cigar and lifted her glass to her lips, the orange liquor leaving a slight moustache. "Whenever!"

Decisions had been made. John-john found himself feeling more at ease with his fiction. Junian's faith was delicious. He glanced at her figure, imagining her small breasts and the dark nipples and her long exotic body...and she seemed to watch him in a similar way, her gaze frank and appreciative, her smile hinting at a grand wickedness.

"I can show you some of my stuff tonight," she allowed. "Paintings. I've got quite a few at home."

"If it would be convenient."

She laughed as if he was teasing, standing and paying her tab with her glass eye. An abbreviated projector identified her from her synthetic retina, then she blinked and said, "I don't live far from here."

"Fine."

"I'm not rushing you, am I?"

"No, no." He enjoyed the sensation of being carried along, saying, "I'm finished," and draining his glass with a sense of theater. "All done." Then he paid, Junian's hand closing around his elbow with a weak or gentle grasp. He couldn't tell which it was.

Outside, walking in the near-dark, she whispered, "Genius."

He glanced at her, wondering what she had meant.

"I know you're one," she persisted. "When I see genius, I know. It's an ability of mine."

"Really?"

She cuddled with his arm. Dipping her bony head, she nestled it between his shoulder and head. "Tell me about the terraforming. How many people will live in your asteroid?"

"Millions, eventually." His voice had confidence and authority. "Of course we'll build with room to

spare. Not like here. Parks and big homes, just like on Earth."

They were strolling in an unfamiliar direction, but the buildings seemed similar to the ones he knew. It was conformity more than sameness. Superficial variations, the same essential feel. Junian put his arm around her waist. She felt soft, disappointingly soft, Moon-born flesh probably having to work hard to withstand its modest weight. She smelled of tobacco and sweet alcohol and something vaguely fishy. "I can't tell you too much," he allowed. "You know. Security?" He turned to her and pulled her even closer.

Her apartment was nearby, as promised. BUDDY had said something about Junian's investments, yet her room was no bigger than his own, and possibly smaller, set at ground level and smelling stale as they entered. The ceiling's glow flickered. She apologized for the general clutter, walking through the room and picking up underwear, towels and unmatched socks. Everything was heaved into the closet. Then she turned and smiled, showing so much hope and joy that John-john felt like fleeing.

"Another drink?" she asked.

"A baby one."

She poured clear liquor into two glasses stained with white sediment. His drink tasted wrong. Junian's eyes remained fixed on him, scarcely blinking. He couldn't name their color. Green, or hazel? Finally he remembered the paintings. "Where are they?"

"Right here!" she chimed. In a high kitchen cupboard canvasses had been rolled together and stacked like firewood. She pulled out several logs, warning him, "Some of these are rough."

He opened a random canvas.

"Good artists aren't organized. Never." She sounded proud. "Which one is that? Oh, good. Good!"

He held it up to the flickering light. It seemed to be a sketch of an earthly stream and a grove of wild trees. People were in the foreground; squat as toads, and the backdrop

was full of wrong-shaped hills. Everything was done with rigorous precision. No critic of art, he felt justified in having no opinions. But for him the work lacked life and spirit. Colors and shapes, but none of it vibrant.

Of course she asked what he thought.

"It's fine," he lied. The words clung to him, trying to betray his true mind. "I like it quite a lot."

"It's Earth. But you knew that, I bet." She began happily uncurling other canvasses, constantly brushing herself against him. He couldn't ignore her body. When she looked at him he felt nervous, her intensity wrong. Too much of it, too soon. "Well," she said to the scattered landscapes, "what do you think, John-john?"

She smelled a little drunk, he thought.

Reaching with both hands, she grabbed him behind the ears and pulled him close, kissing him with a panicked urgency. She had no strength but could move him at will. It was like descending into a current, trusting the water's motions. For several hours he remained happily passive; then it seemed late and he told Junian, "I've got work tomorrow. I should go."

"Stay here? With me?"

"I can't. Sorry." She was watching him. She seemed smaller all at once, fragile, apparently afraid that she might lose him. He told her, "I don't sleep well with another person." *A truth.*

She dipped her head and said, "My genius."

He considered telling Junian the whole truth.

"Can I see you? Tomorrow, maybe?"

"Of course." He swallowed and added, "Absolutely."

And thankfully she asked nothing else. Perhaps experience had taught her not to press too hard. She lay in bed, watching him dress, her soft breasts flat against thin ribs and her belly showing a long, unmentioned scar. John-john realized she wasn't thirty-one. BUDDY was

wrong, maybe by ten or fifteen years. Did she know Cleave? Did someone like him help doctor her records? But he didn't dare mention the man, deciding it was best to live with the charade a while longer.

He was touched by the woman's affections, after all.

And more than that, he adored her attempts to inflate his worth. The noise about being a genius; the intensity of their sex and her stares. What person could resist such things? *Bless you*, he thought as he left the tiny room. *Bless you, a thousand times....*

They'd meet at the clubhouse at irregular intervals, John-john giving away his last name but not his address or his hours. She settled for the new routine. He bought her drinks, playing the role of the most-important Smythe in a company bound for greatness. She treated him as a marvel, forever applauding his role and fictional status. They managed patience for each other's quirks; they made half a dozen pornographic digitals of themselves, only for themselves; and all the while John-john created new details about his scheme for transforming the unnamed asteroid.

Junian didn't approve of modesty, he learned. It was like a limp or an open sore, and she ignored any humble words. If he got lost while they walked somewhere, it was because his creative side had distracted him. And what he did do properly was beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. She said so firmly, almost daring his rebuttal. He had a certain value in her mind, and he wasn't free to debase that worth by any means.

One night John-john lay on his back, in her bed, thinking of Dabby. He tried remembering her face and body and the sound of her voice. BUDDY didn't help. It required the physical presence to engage the system, and since he hadn't any digitals, he had to make due with sloppy wet memories.

Junian noticed him drifting off to sleep, and she bent close, mouth

to his ear, whispering, "I was once married, darling." A whisper, yet intense. Focused. "Darling? Did you hear me?"

He nearly said Dabby's name, jerking awake.

"Did you hear—?"

"Married?"

"Yes."

"Well," he offered, "all right—"

"I was a child bride, and stupid." One long damp finger stroked his temple. Then she sighed and rose above him, bracing herself with the other arm. "It's funny. People think people from the Moon are different. Smarter and more sophisticated and all that. Isn't that right?"

"Sometimes," he had to agree.

"Yet we're not." The stroking finger lifted, scratching her natural eye. "I mean, we make mistakes. We're far from perfect."

He would never accuse Junian of perfection.

"Such an awful man."

She means her husband....

"Not that I want to dwell on it. I don't. I just thought you should know about him."

John-john thought of the long scar, shivered and said, "I'm sorry."

"A brutal savage." Her voice was tight and slow, her face apparently haunted. It had always been haunted, he realized. It had a stiffness, something wrong with the eyes. What kinds of memories did she carry? A lot of people, after trauma, had their hard memories wiped free of anything that might remind them of bad times. Had Junian been purged? But there were other memories, of course.

"When he wanted," she said, "he was the sweetest dream. And a minute later he was a monster. An asshole."

He felt sorry for her, and he feared that he was just a different kind of monster. The same as her ex-husband, he wasn't what he pretended to be. John-john wished he could be home again. On Earth. He put his face into his pillow, whispering commands; and in one eye he could see his yard and flowers, plus the single meatberry tree supplying

shade and steaks every summer. *It's summer now.* Imagination added Dabby, making her kneel in the flower garden while wearing a clinging dress. She seemed a natural part of the landscape, talking in a casual, familiar way. She lived here. They were husband and wife, and she sounded self-assured and rational. John-john imagined himself approaching Dabby, touching a firm shoulder; and he sobbed, perhaps for Junian and perhaps for himself.

"I'm sorry," she offered. "You've got more important things to weigh on you. I shouldn't have—"

"It's fine. I'm glad you told me."

"It was done long ago," she repeated.

"Good."

"I'm over it." She shifted her weight. "You can tell, can't you? That it's all past?"

"I didn't even guess."

"Good."

"You were a youngster," he said.

"Exactly." Her voice was flat and featureless as leveled concrete, yet her face seemed thankful. "You're good for me, John-john. You do me wonders."

"I don't know."

"You do!" She wouldn't entertain excuses.

He tried to conjure Dabby again, but she eluded him.

"I told you," Junian persisted, "because I had an inspiration. *I felt it was the right time.*"

He touched her damp belly, feeling the thin raised line.

"Intuition has led me through shit." She stroked his chest. "And it led me to you, lover. Darling. I saw you and had an intuition."

He remembered the long-ago shrug of her shoulders.

"Stay tonight. Will you?"

He said nothing, trying to think.

"It would help. More than I can tell you, it would help me."

"All right then. Okay."

"My sweet gifted lover." She gazed at him, both eyes intense. A palpable heat rose from her body and broke across him.

John-john kept absolutely still.

"Hey! Did I tell you? I've taken up poetry." She offered a smile. "I started just this week."

"Poems?"

"I should read some to you. They're very good, I think."

"I bet so." He was thinking about her bad paintings. "Later?"

She kept smiling, promising him, "In the morning." Yet despite the smile, Junian seemed nervous. Brittle. Tobacco breath was thick, and the bad lighting made her appear ten years older than her honest age. She said, "Tell me something about your work. Something new?" She curled up against him like a child might, skin dry as parchment and her heart beating against his arm.

John-john spoke about freefall parks and spherical ponds, inventing odd fish that swum in water and air; and he knew he was trapped, unable to ever admit the truth; and there was a comfort, he discovered, in being trapped, the tensions erased and no unequivocal choices left for him to make.

Work went into a long decline. Boredom was part of it, but there was also the distance from home and Uncle Willy. And maybe it was because his lies made the real work too bland to tolerate. Prefabricated walls didn't compare against the building of an entire world.

Routines persisted. He made the factory tours and the data searches, his hard memory cluttered with tables and graceless schematics. Yet his pace slackened. The job had no attractions whatsoever. When did the company last contact him? The head accountant called to ask about a cash payment to a consultant, someone named Cleave. Cleave who? And what had he done, this mysterious Cleave...?

Sloth had its seductions. John-john wandered about the area, people stopping him to inquire about terraforming. Were they truly interested? He believed some were, yes, but he'd always had troubles reading faces. Outside Candletree, he was mostly a stranger. His favorite place

was the spacious freefall lounge, watching shuttles and tugs dock with the hub. He liked their clean motions and the underlying order of the place. If humankind were only so orderly, he believed, there wouldn't be so much waste and pain. Staring at the white-and-blue face of Earth, he made his solemn wish. *Order and thrift universal....*

One day, returning from the lounge, he happened upon Dabby. For half an instant she stared at him, not quite recognizing him. Then BUDDY displayed his name, her blinking and smiling while asking, "How are you, John-john? Goodness, how are you these days?"

"Fine. Fine." His chest began to ache.

She nodded and kept the smile working, pleasant but never more than pleasant. "And the apartment is succeeding for you?"

"Oh, yes."

"A cute place." She spoke with professional confidence. "I knew you would fit right in." And she paused, perhaps sensing something wrong. BUDDY was telling her about the new, improved Smythe Incorporated, and maybe she was comparing it to her wet memories. Yet why would she recall such details? He was almost certain she'd never committed his original biography to hard memory, which was fortunate...and now she asked about his work, her smile betraying no doubts. Was he accomplishing things? Could she help in some way?

"Oh, no. I'm...it's going well, I mean...." She looked better than he remembered. Dabby's hair was darker and longer, flowing to her shoulders; her clothes were casual and bright and warm. "How's your work?"

"I've been moved upstairs, actually." Pride surfaced. "I'm managing the whole office. A real stroke of luck!"

"Wonderful!" A sudden bravery cut through him, and he asked, "Maybe we could celebrate? Go out to dinner, maybe...."

She was watching him.

John-john persisted. "There's a restaurant at the clubhouse. At least I've seen it on the floorplan—"

"A nice restaurant." She wasn't thrilled, but she acted agreeable. "When did you have in mind?"

He picked a night.

"I've got to work late," she countered.

A different night, maybe around six?

"Make it later. That's my dance class night—"

"Whenever." He felt himself floating. "I can pick you up—"

"Let's meet there."

"Absolutely. Whatever."

For days John-john felt silly and boyish, buoyed up by hopes. He went almost nowhere, and never to Junian's. Yet she came to his apartment—*Did she follow me here some night?*—knocking on his door in a feathery way, and him gazing through the peephole until she left. Later she called and left messages. The first message was pleasant, but by the third one her voice turned bitter. She said nothing about John-john avoiding her, yet the implication was in every phrase. Every syllable. "Call me? Anytime. I know you're busy, darling, but when you can. Any any any hour."

He couldn't let himself.

It was an awful game, and he felt guilty. He had let her build him up in her mind. In his fashion he was as bad as the ex-husband, preying on her weaknesses. Junian, he reasoned, needed someone she could admire honestly. Not for the first time, he wondered how many other lovers there had been. He imagined dozens of perfect men, each one tiring of her and discarding her. Maybe she wouldn't persist much longer... maybe she'd recognize the signs, he hoped...

Dabby arrived late, an apology ready and John-john accepting it openheartedly. "Oh, gosh," she said, "I'm not ready to eat. How about a quick drink? Unwind first?"

In the tavern, naturally. It wasn't much of a coincidence, the two of them sitting in a back booth, facing one another, Dabby looking pretty

but tired. Distracted. They discussed her job and office for a long while. John-john tried to care about her dramas. When she laughed, he laughed. When she labeled something as stupid or wrong, he felt in total agreement. He had dreamed of this moment, and he basked in Dabby's presence. Maudlin, but true. He thought of declaring his feelings. He tried to believe she shared them, then warned himself not to rush. He had to be patient, and Dabby decided to turn the conversation back to him.

"I guess I'm vague about what you're doing here. Research? I know you told me—"

"Research."

"You're thinking of building in the Belt?" She sounded skeptical, sober.

"A new city," he offered.

"But you don't build cities in remote places. Not usually, at least." She frowned and dropped her eyes. "I mean, think. Where's your profit? A place like Forbestown...it succeeds because it's close to Earth. It's got many functions. There aren't any long delays in electronic traffic, and that's not true about the Belt. Even basic tasks out there would be difficult. Expensive. Think what that would do to your competitiveness."

The tavern felt crowded, noisy and confused. A glance at the faces gave him lists of names. Yet they were strangers, a great mass of them, and they threatened to overwhelm John-john.

"I guess these problems seem obvious to me. I work up here." Dabby finished her drink. "I mean, think. People don't march into a wilderness and build a whole city. Not without religious goals, they don't. They need an economy. An export item. But robots can mine any asteroid, and do a better job than any person too."

He coughed. "Maybe we can bring the asteroid here, then."

"Which would scare Earth." She began to giggle. "A massive object dancing with it? I can imagine that uproar!"

John-john tried to find his center, his mind sputtering, unable to

create any effective new lies.

"How many people would live there?"

"I don't know. We haven't decided."

"Shelve the idea, at least for a couple centuries." Dabby shook her head, confessing, "I'm a little drunk. Nothing in the belly but booze." She tried laughing and then quit, growing serious again. "I keep thinking something's...what?"

He stayed quiet.

She stared at him, the glass eye possessing its own cutting gaze. He felt it working on him. Dabby giggled and shook her head with disapproval. The walls of the booth were suffocating him. He coughed and managed to ask, "What's the matter?"

She looked drunk, shaking her finger at him. "Naughty. Naughty."

Powerless and exposed, he folded his hands and felt his eyes slipping one way, then another.

She said, "Listen. I'm obviously not the best company tonight. Sorry, but let me pick up your tab. No commitments. We'll call it an evening, all right? Maybe that would be best."

He nodded and felt the beginnings of anger.

"Oh, and I'm glad you like your apartment. We adore happy tenants."

Dabby rose and vanished into the crush of bodies, people calling her name and her progress marked by them. John-john remained seated, nursing his drink while trying to think about nothing. Then he rose and people said, "John-john," and he nodded without focusing on faces. In the booth beside the doorway half a dozen people chattered happily. Dabby was with them. She smiled without bitterness, and her friends noticed him and became silent. Not one said, "John-john," and he knew they had been talking about him.

He stepped outside and walked partway home, the wind coming at him sideways. Then his stride shortened and stopped, giving him a chance to think again. *The last thing I should do...*but he was already walking, going the opposite direction, telling himself he wouldn't do

anything but see if she was home and all right. *That's all.*

That's it.

Junian had given up bad poetry for painting again. Intuition was a fickle taskmaster. She held an airbrush in one hand, a bristle brush in her mouth, and she stood in the open doorway, staring at him. After an instant she broke into an enormous smile. Both hands waved, coaxing him inside. "Oh, please! Please!" She spoke around the paintbrush. A canvas was propped on a simple easel. She seemed to be painting something abstract. A chaos was infused with a curious predictability. Not unlike her apartment, he thought. Junian stood in the middle of everything, her smile wavering as she set her brushes down.

"I've been awfully busy," he began.

"And it's all right. I understand." Her voice was tentative but forgiving. No crime was too large not to be excused, she implied.

"Can I sit?"

She cleared her chair and sat on the edge of her bed, then stood again and asked if he'd like tea. A drink? Anything?

He felt pity for the poor woman, and it helped cure him of his personal sorrow. She seemed lovely in a haggard fashion, precious because of her fragility, and he heard himself saying, "Tea," and then, "Please?"

She made tea, only for him. Did he like it?

"It's good, yes."

"I missed you," she confessed. "But you've been busy, haven't you?"

This one time, with silence, he refused to tell another lie.

Later—in bed, in the dark—she told him, "If I've hurt you, then I'm sorry. If I've done anything wrong, I apologize."

"Don't worry," he cautioned. "Don't."

"I can't help it. I keep thinking...a man like you, and all the temptations you must have...."

"Stop."

Junian was silent.

"It's not like that."

"Darling," she said in a soft, certain voice, "I'll never, never hurt you intentionally. You've got to believe me."

Such a limp promise. What was the worth in any relationship where it comes down to a promise not to injure? But John-john couldn't speak his mind. He lay there with Junian pressed against him, and he thought of his ninth birthday, the ponies and cake and the fragile children playing every game without any hint of fear.

The phone number was inside a kitchen drawer. He called it and heard the odd ringing, then the electronic voice. "I want to talk," he announced. "Face to face."

"Why?" asked Cleave.

"Come meet me and I'll tell you."

There was a prolonged pause, then the voice said, "Not a good idea just now. Sorry."

John-john stared at the blackened screen, surprised.

"I'm pulling out of this business. Understand?"

"I want you to help me." He told Cleave that he wanted his file changed, perhaps in stages. Gently but thoroughly scrubbed, left free of untruths. "You talked me into crap I don't need, can't use—!"

"Hey, I'm done. Forget it."

"Help me," John-john groaned, "or I'll turn you in."

"To whom?"

He thought of Dabby, then said, "The people in charge."

"Why don't you then?" The laugh was an electric cackle. "It won't be news to them, believe me. They aren't fools!"

John-john stood over the phone, appealing to the man's pity. "Just help me! I'm looking like an idiot. If you could empty my file...make it look like an accident, maybe...?"

The line was dead. He heard the dial tone and began walking circles around his room, tears welling up and his stomach churning. He wouldn't let strangers rule him. Not anymore. Confronting Cleave was the only answer. John-john left his

apartment and walked to where he'd seen Cleave the first time, with Dabby. It was mid-morning. He crouched in an odd corner, watching the pathway and the pedestrian traffic with an alertness born from anger and growing frustration. People tended not to notice him, and the exceptions seemed puzzled but wary. Sometimes he played with the thin soil. For long stretches he did nothing but sit.

A strong wind blew one way, then reversed. There was a soft cleansing rain, water mixed with perfume. John-john ate the sweet red fruits on the vines, plucking them bare. Night came; traffic thinned. Then more people went out for evening walks, and nobody noticed him in his hiding place. Couples. Singles. He ignored all of them equally.

There was another falloff after midnight, then a second rain. Perhaps he should return to his apartment, rest and reappraise? Then he saw the familiar Moon-born figure walking towards him, hands in his pockets and his long body bent forwards. *Cleave*. John-john knew it without BUDDY'S help. He rose and shouted: "Stop! Listen here! Stop!"

A face, familiar and surprised, shown in the reflected light.

BUDDY displayed a name. *Spinks*.

"What do you want?" asked Spinks. Then he added, "John-john?" pretending they'd never met.

"I told you...we have to talk!"

"Why? And what do you want?" A long hand gestured. "You're confusing me for somebody else."

He had a different biography today. Spinks; Cleave...whomever. Now he was an employee of Tri-C Industries, beyond reproach. Yet John-john wouldn't be swayed. His own mind knew the face, including the gold eye and the brow pins and what seemed to be little faces on his teeth.

"Out of my way!"

John-john wouldn't give ground willingly.

Cleave started one way, then spun and ran. Long legs tried for speed, but his muscles had no

strength. John-john trotted after him, shouting, "How much? I'll pay anything. Just help me, you son-of-a-bitch!"

"Off my ass!" moaned Cleave.

The long legs took smaller strides. He turned down a narrow pathway, weaving around other people. John-john closed to within a meter, then closer, and Cleave attempted to climb a zigzagging set of stairs, stumbling and then reaching for a certain doorway—

—and John-john grabbed him. "Help me...help me now!"

Cleave tried to push him, gasping, "I don't...know...you...!"

A lie. A stupid, feeble lie.

John-john pushed back at him, then grabbed one of the long bony arms and jerked. Cleave fell, hitting the foam-glass stairs and rolling. There were dull wet thuds, then silence, and John-john knew he had killed the man. *An accident...he tried to push me first...!* He gazed at the limp figure sprawled where the stairs turned, the bloody face shiny and unrecognizable, a bloody bubble forming over his mouth and bursting and reforming again.

The man was breathing. *Living.*

Cleave woke, blood pouring from his cut forehead. The voice slurred, telling John-john, "I'm going to fuck you over, asshole. Just fucking see!" Then he tried to stand and fell again.

John-john slipped past him and ran, the insults following for a little while. Cleave, or whomever, warned him to beware. He was going to have to eat all flavors of shit. Then John-john couldn't hear anything, not even his own gasping breaths or the strong wind roaring between the buildings, pushing him faster and then faster still.

He slept badly and rose late, giving the local news a quick eyescan. There was nothing about fights or police searching for an assailant. That helped his mood, then a large breakfast did more good. It had to have been Cleave, he reasoned, and hadn't the man survived? John-john managed to neutralize his doubts and guilts, calling the episode an accident. Sad, but finished. And when he went outside he felt comfortable, walking toward the clubhouse on his favorite route.

A Moon-born man named Frost—alloy specialist—looked at him and broke into laughter. John-john was startled, stopping and staring as Frost laughed even louder, holding his sides with both hands. Nothing could be funnier. Not in the world....

John-john kept walking, dwelling on the possibilities.

A pair of young women came towards him. Sisters. Tina and Grete.

Pretty and round-eyed, the eyes growing huge and staring at him.

He braced for laughter.

But instead they turned and fled, Tina glancing back at him, her face horrified...and her sister shouting, "Run, run!"

Now he was a criminal. A rapist, perhaps, or a serial killer.

Other pedestrians merely shied away or acted confused. How had Cleave managed this trick? BUDDY was giving different people alternative bios. It was a nightmare. The man had some kind of hold on the complex. Every whim of his could become a new, awful fiction. What could he do against such a force?

John-john hurried home, feeling deflated. Half-dead. One of his neighbors was coming downstairs—Ulles, no profession—and smiled without laughing, the smiling voice asking, "Why didn't I know?"

"Know what?"

"And augmented too," Ulles declared happily.

Augmented?

"We're two of a kind, John-john. Care to see?"

The man exposed himself. He was young and well-built, and his grotesque member tumbled into the air. Half a meter long and ropy... and Ulles was saying, "Extra nerves. A minty taste. Now show me yours, John-john."



He couldn't move, couldn't pretend to think.

"What I want," said his new friend, "is to Granny knot us together, then we dance. I like waltzes. What do you like, John-john—?"

"Move!" He startled the man, got to his door and locked it, then shouted, "Stay away from me! Hear me? Stay away!"

"What are you doing?" asked Ulles. "I thought you wanted me. Why are you teasing me? I don't like being teased, John-john. It makes me sick, I hate it so..."

It was early afternoon. Junian knocked until he couldn't stand the sound, and he opened the door, asking, "Who do you see? Who am I?"

"Don't be odd," she chastised. "I see my darling." And with that she came inside, a fresh canvas rolled under one arm and her joyous voice informing him, "I've done something. I wanted you to see."

He closed the door and retripped the locks.

"Come see," she begged.

There were smaller canvasses inside the outer one. Five, in all. They were stiff with new paint, colors blurring before his exhausted eyes; he couldn't perceive shapes or meanings. A masculine form? Drifting, apparently. Drifting against a riot of greens.

"What do you think?"

"I...I don't understand..."

"It's your world." She was hurt that he hadn't known the place at a glance. "See? This is the freefall forest, and this...this is one of the apartments. Just like you described it."

Suddenly he saw the sense of the floating bodies and greenery. He was staring at the soft walls of enormous caverns. There was a lightness in everything that went beyond freefall. Junian lacked talent, but somehow this freedom from gravity and convention had inspired her. She'd done a better job visualizing it than he had even managed, and that made him ashamed.

He handed back the paintings, pressing them into her hands.

Stresses culminated, shattering his will. He made fists and said, "Listen," and opened his hands. "I can't see you anymore. I have to tell you...I can't...!"

She looked ready to melt.

He wanted to save the woman, saying, "Please leave. Now."

She sobbed and wobbled, but stood her ground.

"I don't deserve you," he promised. "Please leave?"

"Who is she?" Junian whispered.

"It's nobody." Words clotted in his mouth. He tried to find some excuse, wanting to tell her that the project was cancelled; only he couldn't find enough strength. Instead he said, "Forget me, Junian. Start over and do your best."

She nodded peacefully, acting unsurprised.

He ushered her to the door, a hand against her thin back, and she said,

"I can't...won't...let you go..."

The door shut again, locked again, and there wasn't any sound from outside. Yet he knew Junian was waiting for him. He didn't need to look through the peephole; it was something he felt. Slumping against the plaster wall, John-john realized he was sweating, face and clothes soaked, and his hair too. The glass hairs were slippery when wet, and when he combed them with his fingers they squeaked, like little crickets hiding inside dewy brown grass.

The girl said, "Oh, I understand! You don't have to explain to me." The voice was odd, pity thick and strange. "But since you agreed to a lease, I'll have to get my superior. Could you, if it's not too much trouble, follow me up these stairs?"

The girl thought he was ill. *What's Cleave done now?*

"If you need help," she began.

"I'm fine," he snapped.

Dabby greeted him warmly, without surprise or pity. "Thank you, Lin. I'll take care of Mr. Smythe now." She offered him a seat, then sat herself. Her office was almost spacious and tastefully furnished. He

barely noticed, telling her that he wanted to go home immediately. Today, if possible. Wringing his hands, he blamed cultural shock and his own professional troubles. Nothing he could blame Candletree for—

"That's good to hear." Her smile was sympathetic and genuine, yet he couldn't guess what she was thinking. About Cleave? Was she aware of the latest changes in his files? At least she wasn't treating him like an invalid, explaining in clear terms why he was responsible for his rent, at least until his old apartment was occupied again. "Without furniture," she reported, "that's a little more than five thousand new dollars every four weeks, for the next twenty."

"Fine."

She blinked and gazed at him. "Smythe Incorporated will pay?"

He wouldn't. That's all he knew.

Then with an easy practicality, she suggested, "They might send someone else to replace you."

"I'll mention that to Uncle Willy."

"We'll hold it for the time being. All right?" Dabby made arrangements while John-john watched, always impressed with her efficiency and good manners. The laser linked with her eye, a second beam with his eye, and the legalities were concluded in an instant.

He was the one to say, "I'm sorry it didn't work out."

Dabby nodded, more amused than anything. Amused that he would apologize? Or with the entire circumstance?

Finally he added, "I miss my home."

"I can imagine." She rose from behind her desk. "And good luck to you, Mr. Smythe."

He remembered the single greenish hair. "Aren't you taking it back? It's no use to me."

"Keep it."

"What?"

She told him, "It can't be recycled. Besides, perhaps in a few years we'll install BUDDY on Earth. Then you'll be ready, the first on your block and all that."

He felt cold.

She laid her hand on John-john's back, between his shoulder blades; and after a moment he realized that she was pushing him toward her office door, saying, "It was good having you with us, if only briefly."

A professional statement, bloodless and perfectly done.

Yet John-john felt warmed by the artificial concern, the door closing and him left walking downstairs, the original girl—Lin, a new employee—watching warily, perhaps waiting for him to crumble and fall.

There was little to pack. It took minutes, then he carried everything to the nearest cab station. Standing in the distance, almost obscured by shadows, was a familiar narrow figure. John-john couldn't find a face, but he guessed it was Cleave. *Probably gloating.* He ignored his audience; escape was all that mattered. Only later, riding the cab towards the hub, did it occur to him that someone else might have been spying on him. Someone else Moon-born and interested in his life.

It seemed his luck was changing. The first shuttle home was loading when he arrived, and he paid with the company's credit, filing on board with the other passengers. It was a new shuttle, its hull made of transparent ceramics, robots and officious workers making last-moment checks and adjustments. John-john sat next to the hull, strapping himself in place. One of the outside workers, dressed in a bulky lifesuit, drifted beside him and stared in at John-john. He couldn't see a face through the tinted faceplate, but the person was obviously angry. *Who are you...?* There was a tool in his hands, and he braced himself and began beating at the hull. The other passengers fidgeted with the sharp thumps. Eventually a couple other workers grabbed their companion, wrestling him out of sight....

John-john stared straight ahead, trying to ignore everything.

The shuttle maneuvered out of the dock, Forbestown resembling a dirty gray wheel endlessly turning, the glare of the full Earth giving

John-john enormous hope, clouds and continents resembling a face set behind a mask of thick gauze.

He closed his eyes, whispering commands. His glass eye filled with images of his house, the camera's view taking him through the neat clean rooms and his mood improving by the instant. *Not long now...* and then he noticed an oddity. Something unexpected. He was in his bedroom, and someone was walking across his backyard. He didn't remember another person in this digital, yet there she was—

—towards the window, her long thin face almost smiling, the bony arms reaching for him. *Junian.* He tried to disentangle himself from the file, but he forgot the proper words. She was talking to him, saying, "I won't let you, darling. Men always leave, but I won't allow it." Her image melted through the back wall, her hands closing on him. "I'm always going to stay with you, my John-john. Always!"

He broke contact with the file, both eyes opened.

For an instant he searched the cabin for Junian. But she couldn't come to Earth, of course, the gravity able to break her bones...*thank God!* He was safe. Fundamentally safe. Wiping his forehead, he muttered, "I was dreaming. I slept while in the file and dreamed her..."

Nearby passengers eyed him, concern mixed with suspicion.

John-john gripped the armrests, making himself shut his eyes again. He asked for his ninth birthday party, aware of his heart's beating and almost nothing else. He whispered, "Start," and Junian stood between the camera and children, her expression intense and her husky voice speaking quickly. "I'm in *all* your hard memories, love. A friend helped put me in every one of them—"

He broke contact with the file.

A friend? Cleave? Or someone else?

"Is that possible?" he muttered to himself.

Neighbors stared, or was it his imagination? He shivered and hugged

himself. Junian must have inserted herself in Dabby's office, by some kind of Moon-born trickery....

"All your hard memories," she had promised.

He tugged on his hairs, moaned, "Every one," and began to weep harder than he had in years. ■

THE WRITERS IN THIS ISSUE

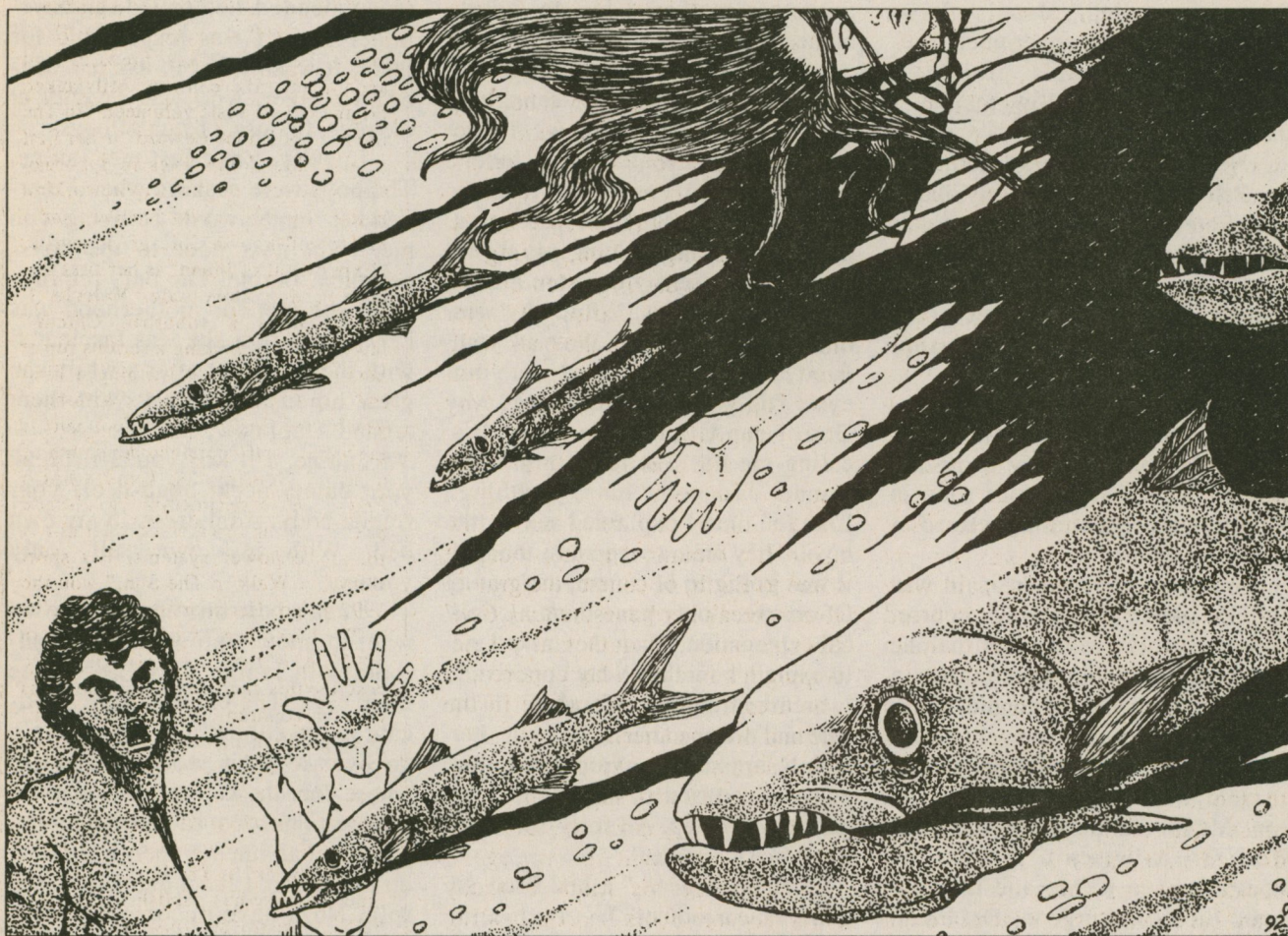
Suzanne Allès Blom is a graduate of college in Iowa, and Clarion East, and a Milwaukee tax preparer and accountant. She came to Milwaukee originally as a Vista volunteer. "In The Memory of Prince Edward" is her first sale. Chloe Bolan lives in suburban Chicago, where apart from working nine-to-five she is also a mother, and a rather well-known Chicago playwright. "Experiment of Mann" is her first science fiction story sale. Valerie J. Freireich is a suburban Chicago lawyer, who is making a serious run at being a writer since winning a First Place in L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of The Future Contest. "The Toolman" is the wholly self-contained beginning of a novel. Geoffrey A. Landis has a Ph.D. in experimental solid-state physics, doing research on solar arrays for space power systems. His short story, "A Walk in The Sun," won the 1992 Hugo. His short story, "Ripples in The Dirac Sea," won the Nebula in 1990. And that does not begin to describe this charming man, who owns two schizophrenic calico cats and 12 dead goldfish named Larry. "In The Year of Purple Flowers" has also appeared in England, in *Interzone* magazine. Robert Reed was the first Grand Prize winner in L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of The Future Contest. Since then, he has published stories in *F&SF*, *Asimov's*, *Universe 16*, and elsewhere. He has also published five novels, of which the latest is *The Remarkables*, from Bantam. He is working on three other books. William Scarff has not published in 35 years, but in the 1950s was reasonably active. Perhaps his best-known story was "Just Around the Corner," which was the lead novelette in the same issue of *Fantastic Universe* magazine as Algis Budrys's short story, "Who?" Eolake Stobblehouse lives in Copenhagen, Denmark, where he also paints and plays in a rock band. He has appeared previously in the *L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of The Future* anthology. English is not his first language.

EXPERIMENT OF MANN

Chloe Bolan

Illustration by Peter H. Francis

One of the six clones was cuckolding him. He didn't like that



Watch them squirm. My class of six, my boys, myself. Their eyes, however, are locked on their terminals, reading the question on technical modifications of the unified field theory, a subject we've never discussed in class, this class or any other sci-math class I teach them. Right this second they're all thinking it's an unfair test.

And they're right. The only other time I've done this was when one of them dropped my three hack-jawed cannibal fish into the same

tank. I ended up with one fat fish and they ended up with endless homework and a series of unfair tests. They were eleven at the time and so shaken up they reverted to calling me Dad instead of Professor. Now that they're eighteen they're beginning to call me Marty—outside of class. But then, I am their brother, their older brother, their older twin brother.

Besides, they've all reached their full adult height of six foot six, completed their bachelor of sci-math

degrees, and can continue on for their Ph.D.'s according to government plan, or leave the program. They're free. Free adults. And one of them felt free enough to make my wife an adulteress.

I found the key yesterday. Its flashy gold chain a glint under the bed. The key itself deep in the long-haired carpet Janine has always hated. When we first bought the module, she wanted to tear it out; maybe even then she knew she'd get

caught in its white tentacles. But the carpet is part of the floor boards so the expense would be exorbitant. Sometimes I think she's still angry about it. I can only guess at what she feels or thinks, only catch a glimmer now and then. She's a mystery... and I've always loved a mystery.

That same curiosity drove me into research, drove me to break the mystery of man's traveling the speed of light. Mann's Theory I called it. Now it's called Mann's Law. Because of this the government presented me with this project. I couldn't resist it. But maybe I should have.

Now one of them's looking at me. Peter. Peter with the curly, black hair. Peter the Black the boys call him. He's glaring at me with those intense gray eyes, exactly like mine. Glare all you want, Peter, it won't do you any good. Now he's raising his hand.

"Yes?"

"This test is unfair."

"You have precisely forty-one minutes to finish it. Your time is better spent concentrating instead of complaining."

Wise-ass. I wonder if it was him. He likes older girls. Of course, Janine is twelve years older than he is. Actually, she's closer in age to the boys than she is to me. Only they're not boys anymore.

Whoops. Red just dropped a roll of candy. I wonder if he owns the key. Maybe Janine likes red hair. Well, if it weren't for me he wouldn't have it. Me and the cosmetic biologist/surgeon, Dr. Patel. She did a wonderful job changing hair and eye colors. Not so well on skin though, so they all kept my ruddy complexion.

God, I hate that sound. Like someone being strangled. It's Wolfie clearing his throat. He's nervous. Now they'll all be clearing their throats. Annoying habit, even if it is mine.

I wonder if the key is Wolfie's. Wolfie with the big, brown, soulful eyes. Like a puppy. No. A wolf. A hungry wolf. I better calm down. Not give away my anger. Hold it in.

Think of something else. Think of how lucky I am not to have ten boys sitting in front of me! Originally there were to be ten. But two women reneged right before implantation and another miscarried. Then there was Larry. Died at three. Hit by a car, chasing a ball. Devastating experience. Thought I'd never get over it. Funny, I didn't 'til I met Janine seven years later. The death of a child. Indescribable. A child without a mother. I had to mourn alone.

Brett's biting his nails. Of all the boys he's the most sensitive. He's looking at me now. Those bright, blue oceanic eyes. Underneath, a warm current of feeling. Why, they ask, why are you being unfair? I can barely look into them. Maybe because my own are a sunless version of his. Why, why was one of you unfair? Was it you, Brett? I've always envied you your eyes. Did you envy me Janine? My God, I can't think about this. It's eating me up. Got to let my mind wander. To something, anything. Like the time I explained sex to the boys. They were seven and I thought it was going to be so embarrassing. Of course, I only gave them a clinical explanation. Then they asked me to explain how they were conceived. I breathed a sigh of relief. "The woman who carried you in her womb supplied the cytoplasm of her egg, but contributed nothing to your genetic make-up. All forty-six chromosomes are mine."

"Do you mean," asked Brett, "I don't have a mother?"

"That's correct," I said.

"But what about the woman who sent me all those cards when I was little?" he persisted.

"The Genetic Society asked her to stop contacting you. In fact, all the women who carried you boys were told that."

"But...but," Brett said, "I want a mother. We all want a mother."

"And we should have a mother," Peter added.

Then they all began to cry.

"You all have a grandmother," I tried to console them. "My mother."

I shouldn't have said that.

"Your mother!" Wolfie wailed. "You have a mother and we don't!"

"No, no. Technically, my mother is your mother and I'm your brother."

"You're our dad," they wailed.

"My father would be your dad."

"Grandpa's dead," Brett said. "So now we don't have a father."

Inconsolable crying, but what could I do. The Genetic Society had recommended I be called the boys' father since I was responsible for them. It wasn't fair to ask my widowed mother, who was seventy at the time, to raise a batch of boys.

Luckily, I had just met Janine. The boys were ecstatic when I married her. Janine would be living with me, right next door to the boys' complex. Janine. The only requirement she met for motherhood was her sex. At first she was fascinated with the boys, but after a while she grew bored and didn't want them around. Until now, it seems.

Janine, I'll kill you. I'll break your dainty neck. Snap it off your fragile body. Adulteress. In my own bed. With my own self, only younger.

I can't bear this any longer. If I want to know who was in the bedroom with Janine, I can ask to see their keys. The one with the duplicate is the culprit. Or I can simply go over to their modules and see whose door the key opens. Somehow these actions seem so beneath me.

I feel an intense energy building up inside me. Like a quark about to split. No. I have to control myself. Breathe deeply. Relax. There, that's better. What to do, to channel the anger. Of course. Figure out who did it here and now. Go to his module, unlock the door and there's the proof.

I look at the first seat, first row. Eric. Typing away. He and Cary are the closest of all the boys. Eric with the perfectly proportioned ears and Cary with the classic nose. Aside from these deviations, they both look exactly like me when I was their age. No muscle tone, from working out at the library instead of

the gym. The two of them even date twins, so there's no possibility either of them would be knocking on Janine's door.

Now Red, who sits behind Eric, is another kind of marine animal altogether. Very bright and aggressive. The first born. By a nanosecond.

My watch is beeping. "All right, boys, ten minutes more. If any of you want to bring me your printouts, you can."

Peter the Black glares at me again from under that mop of dark hair, which only intensifies his gray eyes. Good God, of course. It's Peter. He's been more trouble than any of the others. Even as a baby he ended up with two hair deviations—black *and* curly, thanks to Dr. Patel's error. So he thinks he's special. Ungrateful bastard. Motherless brat. Pseudo Oedipus. I'll murder him. Wants to study music. If he doesn't continue in sci-math, he'll lose his scholarship. I keep telling him but he doesn't care. Already he's convinced Brett and Wolfie to join him in their own band. He can play any instrument, so I suppose he's talented. I don't know where he got it from. Maybe I could have been successful in music if I hadn't been steered towards sci-math by that frustrated inventor of a father of mine. Still, the real issue is the government project, to groom the boys to be sci-math professors in the top universities. But Peter doesn't care. He's the head rebel. The lovely Lucifer. Black hair and heart. Out to corrupt the others. Be yourself, he tells them, not a copy of Marty.

It's six-thirty. I must have fallen asleep. Janine won't be home till late tonight. God, this acid bath of anger and pain and anxiety is eating my heart out. I'd better talk to Peter. I know he instigated this thing with Janine. She'd never start anything... like this. She might fall victim, but she'd never be the seductress.

Peter's finished his work-out by now. He's probably on his way downtown to have dinner with the boys. I'll unlock his door and wait for him.

He'll be angry and defiant. Say I deserve what happened and then try to lay a punch on me. He's in great shape. Better shape than I ever was. Well, I'm not going to suffer insult *and* injury. I'll be prepared. With what? I don't have any weapons. A kitchen knife, but no gun. Wait a minute. I do have a laser gun. Sent to me by some rabid fan nineteen years ago when my name was volleyed all over the world for my discovery. I received gifts every day and I was always afraid of finding a bomb. God, how I hated fame. The demands of the media, the intrusion of strangers on the street. I'm much better suited to being a professor in a quiet, university town.

Now, where did I put that gun? Oh yes, in the basement in that big box with the other gifts. I haven't looked through it in years. I don't think Janine's ever seen the stuff. She wasn't really interested and I didn't want to disinterest her any further. After all, who wants to marry a man with sextuplets. Worse, six little clones.

I escalate down to the open space of the first floor. The late afternoon sun touches everything with its feeble fingers. Abruptly the escalator takes me into the dark reaches of the basement. I switch on the light.

Good God, there are three boxes of memorabilia from that year. Do I really need a gun? It might not even work.

Let's see. What's under the dark, plastic wrapping paper?

A sensograph showing an aerial view of the boys in the nursery, all wearing their different colored booties so we could tell them apart before Dr. Patel worked her science. I smell the talcum powder and hear the rustle of restlessness from the cribs and a few hungry whimpers. There I am in the corner, looking up smiling. Thirty-three. Twin to each, brother. Father and mother. Later on teacher. Too much responsibility at once.

Still it's too much for me. No one to share the highs, all alone in the lows. Whoever dreamed up this

experiment was under the influence of their own ego. Dr. Fong-Rhodes. A mediocre geneticist, a closet poet, and a very simple thinker. Clone Marty here. Dr. Martin Luther Mann. He's got the highest academic credentials and didn't trip once on his way to the podium to claim his prizes. He's perfect! A researchaholic, a recluse for sci-math, a nerd. He knows practically nothing about human nature. A tabula rasa we can write our experiments on. How could I have gone along with Fong-Rhodes and the rest of those government scientists? They know nothing but their individual fields. Nothing but the way to advance themselves through more spectacular experimentation. Nothing of the emotional toll a project like this one can extract—the "x" in the equation that can never be figured out because it's never been factored in.

There it is. I can see the glint of the handle. It's all the way down at the bottom of the box. I wonder if it even works at all? No matter. I'm not going to use it for anything but to scare him.

I stand and watch my fish before I leave. The door opens and, through the circular tank that holds a school of golden barracuda, I see a black and white blur wiggling closer.

"Marty. Is that you?" The voice is molasses.

"Who else would it be?"

She doesn't answer. She stands still on the other side of the tank while the barracudas snap up the last of their dinner.

"You're home early."

"I left the meeting early. The Music Club has asked me to sing. To raise scholarship money." She walks around the tank. She's white teeth, whites of eyes, white dress against dark skin, hair, eyes, soul. But then she smiles at me and I question all my calculations.

"The songs you sang on 'Music World?'" I ask, remembering when I first saw her on telesensor, her beauty putting color to shame and her fragrance coursing from the screen into my brain.

"I thought I'd sing something not quite written."

She always entices me to question her as if what she says is too difficult to understand in one statement. I comply and ask, "Not quite written?"

"It's something the boys are working on." She smiles.

Doesn't she know I hate their involvement with music? Doesn't she know I found the key? Doesn't she know I know?

"The boys should concentrate on sci-math." I stand up, towering over her. For a second I feel her terror, but only for a second. She smiles and asks, "Where are you going?"

I pick up my brief case which conceals the gun and walk to the door. "I'm going to a lecture," I say.

It's pleasant to simply coast along on the movable sidewalk, hold onto the hand rail and gaze at the sky. It is a cold, clear April night. The Moon's so bright I can see its craters. Only tonight it's a circular plate with a hunting scene painted on it. Like the one Janine gave me for my last birthday. In the center, the goddess Diana stalking her prey.

Peter's module is in the middle of the row. The government has certainly given them attractive accommodations. Renovated steel and glass. Dwarf trees flanking each doorway. I hope the boys appreciate this. Of course, they won't till they're on their own. Where it is? Number 109. Well, let's see if the key fits.

It won't turn. It doesn't fit. It's not Peter. I try next door at Brett's. Again the key won't turn. I reach the end of the row. Wolfie's. I turn the key and hear the click of condemnation. Like a kick in the stomach.

It must be eight-thirty by now. I've spent forty-five minutes waiting in this sitting room. The skylight overhead allows me to count the stars it frames. But I've got to get up and move around. I've counted enough stars. They're worse than counting sheep.

What's this? A guitar. Deep mahogany color with intricate carvings of flying birds inlaid with gold leaf. Exquisite. It's a staytuned. I touch the bottom string—a perfect E. So this is why he worked after school last semester. To buy this. To prepare his escape song. Well, good luck, Wolfie. There's no escape now. Not from me.

I hear the duplicate key in the lock and immediately walk back to the sitting room under the skylight. The blood is pounding in my head and I can feel the gun in my pocket, cold through layers of material, cold against my sweating flesh.

"Marty, how did you get in?" Wolfie sounds a little drunk, and the fact he calls me Marty annoys me.

"I got in with this." I hold up the key on its flashy chain. Suddenly the light intensifies as the clouds move across the skylight to reveal the full moon. The grand inquisitor. It's so bright I can see Wolfie's eyes, two black holes sucking in my strength. He gazes at the key. His mouth tightens. "Where did you find it?" he asks. I laugh like a hollow man. "Under my bed. My bed and my wife's."

He collapses on a chair. I sit across from him.

"No need to lie, Wolf. Janine told me everything. I want to hear your version." I'm bluffing, but it might get results.

The moonlight plays on the planes of his face. Finally he says, "I don't know what Janine told you. I only know it was an accident."

"What do you mean, an accident?"

"There was an opportunity, and...we took it."

"It only happened once? Is that what you're saying?"

He hesitates, then nods.

I don't believe him. Has his name made him so cunning? "That's not what Janine said," I say and pull out the laser gun. Under the moonlight I see terror in his eyes, smell fear-sweat mixed with alcohol.

"Is that a laser gun?" he asks.

"Yes. Old, but it works. Just like me."

"What do you want to know?" he asks.

"Everything."

He swallows hard. "About a month ago Janine came here to see my guitar and hear me play. I thought she liked me—most women do, but I didn't know if she wanted it to go any farther than that. I did, so I tried every trick I knew."

How many tricks can you know at eighteen, I wonder.

"I finally realized," he continues, "if I made her feel sorry for me, I'd have my best chance."

Feel sorry for him? How clever. I must have done that, too, when I first met her. With all my fame and even a bit of money, I must have let her see underneath I felt overburdened and lonely. Except I wasn't as calculating as Wolfie.

"You've let me down, Wolf, in more ways than one. You and Peter and Brett with your illusions about being rock stars."

"Rock musicians," he corrects me.

"Stars, musicians, fools, it's all the same. You're dumping your career in sci-math, after all the time and money that's been spent on you. Don't you realize how special you are? To be groomed for a professorship at one of the top universities? Don't you realize how lucky you are? To be doing what you love and not worry about security?"

"But, Marty, that's just it. Peter and Brett and I don't love sci-math like you do. We're not you. We don't look like you. And we don't think like you."

"But you and I, Wolf, seem to like the same women."

We sit in silence now, the moonlight creating a dappling effect on us.

"Why did you do it?" I ask.

"Because we like the same women."

I feel my trigger finger move, but I control myself. "You're hiding behind Peter, just like you've always done. You were the one who put my three hack-jawed cannibals together, and then you blamed Peter."

"It was Peter's idea."

"But you did it, Wolfie. This rock band is Peter's idea, too, and you're doing it."

"Look, Marty, the only reason you want us to be sci-mathists is to complete the experiment successfully. That's all. You've never had anything go wrong in your life. The mind behind the discovery of the century. You've got a perfect record and you don't want to ruin it. If we perform properly, you can die in peace."

"No, Wolf, I'll never die in peace. You've seen to that."

"Maybe you won't, but Janine will."

"What do you mean?" The gun feels heavy in my hand.

"Do you think she likes to look at your fifty-year old wreck of a body every night? Or hear you drone on about some sci-math revelation?"

My finger is beginning to twitch.

"I taught her a few things she didn't know before, so don't think she regrets anything too much."

Suddenly there is no Moon. I see a stream of light and feel the gun wet in my hand and smell the stench of death, as I watch Wolfie's eyes widen and see him slump in his chair. He's dead and a part of me is dying. The hole in his shirt is over his heart. My own heart constricts. Remorse floods over me as the clouds part and the Moon throws its incriminating light everywhere.

It seems I sit for hours. Only it's minutes. Should I call the police? Should I do that? To myself and the rest of the boys? A part of me doesn't care and another part says I've got nothing to lose if I protect myself. Let the police find me, if they can. Why would they necessarily look for me anyway? They only look for thieves and murderers. Thieves. Why not take the guitar and make it look like a burglary turned robbery turned worse.

I pick up the guitar and leave the key. No worry about fingerprints left behind. I make sure no one sees me leave. I'll pack the guitar with sand and drop it in the river. If the

current grabs it, so much the better. Down the Lookingglass out to sea.

Lucky for me it's Friday night. All the social life in this college town is centered around the downtown bars. I'm heading in the opposite direction, which is so unpopular the town council never bothered to install movables.

It feels strange to have to walk, to be conscious of every step. Even though I can walk, run or tap dance on the movable, I usually stand still and think. That's the way I discovered my famous theorem. Now, the walking makes me focus on my muscle strain instead of my grief.

On my way home I feel relief that the guitar is buried in the secret waters, but Wolfie—Wolfie I try to bury in my heart and it isn't deep enough.

I see the Exhibition Hall is lit up. I walk in and sit in the back. Oh yes, I forgot, Dr. Rorvik is speaking on the binary solar system with an Earth-like planet he discovered. I meant to tell the boys to attend the lecture, but I forgot. After finding that key, I forgot everything. Maybe I should leave. No. Stay. Listen. Try to concentrate. See if Rorvik can speak as well as he thinks. Only I'm numb as a textbook and before I know it the audience is exiting.

"Marty, how are you?"

I look up. It's Frank Matucci, one of my colleagues. "Hi, Frank." I stand up and walk out with him.

"Fascinating lecture," he says, "but we had to wait long enough for it."

"Why?" I ask.

"I don't know why Rorvik was late, but the Student Science Committee was pretty rude to make us wait two hours with no explanation."

"It's a small crowd for what it should be," I say without much heart.

"Only the die-hards stayed. The ones who left thought Rorvik wasn't coming." Frank shakes his head. "Rorvik must think this is one of those anti-intellectual campuses. I'm going to speak to the chairman of the SSC. If we don't get some kind

of public apology, I'm going to file a complaint. Want to back me up?"

"Sure, Frank."

As soon as I get home Janine is waiting for me. I kiss her quickly and go up to bed. I hide the gun under the bed, deep in the long-haired carpet. Then I fall asleep before I even feel Janine beside me.

The next morning the police come to the door and tell us about Wolfie. I begin to sob. All the overwrought emotions from the last two days catch up with me. Janine is crying too.

All the boys, five of them now, come to the house and we weep together. The police question us and Peter is the one who comes up with the theft theory.

"What does he have to steal?" the officer asks.

"He has this guitar," Peter says, "covered with carvings of birds traced in gold leaf. It's one of a kind. Megan Boyle did it. She's an artist. Had an exhibit here at school. She's going to be in the band. Was going to be in it."

"I better tell Megan," Brett says. "She was in love with Wolf."

I look over at Janine to see her reaction. Her face is still and full of sorrow.

Four days after the funeral Frank Matucci calls to convey his condolences and mentions in passing that he's filed his complaint—our complaint—which verifies my alibi. In a cold flash I remember the gun is still under the bed.

I rush up the escalator that Janine has set at a fast clip, stumble into the bedroom and reach under the bed. Nothing. I stretch my arm out to my fingertips and sweep it over the shag. Air. I dig my arm deep into the carpet and resweep it. Dust. I move the bed and comb every millimeter of hairy surface. Gone!

I sit in front of my fish tank thinking. Except I can't think with so many emotions getting in the way. All I know is I've done an unforgivable deed, killing Wolf, genetically killing myself. I, the sci-

math hero given abundant life, thanks to Dr. Fong-Rhode, had no compunctions about taking life.

Suddenly my groggy eyes see a golden barracuda attack his mate. My God, I've forgotten to feed them. I rush up to the feed room which hovers over the edge of the tank and quickly dump in a barrel of live eels. It's only a snack for their insatiable appetites but it should appease them until I check on my supply of dried piraruca. I watch them snatch the eels as they unroll into the tank. However, I'm too late to save the female barracuda. Her mate and several others finish her off, leaving a pinkish cloud of fish blood.

The front door opens and I see Janine from my feed room. Dark beauty in a tight, virgin-colored dress. I'm too weakspirited to greet her.

"Oh no!" she cries and points to the blood-cloud. "They're only seven now."

I'm about to tell her what happened when I hear my own voice say, "I didn't know they ate each other."

"Neither did I," she answers.

She's talking to one of the boys. I stay perfectly still.

"It's just like Marty, isn't it," he says. "Remember the hack-jawed cannibals. All the trouble he went to so they wouldn't eat each other."

"And they did anyway," Janine laughs carelessly.

I see a dark, curly head. Peter.

"Who would have thought the female would finish off the two males? She was so much smaller."

"She was pregnant," Janine says.

"I never knew that," Peter says taking the thought right out of my head.

"Marty made me give her to the Aquarium Society. When they wrote to thank me, they thanked me for eight fish."

"I never knew that," Peter repeats. Suddenly I realize Janine has only one bright trick, the secret to her mystery—reveal as little as possible.

"Why don't we throw the gun in the tank?" Janine says. She *does* have the gun. Of course, it's only logical and yet, the whole damning confirmation begins to overwhelm me, until I realize things are worse—she has Peter, too.

"Give me the gun, Janine. We have to confront Marty with it. He shot Wolfie."

"When you found the gun, I thought so, too. But it doesn't make any sense. We're the lovers." She uncoils her delicate, dark arms around him, like shining eels. "So, why would he shoot Wolfie?"

"I don't know," Peter says before kissing her. "I don't know."

But I do. I know everything now. Janine was seeing both of them. She just liked Peter more. She set up Wolfie and I did her dirty work. She knows me well, and Wolf, and Peter, and all the rest. I bury my face in my hands and surrender to grief.

My mind has deserted me. No, it's betrayed me. Left me without plans, without instinct. Just then I hear Janine rush up the steps to the feed room and close the door.

"Don't, Janine," I hear Peter say, exasperated, playing a game that's no longer fun.

I look up. Janine with a little girl look on her face almost runs me down, probably mistakes me for a huge bucket of dried piraruca, but I grab her. The sickly aqua light from the tank illuminates her black eyes. Like one of my exquisite fish, she recognizes me with the same primal question: predator or prey?

Reading my mind before I know it myself, she screams, "No!"

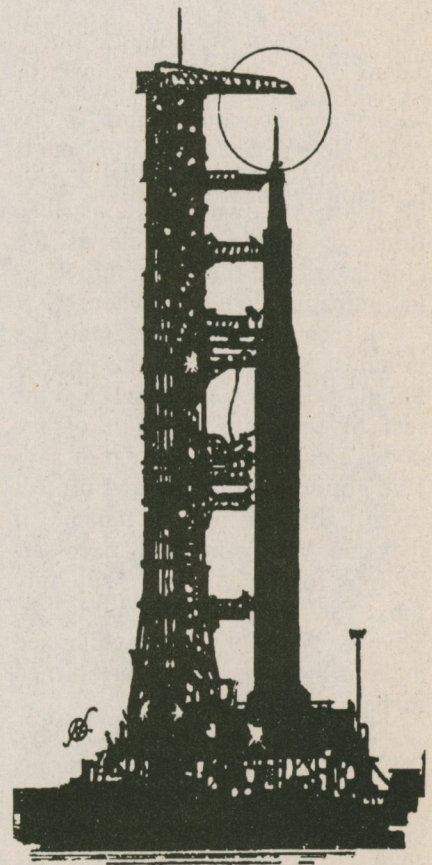
She falls on my kneeling body. "No, no. I'm pregnant. Please."

I push her over the guard rail, ever so gently, in case she isn't lying. Barely a splash, but an incredible feeding frenzy begins. My beautiful black and white Janine is still dark flesh and white bone, but all is bathed in blood.

Peter is in shock, his palms against the glass. Helpless. He's about to faint, his eyes roll back in his head, then lock on mine. There's

a laser flash, a barracuda explodes, the tank cracks open: barracudas, rushing water, remnants of Janine. Even Peter is a part of it. The fish frantically bite debris, each other, the air, as water runs through the module, down the escalator, into the corners of the basement, washing away forever my boxes of memorabilia.

They tell me I'm in a ward and if I don't behave I'll be in a cell. A single cell. I've had one visitor in the year and a half I've been here. Dr. Fong-Rhode. Oh, the power of guilt. I ask him about the boys. He tells me Peter's friend, Megan of the beautiful guitar, is helping him adjust to his lost leg; he strums out his grief in quarter notes. ■



WRITING, PART TWO

Algis Budrys

This will introduce you to Sarah Jane. She will help you write better

The manuscript is not the story. Remember that. The manuscript is but the convenient way to transmit the story, by means of coded hard-copy which is decipherable by a majority of the English-speaking world. But there was a time when this was not true, and apparently there will come a time when it is not true again. Other ways will be found to transmit the story.

It is an error—understandable, but an error nonetheless—to speak of working on your story, when what you mean is you are going to find a means of making your manuscript transmit the story more accurately. The story already exists in your mind, most of the time, whether you consciously know that or not. Even if you swear you're just making it up as you go along, *something* exists in some part of your mind, monitoring what your hands are doing, telling you this is OK, and that is not OK; guiding your creation. Obviously it is so, now that you think about it.

This has certain consequences. For example, working on the last couple of paragraphs of the manuscript may do nothing to improve the ending. Very likely, it will only confuse you. The problem with the ending consists of how you set up the beginning of the manuscript, or the middle. An ending does not exist in the last few words of the manuscript; it exists in the very purpose of the story, which purpose ideally is partially expressed in the very first word, and in all the words thereafter.

There is a very real difference between the manuscript and the story. The manuscript has to proceed from left to right, top to bottom, in serial order. No such limitation exists on the story, which lives in your mind and is multiplex. I defy you to tell me where and how a story is born. You may immediately begin recasting that moment of creativity into manuscript form, either written down or in your mind, but that is already after the fact. The story—whether you consciously know it or not—was already born, in a shroud of mystery we can only approximately understand. And it is in reconciling the story and the manuscript transmission mechanism that the skills of writing lie.

Let us go back to the seven parts, as explained last time. (1) a character, (2) in context, (3) with a problem, (4) makes an intelligent attempt to solve the problem but (5) fails, because the problem is more complex than he thought. He tries again, more urgently, and fails again, and tries again, each time learning more about the problem, each time staking more, until with one last maximum effort, staking everything, he (6) wins. And a trustworthy but otherwise disinterested character says "He's dead, Jim," or the moral equivalent, and that is (7), validation.

Validation, you will remember, actually proceeds throughout the story in many ways. The hero never

does anything uncharacteristic. The time of day proceeds rationally. The birds do not change from starlings to sparrows. But the biggest validation comes with "He's dead, Jim."

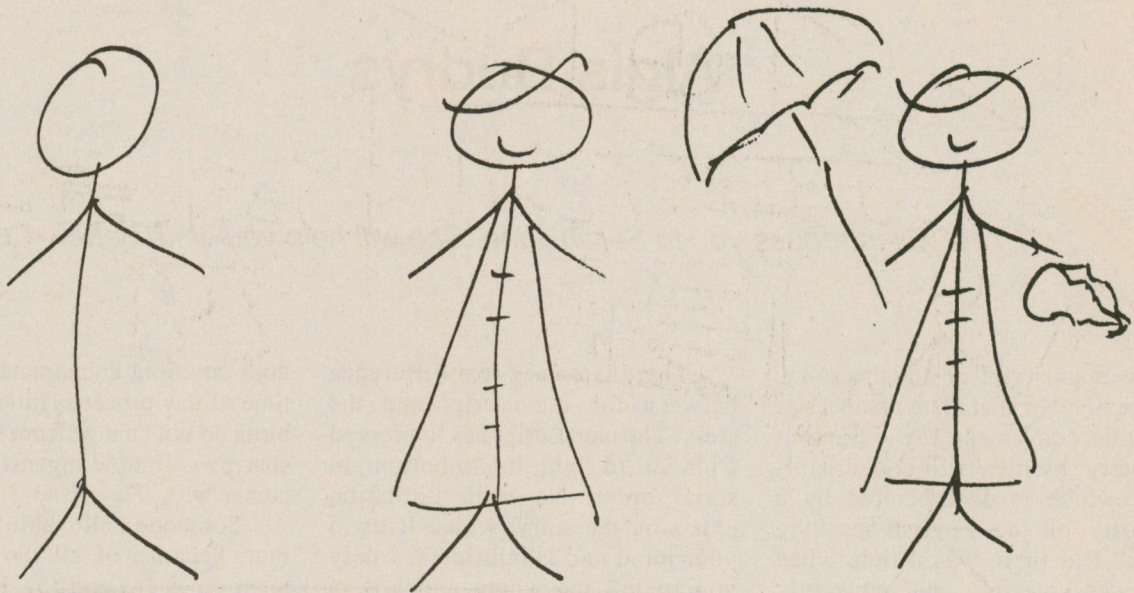
Someone believable *has* to say that, because of all the stuff that went on in (4) and (5), in which it looked like the hero was going to win, but at the last minute didn't. And even now, with the villain having gone off the top of the Empire State Building, there exists some small element of doubt in the reader's mind, until he hears "He's dead, Jim," from a trustworthy, otherwise disinterested, source. Or, from the author, if he or she has maintained a neutral tone.

Readers are like that. They remember every part of a story, and compare each new part, coming in in serial order, to *all* the old parts. They don't file those parts in serial order; they file them according to a lot of things, and one of the tags on each item is where it belongs in serial order, but they file them according to a lot of things. Remember that.

Then, they require the big validation at the end, and they require all the small validations in the rest of the story. Each time they spot an inconsistency, some readers will drop off. That's the big difference between the writer who barely does OK and the writer who really succeeds; the latter doesn't lose readers.

But let me tell you the story of Sarah Jane.

Sarah Jane begins as a barely perceptible character, and builds up from there.



What is at first a barely perceptible figure blooms as you write; for instance, becomes a high school girl...

So there she stands, outside the school at 3:00 with her violin case and her umbrella, in the rain. The reader can see that, now, as well as the school buses off to one side with students going to them, but the girl does not join them. Why does she not join them?

Because of the violin case. She is waiting for a cab. She ordered it yesterday, with forethought, as she shows forethought in many things. Her name is Sarah Jane, she is about to graduate from the high school, in Wet Prairie, Minnesota, and today she will play at an audition for Itzhak Perlman, who is in town between planes, and she will get a four-year scholarship to the Juilliard School of Music in New York City, and she will go on to be a famous concert violinist and get out of Wet Prairie. And the cab does not come.

All right, it doesn't come. Sarah Jane has a backup plan. In her pocket is the exact change for the bus, and so she turns and walks up to the corner bus stop. It won't be

quite as convenient, she won't have the solitude of the cab ride to psych herself up as is her wont, but it will take more than that to stop her on her one chance to be more than a small town violin teacher. And the bus doesn't come.

All right. One avenue block away is another bus line. If she runs, and if the bus comes right away, it will let her off downtown close enough to the audition hall so that if she runs she will still make it. So Sarah Jane takes off lickety split for the other bus line.

And who should she see, in the middle of the block, but good old Doctor Brown, her neighbor, just getting into his car. Doctor Brown, over the years, has done a number of small favors for Sarah Jane and her widowed mother, and of course he will now take her downtown. Her heart leaps up, and she goes running up to Doctor Brown, who looks at her distractedly and says: "Oh, hello, Sarah Jane, I'm sorry, but I haven't got time to talk. I just got a

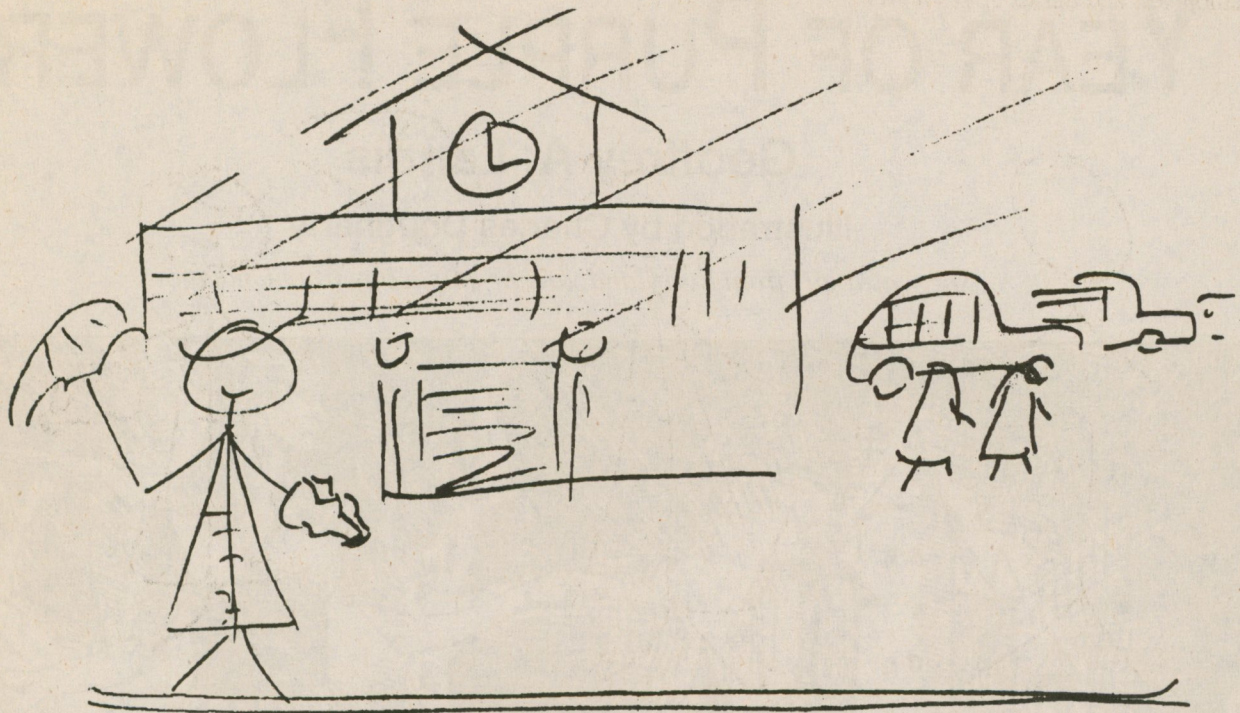
phone call from my wife. She's downtown, and there's been a bad fire in a department store, and traffic's all snarled up, and she can't get home, and I have to get the roast out of the oven before it burns. Good-bye, Sarah Jane, and should you be out running in the rain like that?" And he drives away.

Sarah Jane stands there dumbfounded. Not only has Doctor Brown failed her, she now knows there will be no bus anywhere, to say nothing of a cab. And it's three-thirty, and Itzhak Perlman has to leave at four, and what will she do?

At that point, a '57 Chevy with a yahoo sucking on a Budweiser behind the wheel goes rumbling by. And the yahoo leans out the window, and hollers: "Hey, Girlie, whatcha doin' fiddlin' around in the rain? Yuk yuk yuk!" He tosses the empty over the side and roars away.

Sarah Jane is crushed. Completely crushed. What will she do?

She takes inventory. She has her umbrella, her violin case, and her



...With an umbrella and a violin case, in front of her high school, at three o'clock in the afternoon.

talent. That's it. And she remembers that Nero fiddled while Rome burned. And she stops to think that if she gets out in the middle of the street and plays her violin, that is a sufficiently odd thing to do that someone is bound to stop and ask her what the hell? And she can explain, and get a ride. Or at least that's her only remaining chance. So she steps to the middle of the street.

And remembers that it's raining, and you don't expose your violin to the elements like that. But at this point, she isn't thinking in long chains at all. She thrusts the handle of the umbrella down the back of her slicker, she unsnaps the violin case under its cover, and begins to play, not even realizing, really, that the umbrella has settled down over her head and she looks like a mad mushroom, playing the violin in the middle of a main street.

Well, to make a short story shorter, the guy who stops is cop. When he hears Sarah Jane's story, he uses his knowledge of back

alleys, and his lights and siren, to get her to the audition hall in time. She plays, she wins, she lives happily ever after.

Now, that's all you have to do, mechanically. And it's a very interesting demonstration of a fact not enough writers realize: Writing is not the reverse of reading.

It isn't. You saw a bus stop, a street, Doctor Brown, his car, and lots of other details, in your head. Where are they written down? The '57 Chevy rumbled. Why? Because of its Lakes exhaust pipes, right? Where did I say it had Lakes pipes? Where did I describe exactly how the umbrella settled over Sarah Jane's head? I didn't. I didn't have to; you supplied all that, and God bless you, because for every detail you supply, I don't have to. And that's very good, because my details are not as good, as convincing, as yours.

One of the most common mistakes a beginning writer makes is

over-writing. He feels he *has* to describe the color of the dress the woman wears as she crosses the foyer, and the rug she treads on, and the piano in the corner, and the candelabrum on the piano, and the moth circling the flame on the candelabrum, when all the woman is going to do is open the door to the axe murderer's knock.

Well, next time we will go into that more deeply. And we will explain why Sarah Jane's story, as it stands, is just awful, and what has to be done to it to make it less awful. But, even so, not only have you got the rudiments, you are beginning to pick up some of the grace notes, too. You *can* write. You can. Almost any damned fool can, and many of them do. If I can do it, believe me, you can too. ■



IN THE YEAR OF PURPLE FLOWERS

Geoffrey A. Landis

Illustration by Charles Dougherty

She was a girl from Fairyland, and he was a boy from Chicago



"So are you going to accept him or not?"

Fiona tugs at a lock of her hair and doesn't answer. She presses her heels into the flank of her unicorn, and, obligingly, he trots forward.

Tiri giggles. "Hey, come back here." She whispers in her mule's ear, and the mule breaks into a trot to catch up to her sister's unicorn. "You can't run away from it, you know. You'll have to tell him something, yes or no or ask me again later."

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Will you go to another village to look for a man, then?" asks Tiri. "Like Aunt Cicilly did?"

"Maybe I will, and maybe I won't." Fiona reins her mount around in a tight circle, until he stands up on his hind legs and pirouettes and she has to lean forward and clutch his neck to stay mounted. He turns his huge head to look at her with a deep brown eye, and snorts with a breath that is fresh and vaguely mint. She pats his head absently. "No, of course I wouldn't leave you behind."

"I would be sad if you did," the unicorn says, dropping back onto all four feet. "You have been a faithful companion." He ambles forward, reaching to the side to grab a mouthful of green.

"It would be fun to see more of the world than just this sleepy corner, though," she says.

"So what's to see?" asks Tiri. "You think you could find a boy better than Jasp? He's nice."

Fiona nods slowly. "He is nice. Sometimes I wish he could be more, well, more serious, though."

Tiri shakes her head. "So what's so wrong with being happy?"

"Nothing, I guess." Her unicorn flicks an ear, but makes no comment. "I just wish—I don't know."

They are as different as sisters can be, Fiona small and dark, her hair braided with the purple flowers that grow abundantly on the hills; Tiri large and lanky, with calico hair cascading in large, loose curls down her back. Their day's riding has taken them far from their village, past all the trails they know, perhaps as far as they've ever ridden. As they ride up onto the next ridge there is a sudden vibration, as of the sounding of a gong so enormous that its note is felt rather than heard, and a suddenly strange smell in the wind, as of metal burning, or of autumn lightning. Tiri's mule stops, confused, and Fiona's unicorn paws the ground and rears.

"There is something unusual here," says the unicorn, swiveling his head to sniff the wind first in one direction, then another.

Fiona shrugs, and rubs his ears affectionately. "We've never been this far out before. *Everything* is bound to be unusual." She nudges him slightly with one heel, and, after a brief hesitation, he walks on. In fact, Fiona can't recall anybody she knows having ridden out this far. There is nothing of interest in this direction, just the underbrush, increasingly tangled and impenetrable, and the occasional overgrown ruins of an ancient building. It is a direction that people just never go. Through the tangle of weeds the animals pick their way surefootedly, occasionally exchanging a word with each other in their own language. The sisters let their mounts chose the way, knowing that they have been bred to find invisible paths in even the most seemingly impenetrable thicket. In the distance, occasionally visible through the canopy of forest, rise the mountains.

"More than that," says Tiri. "I wonder if it could be dangerous?"

"Don't be silly. Nobody would allow something dangerous to be

here without any warnings."

Fiona rides ahead, and, after a brief hesitation, her sister follows. They crest the ridge and look down. In the valley below is a white sea of fog. The mists twist and swirl around the protruding towers of a strange village. As they watch, the fog rolls away, revealing a village of exotic beauty: slender, angular towers of brilliant white stone with curious crystalline windows, grass growing only a few inches high, straight walkways of the same white stone.

Her sister protests that this is an evil place, but Fiona is already riding down to it, wisps of fog cuddling around her catlike as she rides. She calls out merrily for her sister to follow if she dares. Expressing misgivings, Tiri does so. Just on the edge of the city she catches up.

"I have never seen anything like this," Tiri's mule comments quietly, shaking his head. The unicorn just snorts.

From close up, the village of towers is surrounded as if by a soap bubble, iridescent in transparent swirls of violet and amber. Fiona dismounts and walks toward it. She touches it, and laughs when her hand slips through the bubble without resistance, appearing veiled in turquoise and silver on the other side. In the very center of the strange village is a huge building, fragile and involuted like a sea shell.

"If you will be going in," says the unicorn, "do you mind if I wait for you outside? A human city is no place for me."

As an answer Fiona pats his neck affectionately. He wanders into the shade of a walnut tree, sniffs the ground, then circles around three times and curls up to nap.

"There can be no good in a place like this," says Tiri, coming up behind her. "I know it. I recognize this place now."

"Oh, it is beautiful. How can something beautiful be evil?"

"Don't you remember the old stories? This is the faerie village. The inhabitants are the spawn of Shaitan, the master of deception."

Fiona laughs, with a gentle, tinkling voice. "Everyone knows those old stories are just pleasant fictions."

"Grandfather told us of it, remember? Everything in the faerie village is deception," says Tiri, her voice deep and serious. "If you enter, they will keep you for a hundred years, and everyone you know will be old by the time you come back out."

Fiona laughs. "Could you be afraid, really? Afraid to enter?"

There can be nothing to be afraid of, for they both know that there is nothing left in the world that deliberately hurts humans. Yet Tiri stares long into her sister's dark eyes before she finally admits, yes, she's afraid.

"Then stay behind," says Fiona, and turns around and crosses the bubble into the village.

The streets of the village are smooth and even, paved with a hard white stone that is rough and unresilient to her feet. Wheeled vehicles wrought of enameled metal in shiny colors roll along them with a soft purring noise. She walks further in, and finds that there are places where the streets themselves move along the ground like rivers frozen yet still flowing. She is delighted.

The first person she meets is a woman of indeterminate age, with alabaster skin and short grey hair. The woman speaks a greeting in words that Fiona cannot understand. She smiles and shakes her head, and the woman speaks again, more slowly, her accent ancient and quaint. "A visitor from outside," the woman says with a smile. Her peculiar way of pronouncing her words makes them all seem to have extra syllables. "Welcome. What is your name?"

"I am Fiona."

The woman nods. "You are welcome to look around. If you have any questions, ask anybody." Before Fiona can speak to her again, the woman strides away, vanishing into a doorway.

There are other people walking along the streets from one building to another, all dressed as the woman was in unusual fabric, brightly colored and slightly shiny. A few of them greet her by name. The people are friendly, but seem serious and preoccupied. One, a young man about her own age, walks up to stand beside her. When she finally notices him and turns to say hello, he gives his name as David.

"Fiona."

"I know," he says, his voice low and trilling in the peculiar and fascinating accent that the villagers all seem to share. His hair is brown and slightly curled, and rectangular windows in front of his eyes give him a wide-eyed, questioning look that she finds amusing. "Shall I show you the city?" He reaches out his hand to her.

She takes it in hers. "Please." She shakes her head to clear it. Something about David, she could not quite say what, fascinates her. Perhaps it is only that he is so different from anybody she had ever known. So different from Jasp.

They stop in front of a small building, one no more interesting than any of the others as far as she can tell. David describes it as a dynamic isotope power system. She has no idea what that means, but he describes it, obviously quite proud, as something that was somehow crucial to the life of the village. "Lucky we happened to have it within the circle," he says. "It turns waste into energy for us, and will outlive all of us, I'm afraid."

To her it is only words, but there is something in the proud tone of his voice she loves listening to. She turns to him. "So distant out here, do you get many visitors? Before today I didn't even realize that there was a village here."

"A few."

"I'm surprised. You seem so far away from anybody. The people here hardly pay much attention to visitors."

"Oh, everybody knows you're here. The Center gets a visitor every few days or so. They figure, you're

here today, but the next day you'll be gone, so why bother?"

"I suppose so," she says, thinking that this is a strangely brusque attitude to take toward visitors.

"Can you answer a question for me?" asks David. "What year is this?"

She laughs, but then looks at him and sees that his expression is completely serious.

"Why, can't you see?" She spreads out her arms to indicate the hills visible in the distance, covered with myriad tiny flowers. "It is the year of purple flowers."

He smiles. "No, no," he says, "could you tell me the date?"

"Date?" she says. "Now is now. How can you date the present?"

"Ah. We used to date years," he says, thinking, "counting from the birth of a god, Jesus Christ."

She giggles. "How peculiar," she says. "Well, it is three-hundred two years from the building of the tower at Yrning, nineteen-thousand eleven from the exodus of the people of the sky."

David sighs. "That doesn't do me any good."

She shakes her head. "Well, I don't happen to recall any gods being born recently. Long ago, yes."

"How long ago?"

"I guess if you wanted to, you could count this as the year seventy-three thousand, two hundred and, ah, sixteen from the coming of the twin gods named," she pauses to think, "Naga Saki and Hero Sheema. Of course," she continues, "no one actually worships those gods—no one I ever heard of does, anyway—but I remember when we learned the names. I think they were evil gods, gods of destruction? Is that good enough?"

"So long," David says, quietly, "so very long. I see that the new gods outlasted the old, after all."

But there is much to see and wonder at: the city, the people, the mechanical birds singing in the city square, the tiny box of glass that glides noiselessly up the side of one of the buildings to give them a panoramic view of the city and sur-

roundings. When David sees her delight, he laughs. "This is nothing. Let me show you where, I assure you, the *real* magic takes place."

The building in the center of the village is laid out with entrances all around, a corridor spiraling inward from each entrance. David chooses one of the entrances and they go in, and he leads her down the corridor. On each side are more doors. He opens one, and she is surprised to see that it is only a shallow niche or closet, well-lit but empty. She expresses her puzzlement, and David laughs. "A bit more than *just* that, I think. Step in, and you will see."

She does, and he closes the door. Instantly liquid darkness surrounds her, embraces her, and for a moment she cannot move, cannot even breathe. Then to her surprise she suddenly realizes that she is standing in a well-lit room with a desk covered with papers. She looks behind her, but there is no door or any sign of the closet she had stepped into, and David is nowhere in sight. One whole wall is covered with equations and mathematical curves, glowing slightly. In the middle of the room, suspended in mid-air, is a peculiar shape, sharp angles and complex curves colored in subtle shades of blue and green. She looks around, to the side, behind her, and when she turns back again there he is in front of her. The windows in front of his eyes have disappeared.

"This is where I work," he says. "Do you like it?"

"Very nice," she says, a little hesitantly, for in truth she cannot understand how anyone could possibly do any work, or want to, in a closed-up room with no sunlight or trees. She points at the sculpture in the middle of the room. "And is this part of your work?"

"Yes, it is indeed. I study, ah, knots in six-dimensional space. This is a three-dimensional projection of a surface in six-space." To the wall he says, "Computer, rotate, v axis, omega point one."

The knot writhes and changes shape and colors.

"Very pretty." She looks around, without much interest. "Is this all that's here? This little room?"

"Oh, no! This is not a billionth of what's here! Look." He waves his hand, and the wall with the equations disappears. Where the wall had been is now open space.

"Oh!" she says, and steps through into a sunlit clearing in shades of red and gold, surrounded by peculiar tall trees such as she has never seen before. In fact, each tree is completely different from any other; this one with golden leaves somewhat like a maple, but bark like a sycamore and branches with tiny red fruits; the next one covered with tabby-striped fur in grey and pink. She strokes the tree's fur, and in response it purrs at her with a soft, deep rumble.

David snaps his fingers, and the office flattens into a picture, then shrinks to a dot and vanishes. A butterfly alights near them, and as Fiona kneels down to look at it, it suddenly turns into a strikingly beautiful woman with alabaster skin and violet eyes. With a start she realizes that it is the woman she had first met, but now much younger, and beautiful. The woman asks how she is enjoying her tour of the city.

"Oh, very much!"

"I'm glad." To David she says, "It is fifteen hours. You're keeping track?"

"Of course."

"Good." The woman stretches her arms. In the blink of an eye she turns into a dove, and darts away into the forest.

Fiona watches her fly away. "Then you really do come from a faerie village, and this is the faerie land, the other side of reality."

He laughs. "You could call it that if you want, I suppose," he says.

"Then is it evil?"

"Not that I know of."

"I didn't think so. Tiri is just so *timid*." She looks up, and sees with surprise that there are tiny people in the sky. "Then can we fly?"

"If you wish," he says, and takes hold of her hand. In an instant, with no feeling of motion at all, the clearing drops away.

"Could I do it alone?"

"I will teach you someday."

From the air she can see that the grove they had been in is just a small area in the center of the village where the sea-shell building—strangely missing now—had stood. As they rise the village shrinks, and they can see tiny fields, houses, roads—not at all the forested valley the village had been in. To the hazy north is the blue of water, and on the shores of the water a gigantic city. Its distant towers dwarf those of the village below them, glistening as burnished copper.

"What could that be?" she asks, puzzled. "I don't know a city near here."

"It is called Chicago."

"Can we go there?"

David shakes his head. "I'm afraid not. That is Chicago as it was thousands of years ago."

"Oh."

Flying, they meet other people, all of whom are friendly and know her name and David's. After a while he takes her up and up, until the land beneath them fades and disappears into mist and they seem suspended in pale blue. Above them a circle of brightness appears. They pass through the circle, and with that they are back in the glade they had started from.

They stand beneath a tree with brown feathers and a large brown eye at the end of each branch. Another tree, one with branches hung with delicately colored crystalline globes of all sizes, plays music for them as the breeze ruffles its branches. With a flourish, David materializes a bunch of grapes from mid air.

"Oh!" she says. "How did you do that?"

He smiles and raises his hands. Grapes fall from his fingertips. Each grape has a different color and tang. He introduces her to several new foods, and other people come to them, each delighting in bringing

forth their own exotic foods, flaming ice-cream sundaes, tiny animals made from some translucent flexible material, bits of chocolate wrapped in colorful wrappers and other strange foods so numerous that Fiona has a hard time keeping track. Devising new foods is a common pastime here, David explains, and everybody wants her to try theirs. In this enchanted forest the people seem less distant and solitary, and she decides that they must only have been a bit shy about meeting strangers. She calls out foods to him, and finds that fruits and berries and bread he can conjure up with a wave of his hand, but most everything else she names he just shrugs his shoulders, shakes his head, and laughs. Many of these he cannot make are very common, things like sorbspice and talla.

After a while they walk off into the forest. After a moment David puts his arm around her, and the feel of his arm seems right and natural. She puts her own arm around him, and then, on a sudden impulse, turns to him and kisses him on the nose.

"We have met many people here," she asks, "but is none of them special to you? Have you no betrothed?"

David looks down at the ground and shakes his head slowly. "No. There was a girl I used to see, another scientist..." He sighs. "I suppose, if nothing had happened, we probably would have ended up getting married. But she was in Europe when it happened."

"Europe?"

"Very far away."

"And your family?"

"They all died very long ago."

"That is so sad. Then you have nobody. Well, now you have me." She reaches one hand behind her neck and unclasps her shift, letting it drop to the ground. Beneath it she is wearing nothing at all.

"Don't you — isn't it — won't anybody—"

"Silly. Don't you know what to do?" She fumbles with his shirt, unfamiliar with the buttons.

"Oh, yes."

"Then, do it."

He kisses her, hesitantly, and she kisses him back with vigor, and rolls him back onto the ground. "A moment," he says, and makes a quick gesture. The sunlight dims to a purple glow, and the trees lean together to give them an impenetrable private glade. The-leaves on the ground below them puff out, and in a moment they are on a soft mattress with silken pillows.

He seems a bit surprised at how forward she is. She is still confused by him, and she wonders if perhaps his people have different notions about sex, that what she is doing violates some taboo she knows nothing about. Once he starts, though, she finds that his hesitancy vanishes and his love-making is full of enthusiasm and vigor. Some of what she shows him is new to him, and he responds with some quite pleasurable surprises of his own.

After the intensity of his passion is spent, she snuggles into the crook of his arm and gazes into the sky. "My sister claims that your village is faerie," she says, "but I am quite sure she is wrong. Is it?"

He hesitates. "I'm not sure I know what that word means to you."

She laughs. "Silly. You are as human as I. Your village, it is all so charming and old and filled with machines. You are no faerie folk; you are folk from the great age of machines. The distant past. But how it is you are here, I do not know."

He rolls over and looks at her. "Yes," he says.

"So tell me."

He thinks for a moment. "Seventy-three thousand years ago...."

"The great age of machines."

"You could call it that. I think we have reason to be proud. Our life was not yours, Fiona. It seems to me you live much as your fathers lived, and theirs, and no one has much curiosity or drive to change. Then, we were working on learning the secrets of the universe." He makes a gesture, and suddenly it is night. Stars are visible by the millions, crisp as jewels and colored, not the

constellations she knows, but others, distorted and alien. The familiar glitter of the ancient skycities are missing. Fiona shivers and moves closer to him, but he fails to notice. "Do you even know what the stars are, those points of light in the night sky?"

"Yes, of course," she says, thinking him rather silly for asking. "They are other suns, much like our own, but very very far away."

"So you *do* know! But don't you feel the urge to explore? To travel out among the stars, and see what is there?"

"Silly. They look like they just hang there, barely out of reach, but that's an illusion, you know. Why, if you could travel even as fast as a beam, it would take years to travel to the nearest of the stars, and your lifetime and more to travel to the farthest."

"Yes," he says, meditatively. "So you haven't forgotten everything. Indeed, the stars are far, very far. What we did here at the Center was to search for a means to make them accessible, perhaps even to travel faster than a lightbeam."

Above the treetops the sky brightens from deep blue into violet, and the strange stars fade into dawn.

She shakes her head. "Of course, you must have known that that is impossible."

"Is it? We had thinkers who said so too, but we believed that any theory must have flaws."

"Even a child could show why that could not be," she says, smiling. "Why, if you could travel faster than a beam, don't you know that you could also travel through time? How can you think to travel into the past? That is clearly absurd."

"Just so," he says, softly. "We thought maybe we could find ways to cheat the gods. We were arrogant, maybe, but.... Well, as you say, we knew that space and time are one. At the Center we studied the nature of time, seeking to negate the tyranny of distance. One day we did an experiment on time itself, to see whether the metric of spacetime could be bent to our will.

"We succeeded, but we failed to realize what success meant. We projected a sphere of titanium no bigger than your thumb into the future. Travel forward in time is no problem, you see. But when we tried to bring it backward, something went wrong. We—the whole research center, buildings and houses and everything—were pulled forward instead. Into the future. We've lost our place in time."

"It was in vain," she says. "There is no way to travel faster than a beam. If there were, the sky-dwellers would have found it long ago."

"Skydwellers? People who travel in space?"

"Lived in space. Tens of thousands of years ago."

"We had space colonies?" His expression mixes hope and yearning. "What happened to them?"

She shrugs. "You can't live in space, not prosperously, not without support from the Earth. In the times of turmoil, there were always people who thought it important to support them." But as time went on, she explains, as wars and wanting dwindled and were gradually forgotten, people found less and less reason to supporting dwellings in space. Eventually most of the sky dwellers returned to Earth to be reintegrated into life. A minority refused to return. "And so they built a huge vessel, a world in itself, with the last of the material they had from Earth, and set out for a distant star they thought to have a habitable planet, the trip to take thousands of years. The exodus of the people of the sky, it was called, and the historians still speak of it."

"The stars," he says, softly. "We did it. We went to the stars."

She shudders. "Can you imagine it? They condemned their children, and their hundred-times-grand children, to live in a tiny flying village they could never leave, and even if they wanted to, they couldn't come back."

"Wow," he says. "A starship. And what happened to it? Did they find a planet to settle?"

"I don't know," she says. "There is an ancient machine for listening to the sky—"

"A radiotelescope?"

She shrugs. "Perhaps one of the other villages keeps listening. I guess somebody probably does. I've never known anybody interested enough to want to find out."

She stops, confused, when she sees the tears running down David's face. "Was it so important to you, then?"

"It was my dream. It was my life, and you have forgotten. We had hoped...we'd thought that someday...." He falls silent.

"I'm sorry."

"We are all alone now," he says.

"You have me," says Fiona, and takes him in her arms.

He is silent for a long time, and when he finally speaks it is barely more than a whisper. "Yes."

They rock to the music of the trees, the branches swaying and dancing with them, and they make love again.

Later, David clears away the trees, and they join the others and feast again. No matter how much she eats, she never feels overstuffed; no matter how much she dances, she never feels tired, though surely hours must have passed.

"Tell me about what it was like to live when the world was always changing," she asks David. "Did people really starve to death?"

"No, of course not. At least, not in the parts I lived in. Maybe in other countries people sometimes did."

"How awful! And you still had plagues?"

"No, no plagues. We had some diseases. Not very many."

"People actually died of them?"

"Sometimes."

She shudders. "Ugh! All in all, I think I like things better the way they are."

"Is your world so perfect? Isn't anybody unhappy?"

She digs a toe into the dirt. "Well, nobody *dies* of it."

"And how did your world come to be the way it is? Do you know? Do you still have history?"

"Yes, the old stories of the way things were." She pauses to think. "In the great age of machines, long ago, your people loved to change things."

"Progress, we called it."

"They kept changing the way they lived, every generation abandoning the way of the one before. And so they kept on changing the society that they lived in until they finally arrived at one that they didn't want to change." She shrugs. "One where people were happy enough with the way things were. And so it stayed."

"I understand what puzzles me about you now," he says. "Your people have no sense of wonder. Surely what I've showed you must be new and strange to you, but you take it all in stride."

"Oh, no—it is wonderful, so old and curious. It really is."

"But you have no sense of wonder about it."

"Sense of wonder," she says. "Is that important?"

"Wonder was very important to us," he says.

"Then I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I love you anyway. I shouldn't, but I do." He gestures around him, and with the sweep of his hand sparkles dance in the air. "But don't you sometimes wish for what you have lost? Once, Fiona, once we had the power to remake the world; to shape it to our aims and to make of it whatever we wanted."

She touches him gently on the arm. "But we *did* make the world we want."

He smiles-wistfully. "Then tell me about your world."

She tells David about her family, her sister, her father, her unicorn, even about her once-almost-betrothed, Jasp. "They will love you, David. They will make you feel at home, and forget some of your pain over the world-that-was."

He closes his eyes as she kisses him.

"Do you really love them?" he asks. "Really and truly?"

"Oh, yes. More than anything else. More than my life itself."

He picks up her chin and turns her face toward him. "Oh, Fiona. And more than me?"

"No." She drops her eyes. "But they are more than love, they are my life. I know I used to complain about how life has no surprises—I did! Until you came along!—but I could never live severed from my people."

Tears are running down David's face. "Then you must leave. Now. Hurry." He pulls her rudely up, and rushes her away. "Computer!"

Suddenly David and the feast and the field and the dancers disappear, and she is standing alone in the shallow niche. David appears outside.

She looks around in confusion. "Where did the dancing trees go?"

"They were never real. That was a virtual; an unreal place. Now, hurry! There's little time! You must leave here at once!" He pulls her down the corridor, and she reluctantly follows.

"No! Why? Can't you at least come with me?"

"No. I can't. Fiona, in the outer world, I am millennia dead. Entropy can be fooled, but never cheated. If I were to leave this city, I would be no more than dust."

She drops her eyes. In a small voice she says, "Then I will live here with you." She looks up at him. "We will be happy, and my family will come to visit me. It will work out. You'll see."

"I would that it could, Fiona. But you must go. Look." He touches a patch on the wall and speaks a phrase in an accent she cannot understand. In front of them suddenly appear Tiri and Jasp and her father. They are grim-faced, and her father and Jasp struggle with some strange machine. Fiona calls out, but they don't answer. "They can't hear you, Fiona. They aren't really here. This is a scene just outside the city."

"I recognize that machine," she says slowly. "It is one of the old

machines from the village that we were never allowed to touch." As she watches, the villagers stand back, and a stream of pale blue fire fountains out of the mouth of the machine to splash against an invisible wall of air a few meters away. Jasp and her father appear to be disappointed, and angrily make adjustments to it. Nothing happens. Jasp kicks the machine.

"Yes, some sort of a plasma cannon," David says. He seems almost amused. "So you saved a few of the old machines after all." He turns to her. "They are trying to force entrance to the city, Fiona, to bring you home. It is a hopeless task, I'm afraid; what separates this city from the outside world is no material object, and cannot be pierced by any weapon we know of. I'm sorry. I wish that it could."

"Why?"

"They know, I'm afraid. I'm sure there must be some people who remember the stories. A hundred years is not so long, after all. Come

with me, Fiona. Hurry! I will explain as we go."

He raps on the wall and the scene vanishes. He grabs her hand—a bit roughly, she thinks, hurt and puzzled by his behavior—and they run through the city. "You see, we are still in the grasp of the same time field. It's the momentum; we have too much temporal momentum to stop. This city will only be here for a few more minutes, before it is again hurled into the future. We pause only for a single day in a hundred years, and then are carried away into the stream of time.

"At first we kept in touch with scientists, and spent each day in a frantic race trying to catch up with the world. But after a few days, nobody cared about us any more. The world had moved on, and left us behind.

"If you were to stay, you would never see your friends and family again. I wish you could. But you love them too much." As they run they have reached the edge of the city. He thrusts her out of the field, and she

can suddenly hear the shouts of her family. But she turns to David.

"But—"

"Goodbye, my love. Remember me, as I will remember you every day for a million years."

"Wait! Can't you—"

With the sound of an enormous, invisible gong, the city vanishes. In the suddenly chill air, all that stands in the place it had been is grass and tiny purple flowers.

"Fiona!" shouts her father, running toward her across the place where the village had stood. "Are you all right, child? We were worried!"

"Tell me, tell me, what was it like?" asks Tiri.

The unicorn gets up, stretches, and walks over to nuzzle her cheek. "I'm glad you're back," he says calmly. "A hundred years is a long time to wait."

But Fiona can only clutch his mane, bury her face in his neck, and sob. ■

OUR COVER ARTISTS

The cover for the first issue was by Alex Schomburg, who lives in retirement in Oregon. Born in 1905, the son of a German father and a Puerto Rican mother, Alex was one of several brothers who moved to New York City in the 1920s and pursued careers in the arts. Alex has been illustrating SF since 1925, beginning with interiors for *Science and Invention*, a Gernsback magazine.

It is impossible to detail every contribution he has made to the advancement of the art of illustration, or to the scope of his accomplishments in the arts. In his SF career alone he has painted innumerable magazine covers and comic book covers, becoming known as "King of the Airbrush" for his meticulous detailing.



Illustration by Bob Hobbs

This issue's cover is by Paul Lehr, who was born in 1930 near New York City. He has done hundreds of paperback covers, among many other things; his best-known in SF circles is "Grok," a cover for *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein,

in the 1960s. His illustrations have appeared in publications around the world, including *Time*, *Fortune*, *Playboy*, *Reader's Digest*, *Omni*, and *Analog*.

A double-page painting of the first Moon landing appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, for the August 8, 1959 issue, ten years before the actual event. The original oil, and two others, are now a permanent part of the collection of the National Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian Institution. His work has been exhibited at numerous prestigious museums and galleries. In later years, he has turned his efforts to the creation of personal images of fantasy; pictures which depict mysterious scenes of human congestion, destruction, and conflict. ■

DECEMBER MORNING

Eolake Stobblehouse

Illustration by Peggy Ranson

It was, indeed, a simple question



It is a cold December morning. The old house is creaking quietly in the biting cold outside. Old willows are standing uncomplaining like islands in the snow. The sun is veiled by a thin layer of clouds. A black cat is walking through the garden.

The inside of the house is dark wood, and old things, things rare and worth much gold. A gray-haired man sits by a table. A young woman stands by a mirror. He is in a morning robe, she is wearing a bath towel, and combing her hair.

The curtains are only drawn from one window, the largest one, facing the large snow-covered garden.

The man looks at his hands on the bare table top. He looks at a painting on the wall. He looks out the window, he looks at the floor. He looks at the woman. He puts his hands in his face. He rubs his face, rubs his eyes, rubs his head, he sits back in his chair. He sighs silently. The woman finishes combing her hair, and puts down the comb. She turns from the mirror, and takes off the towel, hanging it over a chair. She turns back to the mirror and flexes her body, stretches her arms backwards.

She makes a musical humming, then massages her breasts and her ribs. She stretches lazily, and then, still humming, goes to the window, leans on the window sill, and looks into the garden. The man is silently watching her, unmoving.

The woman speaks: "Oh, I do so love Winter, I do. It is so cold, so white, so merciless, so virginal. Any old evil can hide in Winter, hiding in the open, in broad daylight, invisible due to the numbness and the blindness coming from the cold." She puts her hands further apart, leans forward, stands still. Outside, it begins to snow.

The man rises from the table, and walks to the window, slowly. He wraps his robe tighter. He stands still, close to the woman. He lifts his hand, puts it down again. He sits down on a nearby chair. Not looking at the woman, he speaks to her. "You shouldn't stand naked by the window. It is cold."

She turns, smiling. She straddles his knees, facing him, puts her arms on his shoulders. She looks into his eyes, still smiling. "I think you know that doesn't hurt me," she answers. She plays with his hair.

The man's face is turned away. Outside, a black bird lands in the snow. The house creaks someplace.

With a sudden movement, she grabs his face with one hand and turns it towards her own. With a quiet, precise voice she says: "You

haven't spoken to me in days. What is the problem?"

He looks into her face. She has dark blue eyes, long, arched eyebrows, a thin nose, pale skin. Her dark hair is falling in wet strands over her forehead and shoulders. He says: "I love you, you know."

"Why, thank you. I appreciate that. What is new?"

"I am tired, Marlene. I am so tired." He sighs, puts his hand to his forehead.

"You have been tired for a long time, Michael."

"Exactly. It isn't changing, except for getting worse. I haven't done any work in months."

"You don't need to work, Michael. You are rich."

"Yes, I am rich, but I can't live my life doing nothing. I am not made that way. And I like what I work with."

The girl gets up. She walks around, waving her arms. "Michael, you are hopeless! You have everything a man can dream of! You have a beautiful home, important friends, ten cars, you have me. What do you want!?"

The man is watching her. He is leaning back in the chair, stroking his chin. "Marlene, what are you? I don't see you sleep. You can stand any temperature with or without clothes. You hardly eat anything. I saw you the first time fifteen years prior to marrying you, and you don't seem to be getting any older, though you are changing. What are you?"

Outside, the snow is coming down harder, and a wind is starting to blow. The woman sits down in front of her husband.

"Well, the legends don't quite fit," she says, "but you should be able to figure it out, Michael. You are nothing if not intelligent."

"No, the legends don't quite fit. That's what stopped me for a long time. But you must be what we call a vampire."

She looks, down, smiling. "Thank you, Michael. Yes, I am a vampire."

"But you can stand sunlight, and you make a reflection."

"We don't mind sunlight, but we don't tan, that's probably cause of the misunderstanding. People that pale must be afraid of the Sun, people reason. Of course we make reflections. We hate all strong spices, including garlic. The crucifix means nothing to us, that is merely a desperate hope. And yes, we live from the blood and spirit of human beings."

The man looks at her. "But why me? And why...." He feels his throat.

She laughs. "Why don't you have tooth marks? You have felt my teeth often enough, when kissing. You know you should have punctures. It is simple, really, as a survival mechanism. We wish to keep victims ignorant as long as possible. We secrete something that heals the puncture marks almost instantly."

She looks down at her slender hands. "And why you? Well, I like you, Michael. You are a strong man, a good man. You taste good. You keep me strong. You are a good living. Delicious. Nutritious." She smiles at him. "Of course you! I love you!"

He looks at her with a still, neutral expression. "You love me like a snake loves a rabbit. Like I love roast beef. You love me like a hammer loves the nail. You love me like thunder loves the sky. You love me like a car loves the road. What do you know about love?"

The young woman gets up again. "What do I know about love? What don't I know about love? I love the night. I love the frost of winter. I love the wild life of the forests. I love hunting. I love exhaustion. I love fear. I love to kill. I love...I love the taste of your blood. I love the feeling of you growing smaller and weaker in my grasp. I love to have a life in my hands." She has picked up a flower from a vase. She is sniffing its scent. She holds it delicately in both hands. Then she puts it back by its stem. She stands in front of her husband. "You see?"

Her husband regards her pale, slender figure standing in front of him. "Yes," he says. "I see." He con-

tinues: "Why don't you leave me be? I have done nothing bad to you. I have done nothing to deserve this." He looks into her face. "You are killing me. You are draining my life away. I am dying day by day at your hands. You can't do this to another.... You can't do this to a living, thinking human being. You can't do this."

The woman turns from him, and goes to a nearby closet, and takes out a dress, which she puts on. The dress is dark blue, of thin fabric. She takes the man's hand. "Shall we have some breakfast? Here, go sit by the table, I'll make you some breakfast. But first, a question." She sits down opposite the man.

"Let me tell you something," she says. "I'll leave it up to you." She takes both his hands in hers. "What you say, goes. I will only stay if you want me to. I'll stay, and we will continue our life as before. Be assured, I will not kill you. I want you to live as long as you can. You may be able to do less and less, but you will be alive, and you will be with me.

"Then, on the other hand, if you so desire, I will leave right now, and never return. I will walk out your door, and you will never see me again. You will return to health, you will be able to start working again, you will be active. You can start living. You are still not an old man, you know. It just feels that way at the moment. You have potentially half your life left for you." She lets go of his hands, and sits back. "I just need your word."

The man sits for a while, then puts his face in his hands. "Don't," he begins.

"Don't" what?" says his wife. "I can't hear what you're saying."

"Don't leave," says the man.

She leans forward, holds his face, looks into it. She smiles, a broad, happy smile. Smiles with her whole face. "Say 'please'," she says.

"Please," says the man.

"Good," she says. "Thank you." She pats his hand. "What do you want for breakfast, Darling?" She gets up. ■

IN THE MEMORY OF PRINCE EDWARD

Suzanne
Allès Blom

Illustration by
Hilary Barta

*Prince Edward had a terrible
memory. But in the end...*

Outside the stone tower, the king of Circissa's retinue stood beside their horses in the desert sun. In the tower's magical coolness, the king also sweated as he confronted the hermit wizard. "Eighteen years ago when Prince Edward was born you promised he would be incapable of—"

"I promised he would remember no event longer than the time of the rising sun, from when it first brightens the eastern sky to when it clears the horizon by a hand-span. You were, I believe, the one who suggested the idea. Something about, 'The king of Pomfrey will doubtless wonder if his son's looks are askew but will probably not even notice if the lad has no brain.'"

"Yes, yes," said the king. "I will take responsibility if that helps. But—"

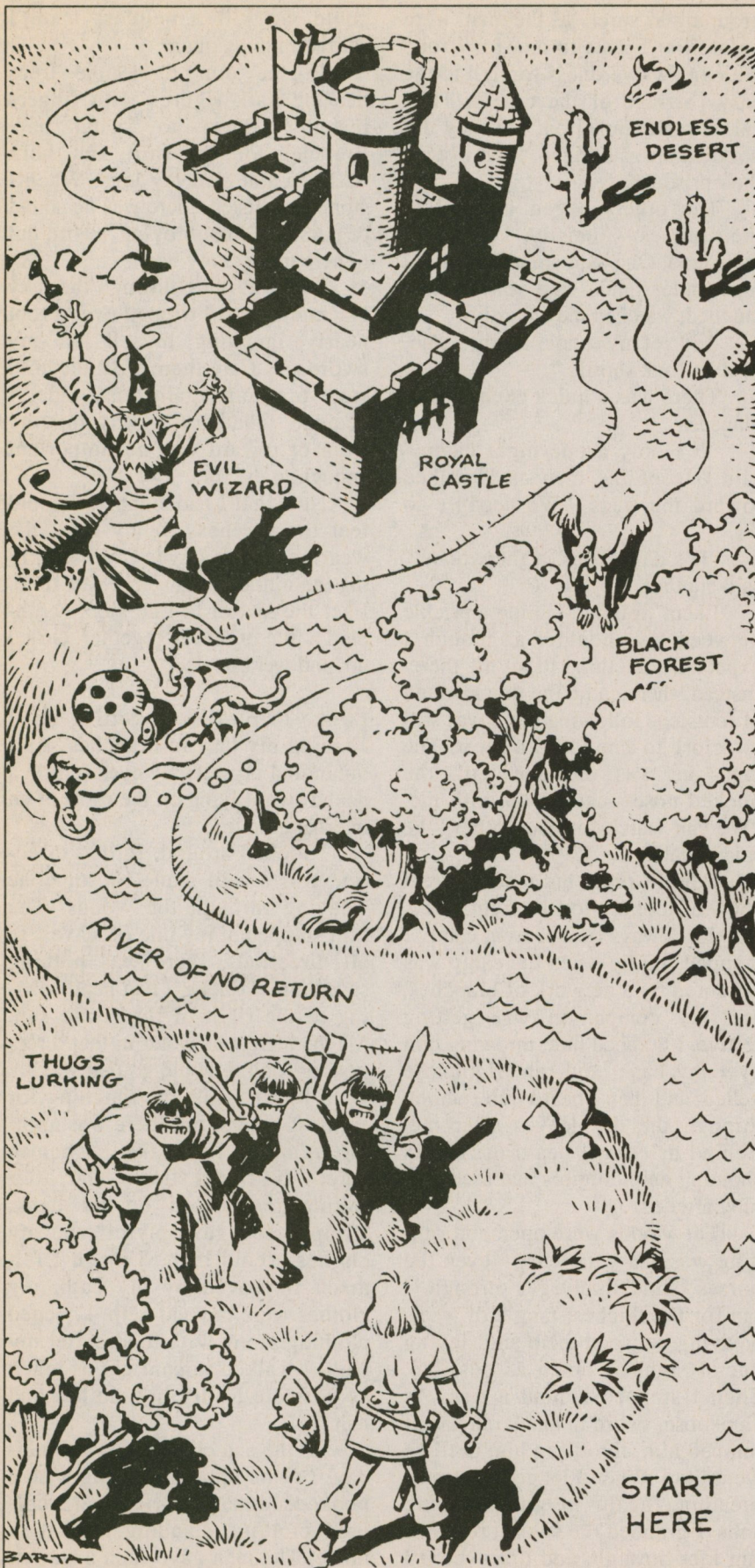


Illustration copyright © 1993, Hilary Barta. All rights reserved.

Story copyright © 1993, Suzanne Allès Blom. All rights reserved.

"You also agreed that he should be capable of learning skills, lest Pomfrey decide to designate another, more capable heir. Or are you denying that he can remember events for no more than the twelfth part of a day and that no one can find cause or cure for his affliction?"

"Of course not. As always your spell worked perfectly."

"Then you should realize that I cannot do what you ask. The spell is undetectable and unalterable. If you wish me to put another spell on the prince or the upcoming event, I will do so for—the proper price. However, the results must be unpredictable. Piling spells on spells over one entity creates increasing instabilities. The performance of any magic on the prince would take half your kingdom and bring no guarantees."

"But..." said the king, then stopped.

The wizard stared at the king from beneath his shaggy brows. "You want more for your gold? Use your own resources—those block-headed horsemen for instance. Remove him from his protective surroundings. He should not be killed, of course, but he could be, say, willingly married to a pig-keeper's daughter."

The king of Circissa nodded thoughtfully. "That would indeed cause Pomfrey, ah, more than consternation."

"Well then."

The sun was in my eyes as I dismounted with the others. Dark tree trunks stood sentinel outside the clearing they had chosen for our camp. The other men were jovial, but my own unease was steadily growing.

I was not part of this group. There were four of them, all swarthy with black hair and a certain air, a manner of speaking, perhaps, that made it seem they were either close kin or long time associates. The others wore beautifully worked swords while I had not even a knife to cut my meat. The horses, part of the

grouping as surely as the men, were unfamiliar beasts to me, for I rode with an awkwardness foreign to the easy carriage of the others. They called me companion, but they did not treat me as a friend. I felt instead their prisoner.

The others began unsaddling their horses. Clumsily, I followed their lead. One said something I did not understand, and the others laughed, watched me covertly.

As I set my saddle down, I said, "I'll be back shortly."

There was a quick exchange of glances.

"It's only a one night camp," said one of the men as I walked toward the trees, "We needn't go far."

"It's dangerous in the woods," said another.

I kept walking, feeling a prickle between my shoulder as though I expected something to hit me there. Instead, there came the quick sound of footsteps following me. I was still too close to camp to run for it. The man—he was the one with the hooked-nose—caught up with me. "We can watch for each other," he said amiably.

I didn't reply but made a great show of looking for the right place, walking always further from camp. I stopped finally when the camp was obscured by a network of branches, and my companion was getting restive. I grabbed him, throwing him over my back, and ran. Hooknose yelled, and then I heard him running through the dry leaves after me. Behind us both, I heard the others shouting unintelligibly and then running after us.

The woods were open and running was easy, too easy—even the horses could likely get through. I ran for the thickest tangle of trees, weaving between them and staying out of sight as much as possible. Then I stopped behind a tree. As Hooknose, sword in hand, ran past, I jumped him, throttling him until he went limp. When I let go, he started breathing again in great gulping sobs. I grabbed the sword, ready to run him through, and discovered I

could not kill a helpless man. I started running again.

In the dim light, the trees became dark figures with fingers reaching down to snatch me. Branches tore my shirt, and thorn bushes entangled my legs. When I stopped to listen, there was no sound of pursuit. I kept moving, sword out to help me feel my way.

I kept moving through the inky blackness until I tripped over a root nearly impaling myself on my sword. As I lay there with the cold steel pressing against my side, I decided whatever I was moving from or toward was not important enough to die for.

Now that I had stopped, I could feel the soreness in my legs, the weariness of my eyes from searching the murk for danger. I was tired. I set the sword to one side, scabbled a pile of leaves together, curled up, and went to sleep.

I woke to bird song. Sitting up, I caught my hair in branches. As I untangled myself, my eyes fell on a naked sword lying on the roots of an overhanging tree.

I looked around. In that direction was a trail made by someone weaving through the woods. The trail stopped at my pile of leaves. In all directions, there was nothing save animal tracks. I had been heading to the right of the rising sun. Maybe there was water in that direction, or food. I would go that way.

I began walking, watching for signs of others, but there was nothing, as though I were the first human here. I did find a stream, and, after setting my sword on its bank, stripped and gave myself and my clothes a cold bath. Though I felt much improved by my bath, my clothes were beyond help. I needed clothing along with food. After my bath, I walked in sunlight as much as possible to dry my clothes and hair.

As the sun climbed toward midday, I came upon a clearing with a hooknosed man in bright parti-colored clothing standing next to a horse. The man gave such a start at

seeing me that I brought my sword up in a defensive pose.

"So you think you're clever?" asked the man bringing his own sword up.

"Tolerably."

Hooknose attacked in a flurry of strokes that did nothing but betray weak swordsmanship. I counterattacked, sending him backing over the uneven terrain. As I had hoped, he soon stumbled and fell. Before he could recover, I had my sword to his throat.

"Release your sword," I commanded.

Hooknose let go, and kicked the hilt away from his hand. "Now, sir, would you be kind enough to tell me why you were waiting for me sword in hand as I came by?"

For reply, he only growled.

I rested on the swordpoint on his throat. "I'm asking as politely as I'm able."

"You got away from us. You pulled that damn stunt pretending not to remember anything. Then, when we took you up on it, you got away."

Us, that was why he had fought even when he must have realized it was hopeless. He had been stalling, waiting for companions. Doubtless I could learn more, but that seemed most important.

I lifted the sword a bit. "Unbutton your shirt."

He looked at me but did not move.

"If I have to repeat everything, my arm may grow weary and slip with disastrous consequences for yourself and your clothes which I covet."

Under my sword, Hooknose undressed himself, then lay face down while I removed the rags I was wearing. I tied him to a tree with the rags and stuffed his mouth against outcries. Then I redressed myself in his outfit. With the sword-belt strapped to my waist and the feathered hat on my head, I felt myself quite a gaudy fellow. I doffed my new hat to Hooknose and said, "I hope not to be seeing you again."

I set off again following a thin trail, but I had not gone far before I heard voices calling to one another. A youth popped suddenly from behind a bush. At the sight of me, he fell to his knees.

"Please don't kill me, good sir."

Though I now carried a sword sheathed and a sword in my hand, this reaction seemed excessive. "Why would I do that?"

The boy's eyes widened. "Sir, sir," he stammered. "You're a Circissan."

His eyes shifted suddenly to the side and narrowed, as though seeing someone behind me. I turned quickly to bring the man or rather men—there were two of them—into view. One had a stout stick in his raised hand, evidently ready to bring down on my head. The two were frozen into place like gnarled statues. They did not look like warriors, whatever their intentions toward me. They looked like farmers, old weather-beaten farmers.

"I am sorry to have startled you," I said, "but there appears to be a misunderstanding here. Why do you think I'm Circissan?"

"Your clothes are Circissan," said the boy.

I smiled, lowering my sword slightly. "That now is easily explained. A short while ago, I took them off a gentleman yonder. 'Tis also how I happen to be carrying two swords."

"Both your swords are Circissan," said the boy.

I compared one with the other. "Why so they are."

The farmer with the billet asked, "Where be this Circissan ye tied up?"

"I will take you to the spot if you wish."

I led them back along the trail until we came to the clearing where the man I had bested sat bound.

Billet walked up to him. "Say something, Circissan."

"I am no Circissan, but a poor wanderer waylaid by—"

"Listen to his accent," said the other farmer, "if he's not Circissan, I'm naked as he is."

"It's my wife," the Circissan pleaded. "She comes from their capitol—she's of good Pomfrey stock but was kidnapped when a baby—and constant talking to her has given me—"

The farmer raised his billet to bring it down on the Circissan's head.

"Hold," I said.

Billet paused looking at me.

"He's helpless."

The farmer snorted. "He's Circissan still."

The other farmer chortled evilly. "Perhaps it would be better, since his companions are dead, to leave him to starve."

"His companions?" I asked.

"Aye," said Billet, "Old Tom and his sons was out hunting, uh, rabbits and had bow and arrow in case they run into bear or other dangerous animals.... Anyway, they hear these two talking to each other in a funny accent. They sneak up closer, and it's two Circissans on their high, proud horses. As they're watching, another comes up, and they all start chattering in their strange babble. Tom sends his sons out around them, and, at his signal, they all stands up and fills them full of arrows. One of the horses got stuck so bad, they had to kill it, too. But the others, hey, they got two free horses just like that."

The Circissan had his eyes closed as though in pain.

"Tom figures," the farmer continued, "they'd come through the forest on the west road and wasn't aware there was any towns nearby."

"We could take him into town," said the boy. "Then we'd have something to show folks."

The farmers looked at each other. "Maybe," Billet allowed. "Might get free drinks that way."

The Circissan had his eyes open again, watching me.

There was a sudden, high-pitched whinny from the trees on our left. The farmers and boy disappeared. I turned in the direction of the sound and waited. A saddled horse without a rider came out of the woods, went up to the Circissan, and

nuzzled him. The others reappeared.

"Well," said the unarmed farmer, "at least we got his horse."

All eyes shifted to me.

I shrugged. "I've no need for a horse. I'm happy with his clothes—and sword."

"Thank ye," said Billet. "It's been hard plowing with no animal."

The farmers found rope on the horse, tied the Circissan's hands in front of him, and then, making a long leash, tied the other end to the saddle. The unarmed farmer held the horse while the youth climbed on.

Just as we started out, Billet stuck out his hand. "My name's Ralph."

I shifted the unsheathed sword to my other hand. "Call me Thomas."

"This here's Chuck, my son, and Lew, my brother."

The others nodded.

"Glad to meet you."

We set out on the trail which grew wider as other paths joined it. When we came to a straight stretch, Chuck kicked the horse to a trot, dragging the Circissan behind. Then he waited while the rest of us came up, and the Circissan pulled himself to his feet. I had pushed my influence with these people as far as it would go. There was nothing I could do.

When we got to the village, the bound man could still pull himself to his feet, though he was much slower than he had been.

We immediately attracted a crowd.

"Lookee," someone called, "Ralph's got a live one."

"How'd ye snag him?" someone else asked.

"Thomas here," Ralph put a hand on my shoulder, "fought him down with swords and took his gear. We just helped tie it up."

Someone threw a stone at the prisoner. I interposed between him and the crowd. Following Ralph's lead, I said, "He's my booty."

The crowd was silent a minute. Then someone yelled, "What do ye plan to do with him?"

"Hang him," somebody else yelled. There was muttered agreement.

"I intend," I said, "to keep him as a body servant, to shine my shoes, carry my burdens, and do those other noisome tasks I'd prefer to leave to someone else."

The crowd hissed disapproval.

I turned to the prisoner who was holding himself erect by sheer defiance. "Do you swear to stay by my side as my servant doing whatever I ask of you to the best of your ability until I release you from your vow?"

"I so swear," said the prisoner.

"Sooner take a snake's oath," came the comment from the crowd.

"He'll slit your throat while you're sleeping."

"That's my problem, isn't it?" I asked.

"It isn't after, when he's cutting the rest of us to bits."

"It doesn't see likely he'll do much of that very soon." I faced the crowd until it quieted. "You can say what you will of his oaths, but I keep mine, and I have sworn to make this man my servant." I turned and cut the prisoner's bonds. "Where can we find an inn?" I asked Ralph.

"Davey's got a place on the left just after the crossroads, but I'm thinking he'll not take you with that in tow."

"Thank you," I said and headed in the direction he indicated.

The crowd stayed silent. The prisoner stumbled along behind me. A stout man with a proprietary air slipped into the inn ahead of us and was waiting with a self-righteous demeanor just inside the door. From his baleful look, it seemed likely he would say no if I asked for a room. I went instead to the bar where a young woman served drinks.

"I'd like ale for myself and my companion."

Self-Righteous, the innkeeper as I had guessed, bustled up. "We don't serve his kind here."

It was just as well. The prisoner couldn't keep his feet much longer. "Well then, we wish a room. I've had a long day fighting and all—" I raised the sword in my hand for emphasis. "—and I'm getting rather tired."

Conflicting emotions ran across the innkeeper's face. He settled on greed. "Rooms here run five gold pieces a night."

I opened the purse hanging from my belt, picked out three gold pieces, and dropped them into the innkeeper's open palm. The innkeeper studied the money a second before closing his fingers and leading the way upstairs.

The prisoner leaned heavily against the wall as we followed but did not collapse until the innkeeper left our room. I caught him with my free arm, dropped my sword, and lowered him gently to the floor. I stripped the sheets from the bed, made them into a pallet, and laid him on it.

When the innkeeper returned with the food and washing water I had requested, he said, "There'll be an extra charge for getting blood on the linens."

I smiled pleasantly. "Why don't we settle that when I leave?"

"Ye need new linen for your own bed."

"Why so I do," I said in mock surprise.

The innkeeper grunted and left.

The prisoner opened his eyes, watching me.

"This will hurt a little," I said.

The prisoner said nothing, only closing his eyes while I washed the worst of his wounds. When that was done, I fed us both. Then I went downstairs for a quick drink. The others at the bar glowered and talked of fancy swordsmen who protected foxes from chickens. I ignored them, but when I went back upstairs, I polished both swords before sleeping.

In the morning, I woke with a naked, wounded and feverish man lying in a nest of linen on the floor beside my bed. There was a sheathed sword in my bed and a bare sword on the floor. Evidently, my companion had lost his scabbard. I got up, strapped on my sword, then went into the hall and downstairs to find food.

"Ye be a fool," said the woman who served me, "leaving him

upstairs with a sword. Ye'll go back to find it aimed at your throat."

"Thank you for your concern," I said.

The man was babbling in a strange language when I returned to the room. I stayed at his side, giving him water when he was thirsty and calming him as well as I could when evil dreams seized him.

As the sun neared the horizon, the fever of the man I had been tending broke, and he fell into a deep sleep. I left a knife by his side and went to trade a sword for clothes. I had no need for two swords, and my companion certainly needed clothes more than a sword.

The innkeeper directed me, suddenly, to a blacksmith's shop.

The blacksmith looked the sword over. "The market for swords is depressed since yesterday."

"'Tis a good sword."

"I'll give ye four gold pieces for it."

I sighed. "Perhaps that is a fair price for most swords, but I would rather keep this blade for sentiment than let it go for such a sum. Ten."

The blacksmith harrumphed. "Six."

If he was going up two gold pieces at a time, I had started much too low. "Nine is as low as I can go," I said in a hopeless tone. I started to take the sword back.

"Eight," said the blacksmith too eagerly, and, from the way I looked at him, he could tell I had caught his over-eagerness. "Eight and three... Oh, all right, nine."

I had definitely started too low. If I had started at twenty, he likely would have thought nine a clever bargain. Now he acted as though I were cheating him. "Be sure it finds a good home," I said.

After I left the blacksmith, I found the tailor and asked if he had any ready-made clothes. He looked me over. "I can see why ye'd want new clothes, but shouldn't ye buy some too for what ye be traveling with?"

I had not been aware that my own clothing was so out of fashion.

I bought two outfits and headed back to the inn. As I passed a space between two houses, dark in the waning light, a movement at the edge of my vision warned me, and I whirled suddenly, dropping the clothes as I drew my remaining sword. A burly man with a stout club stood in the gap, staring at me in terror.

"Did you wish to speak with me?" I asked.

"I—I..." Trying to back away the man came up against a building.

I lowered my sword slightly. "My good man, if you have nothing more intelligible to say, this conversation—"

The man swung his club to knock my sword aside. I sidestepped, turned, and brought the flat of the sword hard against the back of his head. Already off-balance, he fell heavily to the ground. I kicked the club away from his outstretched hand, then, when he did not move, knelt down to check his breathing.

When I stood again, a small gaggle of people had gathered. They looked hostile and uncertain, ready to run or fight if I made any sudden moves. I wondered if the man were a friend of theirs.

"This gentleman," I said, "appears to have had rather too much to drink. Can any of you help him to a suitable place to sleep it off?"

Without speaking, two men stepped warily forward, picked the man up, and dragged him off.

I cautiously sheathed my sword, then bent and picked up the clothing I had dropped in the skirmish. When I stood again, the bystanders had dispersed.

I had been headed somewhere. I had bought two outfits, one for myself and one for.... I kept walking the way I had been going, watching for places likely to have information.

An inn's sign gave a reasonable starting place. As I walked in, there was a sudden hostile hush. People froze with beer mugs in mid-air, then after a second or two, brought them to their lips or set them down.

It was an interesting performance. I recognized three men who had been watching me in the street. There were no friendly looking faces. Whoever I had defeated must be a local celebrity, I decided. If nothing developed, I would move on after a drink or two.

As I walked toward the bar, a stout man who had been talking to one of the watchers came up to me. "Ye cannot be served till ye have paid for your room tonight."

The silence took on a listening quality.

"I haven't gone to my room this evening."

"Your friend," the innkeeper spat it like a swear word, "is still up there."

My friend sounded even more unpopular than I. "Very well. What did you say a room was?"

The innkeeper shot a quick glance at the man he'd been talking with, looked back at me. "One gold piece."

I gave him the gold and continued to the bar. The room stayed silent, and some people left. I had only one drink. I was curious about this friend of mine. Going upstairs, I decided to try the doors in the order I came to them. There seemed no way to figure which was mine. The first room I tried was empty. The second held two people locked in close embrace, and I closed the door quickly before they noticed me. Omitting questions of privacy, it seemed unlikely that my friend—the word had been singular—was so intimate with anyone here. Opening the door of the third room, I found a battered man lying naked on a pallet. He was fingering a knife and tensed as I looked in. I paused.

He set the knife down. "I thought you might be someone else."

"I'm not," I said stepping into the room.

The man was watching me as though I were a strange animal.

"I brought you a suit of clothes," I said.

"Anything else?" The sarcasm in his voice seemed to echo the hostility downstairs.

"Such as?"

"You really don't remember, do you?"

"Remember what?"

"Little things. In nine days you are to marry the princess of Malva. If you do not show, this country will soon be at war with both Malva and Circissa. Further, you have arranged things so if you tell the locals you are their prince, they will not believe you."

"What do you suggest I do about it?"

"I? I can suggest nothing. I am sworn to serve you in exchange for my miserable life, but I am sworn first to serve Circissa. I will shine your boots and carry your baggage, but I will never help you out of your dilemma. In a year, the king of Circissa will rule this land."

There was much passion in the man's oration, but it did not seem useful. I had no idea who this princess was or how to reach her. The locals were, as he implied, discouragingly hostile. "Will you attempt to stop me if I head toward the wedding?"

"I am sworn not to harm you, but I cannot help you return to the capitol."

"Neutrality itself is quite refreshing. I seem to be rather unpopular in this area."

"You rescued me."

"Yes?"

"If you wish, you can regain your popularity by turning me over to them."

I frowned at his tone. "Do you wish me to do that?"

His expression grew wary, but all he answered was, "No."

I went downstairs to get us supper.

When I woke in the morning, the wounded man in the room with me said, "We had better go today. They'll find courage to kill us both if we don't."

I did not like the idea of running away, and, after looking him over, I said, "I think we'll wait. Travel would as likely kill you as anything they could do."

"When we do leave," he said, "the odds are in my favor that you'll go in the wrong direction and end up where no one could possibly recognize you."

I waited, but he said nothing more.

In the evening, when I went down to get supper, the innkeeper said, "If you don't leave immediately, I'll need the price of another night's lodging."

"And how much did you say that was?"

The innkeeper wrung his hands together. "Five silver pieces."

I counted them out.

Looking miserable, the innkeeper took the money.

In the morning, the battered-looking man in the room with me said, "We have to leave today."

"And where should we go?"

"I am unable to tell you that."

An unmentionable destination. It sounded interesting. "Very well," I said.

After breakfast, we walking out into the sunshine of what promised to be a beautiful day. We headed down the main street of town, though it was not much of a street, mere dirt with not even a pretense of gravel to keep the dust down. My companion limped, and I wondered if I should have said no to the idea of travel. The natives, though, from their sidelong glances, were delighted to have us go. The street sloped down to a river with forest on the other side. A ferry was drawn up on our bank.

When he saw us coming, the ferryman jumped to his feet. "The water's too high and fast. I can't take you across. It's too risky."

The ferryman's words were given lie by a thick mud layer between the vegetation and the water. Further, while the road continued on the other side, there was no path along the river on our side. I did not relish the thought of slogging through river mud and dead fish.

I stepped to the edge of the river and sighted along the bank. "Those

two trees.... If we cut them right, we wouldn't even have to work them to get a bridge. Of course, it wouldn't be permanent, liable to sweep away in the next flood. Your raft looks sturdy though, and you could see it coming." I looked at the ferryman. "I'd hate to inconvenience you."

The ferryman looked at the trees and back at me. He squinted at the sun. Finally he said, "If I did take you across, I'd have to charge extra for the danger."

"Really?"

He glanced quickly at my companion and away. "Three silver pieces," he said tightly.

I was clearly out of bargaining room. I counted out the coins and put one in the ferryman's hand. "The rest after we cross."

Grudgingly, the ferryman climbed aboard and poled us across.

I paid him and walked into the woods whistling. The sun was warm, the trees' shade delightfully cool. But my companion limped rather badly. After a time I stopped for a break on a green bank beside the path. My companion dropped heavily onto the grass beside me.

"It appears you should not walk far."

He grunted.

"The problem is, we have neither food nor water."

"I'm not hungry."

"Nor thirsty either?"

He said nothing.

I looked around at the woods. "There is plenty of wood. I could make you a litter, though I fear—"

"No," he shouted, pulling himself to his feet.

I followed him down the path.

In the morning when my hooknosed companion showed no signs of wanting to leave our cold waterless camp, I helped him to his feet, and started off down the road, down because it was easiest. My companion would not help me choose.

In late afternoon, my companion and I topped a rise and spread out before us was a fair-sized village surrounded by neat farms. Along its

far edge was a river. I made for the nearest inn.

The innkeeper was a jolly dame who seemed delighted to have us in her establishment. "We don't get much traffic from upstream," she said. "Of course, the rapids make it impossible for boats, but, even from gentlemen such as yourselves, there's not much business."

Though she was clearly hunting a story, I said nothing.

"Well then," she said after a long pause, "you're right. It's not for the likes of me to know the doings of such as yourself."

She looked so forlorn at the loss of a good tale that I said, "We're headed down river."

She laughed. "All right. Still, it's a long walk to the capitol, if that's where you're going. Bill's got a boat at the wharf he'll be taking out tomorrow morning. It's mainly vegetables, furs, and such-like he carries, but you can ask if he'll take passengers. If you like, I can wake you early."

My companion, who seemed determined to walk as far as I, was pale and limping badly. A boat was a good idea. "Where did you say he's tied up?"

"It's the only boat."

I nodded and told my companion to wait until I got back. Tight-lipped, he merely shook his head and followed. It seemed odd that he didn't say why he wanted to come. Then I realized he was probably a mute.

The boat was a weather-stained barge filled with mounds of this and that, some of them covered with canvas. Bill was a grizzled old man who greeted my request for space with suspicion. "It's true I have a bit more room for cargo, but passengers are not like vegetables lying in one spot and not disturbing things."

"Neither can vegetables pole when you need a bit of rest."

Bill shuffled his feet, considering. "How far are you going?"

"Tis said you travel as far as the capitol."

"Well, if you're here an hour after sunrise, but I'll not wait."

In the morning, I awoke with the eyes of the other man in the room on me. We dressed and went downstairs.

"I beg you pardon, good sirs," the innkeeper cried, "I entirely forgot. Please forgive me."

"Well..."

"Perhaps he waited," she said running out of the inn.

I followed.

"He's still there."

I ran in the direction she indicated, my companion following. When we got to the riverbank, the man in the boat said, "You promised an hour, and here it's almost two hours gone."

"Blame my weary head and the innkeeper's forgetfulness, though I do not know if even the innkeeper's yell could wake me. I beg forgiveness."

The boatman grumbled and growled and soon we were off. "You said you'd pole," he said when we reached midstream.

"Very well."

After a while, the boatman harumphed. "That's not a bad hand you have," he conceded. "Usually through here, I let her drift for I cannot walk her faster than she'll float by herself. You going to the wedding?"

"We're going downstream."

"Well, this ain't the boat to take you. I figure to get there the day after. You keep poling like that, we might get there that evening, but it'll be after the festivities. I'm hoping the fool merchants will have sold everything so I can get enough to retire. I'm getting too old for this."

"I travel daylight only, tie up to tie up. We got a choice of tie ups down to Fairmead, making it in two or three days, but after that, it's Dolman, Rumford, Shipperly, and the capitol, a full day's run 'tween each of them."

"Sounds like a nice little voyage."

"Ha," said the boatman. "Can't make any money though. Just enough to pole upstream and try again." He stared at the water for a

while, then turned back to watch me work. "Bet you two have had exciting adventures."

"None to speak of."

"Come now, with you carrying a fine sword, your companion all battered."

"I'm sure poling a boat is more interesting. You've been traveling the river a good while. Don't you know any exciting tales?"

"Well, you ever hear about Duke Rumford's ghost?"

"Not that I remember."

At Fairmead's dock, I helped load and unload freight with the boatman the shore people called Bill. Bill said the work would ease my sore muscles.

"I should have told you that first day when you were poling like there was no tomorrow you were setting yourself up for aches and pains. Most passengers, though, they try stealing the produce, sleeping on the furs. I'm not used to people wanting to help. And, beg your pardon, it's young lords like yourself that are often the worst. Arms feel better?"

I stretched. "Not too bad."

"Come on, I'll get you a beer."

With the excise man, a merchant, his helper, and the hooknosed man from the boat, we walked to a tavern. While we waited for our orders, the excise man said, "You heard the latest from the capitol?"

"Haven't heard anything except crop problems and water birds," said Bill.

The excise man looked at me, and I shook my head.

He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "A fellow came by two days ago. I don't know how reliable he was. None of us ever saw him before. But he said the prince has disappeared."

"Kidnapped?" asked Bill in awe.

"Nobody knows. But this fellow said the prince's picture in the palace hasn't changed, so he can't be hurt."

Bill frowned. "What does the king say?"

The excise man spread his hands. "He didn't know."

The others began giving their opinions loudly, and the conversation ended with the merchant's, "He probably made it up to get free beer." But though everyone agreed, they seemed uneasy.

At Dolman, as we finished unloading, a freight handler said, "If I was you, I'd turn around and head back upstream."

"What's happened?" the man they called Bill asked anxiously.

"Prince Edward's disappeared. The king's wizards say he's not hurt, and the king of Malva's decided he ran off to avoid marrying his daughter." The man shook his head. "It's going to be a real mess if the prince doesn't show up for the wedding."

At Rumford, several people said the king of Malva was assembling troops on the border in case the prince had not shown up in two days. "Of course," said the excise man, "we all know the prince would get back if he could, but...." He shook his head.

As we unloaded at Shipperly, Bill, the boatman, said, "Well, that's it. We tie up here tonight, and tomorrow we pole into the capitol, or what's left of it. If I was you and didn't have a fool boat to mess with, I'd head overland, back to where you got on. Can't be anything but trouble downstream if what everybody says about the prince is true."

The excise man, flanked by two guards, came up then and said, "Two silver pieces."

"Two silver," shrieked Bill, "I'm only getting a gold and my cost.... I shouldn't have to pay any. King's rules—"

"Two silvers," repeated the official.

"At most it's only a copper or two."

The official nodded to a guard. The guard started toward Bill pounding one fist into his other hand as though ready to beat the money out of Bill.

I stepped between Bill and the guard. "He didn't unload two silvers' worth."

The excise man hesitated momentarily, and I knew I was right. Then he signaled the other guard toward us.

I drew my sword. "No further."

Our silent companion crouched on Bill's far side, his knife at ready.

"Give them a copper," I told Bill.

Bill fumbled in his pouch and came up with three. "It's more'n I owe, but I'll pay to keep the peace."

The excise man looked at us disdainfully. "It's not enough."

The guards drew their swords. I attacked. The guard closest to me parried and lunged with force but no accuracy. I disengaged and riposted while he was still recovering, running him through the shoulder. He dropped his sword and went to his knees, clutching at the wound. I kicked his sword into the water.

"Guards," yelled the excise man backing away.

"Silence," I hissed, but reinforcements were already coming onto the wharf.

"Get in the boat," said Bill from behind me. I heard the mooring ropes being pulled loose and landing in its bottom.

I headed toward our companion who was circling the other guard, trying to find an opening for his knife against the guard's sword. Seeing me coming, the guard retreated up the dock. I waved our companion into the moving boat, then glanced back. The reinforcements had stopped half way down the wharf. I threw my sword into the boat and dived in after.

"They'll kill us," wailed Bill. "Are you all right?"

"What kind of boats do they have?"

"Fast. I wish you'd skewered that damn official. He's always like that, worse every time."

I looked at the crowd milling on the end of the dock. "Looks like it's taking a while to organize pursuit."

"Attacking a king's officer, we'll rot in jail—if they don't exe-

cute us first. I bet they'll say we wouldn't pay anything. They'll take the boat."

I sat down and wiped the blood off my sword, then stood and looked again. "I don't think they're following."

"Doesn't matter. It's foggy at night, and I've no lights. We'll be smashed to kindling. Are you sure?"

I looked forward and back. "If they wait any longer, they'll have a hard time picking us out of the traffic."

"That's true. I'll have to retire. Can't stop there again." Then Bill brightened. "You know, we might make it in time for the wedding after all. There's bound to be free food."

"See if you can get us toward the other bank, I think they're putting out a boat." It was hard to see in the mist rising from the river.

"I knew it," Bill moaned.

Beside me, our hooknosed companion stood to watch.

I went forward. "Let me steer."

"If we can get that string of barges between us and them, they might not see us right away."

"We'll be hard to spot in the mist, too."

We lost sight of the city's boat as we maneuvered.

"Damn," said Bill, still complaining. "Now we don't know whether we're losing or gaining."

It was hard steering in the foggy dark. The sound of water riffing against obstacles, the occasional mist-blurred boat's light, and the smell of mud and rotting vegetation were my only clues of where other boats, snags, and sandbars might be. I kept us close to the high dark line of the shore, away from boats riding the current. The bottom of the boat scraped sand and hung. I found the bar and pushed the pole directly into it. The boat hesitated, then, with a gritty protest, slowly began moving again. Something dark appeared directly in front of us, and I pushed the boat hard to the side. There was a sharp crack. For an instant I thought I had broken the pole. Then I felt the boat shudder as it fought whatever had struck us. I found the

dark snag, and, laying the pole aside, pushed against it with my hands. The old man in the boat came to the side and pushed me. I let the current take us then, steering only to keep away from the dark line of the bank and the other boats' lights.

"I think we lost them," said the old man. "I'll pole a while. You sleep."

I woke with sunrise in my eyes and the soft lap of water against a boat's hull in my ears. A man sat next to me fingering a knife. An old man stood in the boat's prow, holding a pole and staring at the water. My arms were sore and my hands blistered. I stood carefully. The rest of my body seemed undamaged.

As I walked up to him, the old man said, "I didn't want to wake you. I figured it out. They'll have guards waiting. They got a wizard in Shipperly now with a crystal ball hooked into the palace. Course they should be tending to other things, but the king takes care of his own. Normally I'd say that's a good thing, of course."

"Of course," I said, letting my voice match the old man's ironic tone.

"You should jump overboard. They know me, but they might not recognize you from just that skirmish."

I shook my head. I wouldn't run away.

The other man in the boat came forward, his right hand hidden by his body. As he came up to us, he started to jab toward the old man's back. I smashed into him, knocking him backward over a pile of furs. I chopped on his arm, and he dropped the knife.

"Oh, shit," said the old man.

"Get some rope." Then I asked the man, "What's the matter with you?"

But he didn't say anything.

Together we tied him up while the boat drifted.

By the time we finished, people on two boats were yelling at us to back off. I took the pole and pushed us off the nearer boat, bringing us

closer to the other. Before I won free, we scraped its hull, bringing raised fists and curses.

When we were clear again, the old man asked, "How long have you two known each other?"

I shrugged.

"You know, the only time I seen him really happy was attacking the guard last night. Guess it doesn't matter now though. Even if you jumped out, somebody'd probably see you, haul you in, and put you back."

The landscape, the rising outline of the city, the dense knot of river traffic felt familiar, but I had no time to look. I had to steer constantly to avoid other boats. Some were ocean schooners that could capsize us without even noticing.

The old man directed me to the docks. As we came up on a pier, about a dozen uniformed men walked onto it. They were casual, as though expecting no trouble, but the odds were strongly in their favor.

"Yep," said the old man, "that's more'n usual. Our goose is cooked for sure. Too bad, I would like to have seen the wedding."

One of the guards took the rope the old man threw and snugged it around a piling.

"Stand forward," said the captain, and the two of us climbed out of the boat. "Where's the third one?" Then he looked again and an expression of incredulous happiness spread across his face. "My lord." He went down on one knee.

The old man stared at me open-mouthed. "I should have known. I should have known. They were chasing you, weren't they? And that's one you captured, isn't it?"

It was pleasant having everyone admire me, but the captain kneeling in front of me was awkward. I put my hands on his shoulders. "Arise."

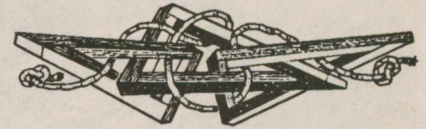
The captain stood. There were tears on his face. "It's good to have you back, sire. We were all so worried.... Excuse me, I'm babbling. Do you wish to stay incognito until we get to the palace?"

"That might be best, and we should take the others with us."

The captain gave the necessary orders.

"Looks like I'm going to the wedding after all," said the old man.

And we went up the hill to the castle. ■



ILLUSTRATORS IN THIS ISSUE

Hilary Barta illustrates and writes for such comics as *Plastic Man*, *What The—?!*, and *Grateful Dead Comix*. He has been doing so for years. He lives in Chicago. **Charles Dougherty** is a graphic artist in Philadelphia. One of his breaks came from being a winner in the L. Ron Hubbard Illustrators of The Future Contest. **Kelly Faltermayer** first came to public notice in L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of The Future Contest a few years ago. Born in Latin America, he works in advertising art for a Texas newspaper. **Peter H. Francis** is a Canadian, living with his wife and cat in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He is a winner in the L. Ron Hubbard Illustrators contest. He works as a layout artist and ad designer for the telephone company, and is also doing work for several small press and professional magazines. **Bob Hobbs** lives in Rhode Island, and is an emerging talent in illustration. Like many of our artists in this issue, he first came to public attention in the L. Ron Hubbard Illustrators of The Future Contest. **Judith Holman** has an MFA, but refuses to give details. She chucked all that to illustrate science fiction, and is currently doing work for *Pulphouse* and *Haunts*, as well as the Brian Lumley book, *The Transition of Titus Crow*. She recently had a nearly sold out show at Philcon, with an award for the book cover. **Peggy Ranson** is a graphic artist and designer in New Orleans. She is a past finalist in L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of The Future Contest, and was nominated for the Hugo Awards in Fan Art in 1991 and 1992.

He didn't want to die, though he had been bred for it



THE TOOLMAN

Valerie J. Freireich

Illustrations by Kelly Faltermayer

Alexander Greeneyes wanted to live, but he was hungry. Those conflicting realizations made him hesitate outside the toolman entrance to Sanda Brauna's apartment. Her security routines would be watching, together with Center's automatic system, evaluating even this slight hesitation. Eventually he would no longer be able to hide his flare. He kept his head high, smiled and touched the panel, opening the door. The time

when he would be put down approached, but it hadn't arrived yet.

Ting Wheeling, Sanda's latest acquisition from the toolman farm, stepped down from the guardian station as Alexander entered. "She's in the sun room." Ting's high-pitched voice combined with his bulky physique to render him deceptively non-threatening. "I'll escort you."

Alexander bowed at Ting with mock solemnity and didn't protest the

official escort through the familiar apartment. "How is she today?" Alexander asked.

Ting turned around, his plain face made graceful by its strength in the careful esthetic of toolmen/guardians. He observed Alexander warily, as though anticipating a wild attack. "Elector Brauna is anxious to see you, probe."

"Wonderful." Sanda was possibly watching, so Alexander said nothing

Illustrations copyright © 1993, Kelly Faltermayer. All rights reserved.

Story copyright © 1993, Valerie J. Freireich. All rights reserved.

more. Lately, she watched him compulsively. He restrained a shiver, knowing only one reason for the change.

Ting led the way through the apartment, each step as measured as that of an automaton, passing every closed internal door as if an enemy would emerge should he be less conscientious. His right hand rested on his gun. Idly, Alexander said, "I don't encroach on your duties. Why do you dislike me?"

Ting stiffened further, but didn't respond. Dull, like all guardians, Alexander thought: a sub with muscles. Ting moved to the left as they entered the sun room, but stayed inside, near the door. Alexander took the path to Sanda, who was reclining in her favorite lounging chair.

The immense sun room was a hothouse—all glass except for the floor and the single wall shared with the rest of the apartment. The apartment was on a high outer rim of the Center complex and no part of the great, enclosed city was visible through the windows. The sun room could have been an isolated hanging garden. Sanda kept two toolmen/subs whose sole duty was to maintain the foliage, under her supervision—her route to the Elector's robes had been through botany. The rich odor of the damp soil and the fresh scent of the vegetation were a profound change from the olfactory sameness of most of Center, the artificial enclave on Sucre which was the capitol of the Polite Harmony of Worlds. This was particularly so just after the vegetation had been watered, Sanda's favorite time to visit the place.

She looked up from a replay of his meeting with the Neulanders, an obvious indication of what they would discuss. As always, it was a shock to see himself—hanging in midair and much reduced in size—on a replay display. He seemed to be a shell, falsely important or deceptively meaningless, but in either case, not real. Sanda ordered the replay off.

"Come here." Her voice was hard.

In addition to her lounge, there was a table with four chairs and a multipurpose desk-set in the sun

room's small central clearing, but Sanda gestured at the ground beside her. The sun room floor was entirely bare dirt, hardpacked in places to make a path, but occasionally muddy and always uneven underfoot. Too aware that the seeming naturalism was a planned effect, Alexander had grown to dislike the room. It was Sanda's favorite. He sat awkwardly on the bare soil with his raised knees between him and the lounge. It was necessary to look up at Sanda.

Her hair was white and shone in the dappled sunlight like a halo. Its color did not indicate age; Sanda appeared to be just past adolescence, although no one could have risen to her position and still been truly young. As a result of the Electors' special medical attention, she seemed younger than Alexander, but she'd entered the long middle age of standard humans many decades earlier and was nearly three times his age. The thought was bitter.

"Do you like what you're seeing?" she asked sharply.

"As always." He didn't avert his eyes, though she disliked being surveyed.

"You should smile when you compliment a woman. Haven't I taught you anything at all?"

"I'm too distraught," he said, smiling. "Are you going to have me put down for talking to the Neulanders? Am I being returned to general services? Will Ting Wheeling shoot me in the back? Have mercy, Elector. I seek some guidance here."

She laughed, but the sound was sour. "Sometimes, Alex, I think I keep your service more for your clever talk than your skill as a probe." She sighed. "Report."

Alexander moved his gaze sideways, to where Ting Wheeling guarded the door, then back. Sanda's mouth tightened, but she did not order Ting outside, so Alexander began. "Delegate Huana was in conversation with the two aspirants from Neuland. He noticed me and asked me to join them."

Elector Brauna raised her hand. Alexander immediately stopped speaking. "I won't bother to ask why you approached Huana's group to

begin with, knowing how likely he is to include you in a discussion," she said sternly, "but after you were there, you used your genetically enhanced probe abilities to predict that the Republic of Neuland won't be admitted to the Harmony." She leaned forward. "Alex. Was this a facilitation?"

"No." He drained the tension from his tone before continuing. "I would never perform a facilitation without orders, Elector Brauna. While a transcript recital might have that appearance, in context, given the audience with whom I was interacting, this was *not* a facilitation. Neuland's admission to the Harmony of Worlds was neither promoted nor otherwise affected." He looked into her eyes and nodded slightly.

She studied him. He smiled and cursed the hunger which had driven him to purposely stretch toolman / probe proprieties in order to take his mind away from his appetite. He should have stood inconspicuously against a wall, like a living statue eavesdropping on the delegates' conversations, not joined in their argument.

Eventually, she leaned back in the lounge. "What do you think of the Neulanders?" she asked.

He glanced away, relieved. She believed him. Sucre's cloudless sky extended forever beyond the transparent sun room walls. He looked down at the dusty, black soil. Shadows of the tall foliage fell like bars across his body. The pattern wouldn't move for a long time. Center kept a counterfeit 24 hour daylight schedule, but Sucre, the world on which it was located, had a cycle that was 136 hours long. Sucre's sun hung in the sky like something broken, and Sanda's sun room was one of the few places in Center in which that reality was apparent.

"These Neulanders are odd," he said looking back at her. "Arrogant and crude. Perhaps that is a result of being Altered humans, and pain-free." He shrugged. "Talia Kavisca is in charge, not the man, Pavel Havic. She's the more intelligent; she was made anxious by my presence. It's an open secret that probes survey the Grand Assembly's deliberations for

the Electors." Alexander reviewed the conversation with his eidetic memory, like mental replay tape, trying to find the best justification for his faux pas. "The Neulanders are hiding something, Elector. That's unexceptional in Center. However I suspect their secret is larger than usual. It might have something to do with outsiders—they mentioned the Bril several times. Both appeared totally sincere in their desire to have Neuland join the Harmony, though unfortunately that doesn't carry over into recognition of the Electors and the Neulander Republic remains adamant in refusing to allow the establishment of Jonist Academies. What surprises me is the depth of their belief in their ultimate success. My forecast of their defeat in the voting in the General Assembly had no effect on them whatsoever." He showed his empty palms. "I have no explanation."

She smiled. "But you'd like one. I respect your intuition, Alex, and I'm interested in the Neuland situation. Focus on those Neulanders. I'll have Ahman Grass assign you as their protocol aide. Watch tape from the mechanical snoops for the periods when you can't be present—make them a special project and discover what they're hiding."

"It would help me considerably if I knew the Electors' position on Neuland." Alexander was curious.

She waved a hand in the air. "You don't need that information. Besides, you talk much too freely with your Andian friend, Huana. Look what you did today."

"Understood, Elector." He moved slightly, signaling an uncompleted readiness to rise to his feet.

"No," she said. She put her warm hand on his knee and looked beyond him, to where Ting Wheeling stood. "You can leave," she told the guardian. "Remain at your entrance station or in the public rooms. Alexander will be with me until I say otherwise."

Ting acquiesced, but let his heavy steps echo resentfully as he left the sun room.

"He's jealous of me."

Sanda's smile widened. "I know. I rather enjoy it. Too bad I haven't

been able to make you jealous of him."

"I *am* jealous of him."

"But for the wrong reasons. You wish you were twenty-two again, or were a guardian instead of a probe. I don't think you wish you spent all your time near me." She brought her legs around so that her feet were flat on the ground beside him. She ruffled his close cut hair, then rested her hand on his shoulder. "Alex, are you...well?"

He worried for a moment that she knew his secret, but she couldn't; she had just given him an ongoing assignment. He forced himself to chuckle. "Only tired, Elector. There has been a great deal of activity in the Grand Assembly since the Neulander aspirants arrived. I've spent more time than usual watching replay."

Sanda touched his chin. On cue, he looked up into her eyes. "You've lost four pounds in the last two weeks, Alex, according to my sensors, although you're eating more than usual. I've checked. Your attitude during the same period has become noticeably more reckless—witness this business today. You were thirty three on your last name-day. I think you're in flare, and trying to hide it."

He didn't say anything.

"Well?"

"Was there a question, Elector Brauna?"

She slapped him.

He touched his stinging cheek. She'd never struck him before. Very peculiarly, it felt good, a measure of her emotion.

"I've never liked that mask most probes assume around humans and it's much too late for you to begin wearing one with me," she said. She scrutinized a mass of inconsequential red flowers near her lounge then looked at him directly, her eyes bright and her face strained. "Just tell me—are you in flare?"

"Yes," he whispered, bewildered by his inability to speak at normal volume. He had expected a measure of relief to accompany the admission that he was dying, but he felt none. It only brought his nightmares into the light. He pictured his body collapsing

as his metabolism became more and more erratic, until he could no longer consume enough calories to sustain himself, even if he ate constantly. Rumors in probe quarters said there would be a slow shriveling of his flesh as his body ate its muscles, accompanied by fever, an alternating restlessness and lethargy, then continual and increasing pain.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Alex, I *am* sorry." She slid down onto her knees and put her arms around him as a mother does for an injured child, tenderly.

He wanted her comfort and for once didn't inspect it for flaws or sincerity. He leaned against her, gathering courage to face his fear. The shadows from the foliage over her shoulder were motionless; there were no breezes inside the sun room unless she ordered them.

Eventually, she moved away.

"Are you going to have me put down to the farm now?" he asked, steeling himself to accept an affirmative without futile protests.

She shook her head. "I should. That's what's proper. If you want it, then I will. But if you don't, you can stay in the apartment with me. Flare can extend for six or eight months, with proper care. Here, you can eat as much as you like, and keep working as long as you're able." She pretended to inspect the sun room. "I'll miss your work, Alexander Greeneyes. You're the best analyst I've ever had." She sighed. "Fifteen years is a considerable time, even for me. I wish they designed you probes for longer service, like guardians and subs."

He said nothing, balanced between gratitude and a despairing fury. He stood, dusting off the pants of his uniform as she watched, still kneeling on the ground.

"The rules say no medical treatment for flare," she added apologetically.

The anger burst out of him. "You're an Elector. You and the other five make the rules; you decide the proper interpretation of Jon Hsu's writings. You decide which research advances order and which furthers decay, who is human and who is not, when a toolman can be made and at

what age he has to die. So don't say 'rules' to me. I know better. And don't say you're sorry—you're the one by whose order I'll die."

Her face hardened as he spoke and become the public mask of Elector Sanda Brauna. "I'll ignore that. Once." She stood up, frowning as if he were an untidy mess inside her room. "Are you staying with me or not?"

He thought of the quick decline and painless death granted at the farm, or the slower, longer one she offered. "I'll stay."

Her smile was hollow. "Good. But no more outbursts. Absolutely none."

Poetry was her favorite occupation, often the best means of communicating emotion to her. Alexander had heard, and therefore memorized, many poems and found meaning in some. He quoted,

*Do not go gentle into that
good night.
Rage, rage against the dying
of the light.*

She hesitated, then laughed and placed her hands up on his shoulders. "I'll miss you, Alex, and not only for your work.

"Probes learn too quickly, see too clearly, and think too well—therefore probes die young, and even so we make very few of you, only a sufficient number to act as our advisors. It isn't fair, but it's necessary. I understand the policy that keeps probes from a longer life. I agree with it. But in this case, I am sorry."

"Yes, Elector." He surveyed her, barely conscious of doing so. Her regret was real and more intense than a superficial inspection showed, but he found it gave no meaning to his impending death, and didn't ease the grief or violent indignation he was not allowed to show. "Thank you."

Her hands slid down his arms. "Was the Neulander woman attractive?"

"Yes, but not exciting." Alexander placed his hands carefully at her waist. Sanda Brauna was familiar and comfortable; in whatever way was possible between toolman and Elector, she even loved him. At her slight

nod, he brought her closer, wanting her warmth despite the overheated atmosphere of the sun room, smelling the violet fragrance of her skin mixed with the scent of more exotic flowers.

Sanda giggled like a young girl. "Those Neulanders might be interesting. Pain free...." She sighed as he kissed her neck. "But then, pain is a most sincere form of pleasure."

Alexander gorged himself the next morning, only slowing the hurried pace of his breakfast as he began his third oversized helping of cheese-filled rolls and eggs. By then, even Elector Lee's two probes, who generally kept to themselves, were openly staring.

"Another long night with Elector Brauna, eh, Greeneyes?" Benjamin Friendly asked, using Alexander's use-name with hearty, if fraudulent, familiarity.

Alexander shrugged. He didn't often play at one-upmanship, but those divisive toolman games were encouraged by the Ahmen and they still went on. "I'm in flare." He gestured at the food.

Benjamin nearly choked.

"When do you leave quarters?" David Runner called, insultingly loud, implying Alexander was deaf as well as dying. Flare gave a probe time to complete his assignments and, for those few in personal service with an Elector, there could be a period of general indulgence before being put down to the farm on Sucre's surface.

"Don't mind him," Benjamin said quickly. "He thinks Sanda Brauna will take his personal service next."

Alexander smiled with perfect condescending disbelief. "I leave today." He spotted the eagerness of some, the detached regret of others and looked down at his plate of food. He had no friends here. "Elector Brauna wants me moved into her apartment this afternoon."

They were stunned. Toolmen lived in toolmen quarters. He finished the meal and returned his plate to a sub attendant while the probes whispered. It was the first time in weeks that he had the satisfaction of feeling full; perhaps it would be the last time, too. That put an edge in his voice as

he said, ostensibly only to Benjamin Friendly, "You know, I was eighteen when Elector Brauna took my service. I've been with her longer than any other probe. Maybe I should make a recommendation as to my successor." His satisfaction at their visible reactions was laced with shame that he hadn't resisted the temptation. With so many eyes upon him, he didn't take the extra roll on the way out, as he had planned.

The tape study room was crowded with probes reviewing data for the daily political report prepared for the Electors and their senior officers, the Ahmen. Around the room, recorded images danced in fast forward. Two toolmen/guardians oversaw it all from the only entrance; everyone else was a probe. Alexander went directly to Daniel Oldest, the librarian, and asked for a displayer position. "I need references to Neuland—general references, not this latest Petition," Alexander said. "I want information on their technology, society and current problems. I could use a helper to sort through the material, if you've got a spare today. One other thing. I'd like to review some old tape on the Bril, particularly anything with a Neulander connection.

Daniel stopped and tilted his head to the side. "Odd request." He scanned his indexes. "Nothing much. Neuland cooperated in the Last War, of course. Even the crossmen did. One Bril ship crashed on Neuland." He shrugged. "A few minor items."

"Whatever you have."

Daniel nodded. "Becky!" he called as his quick fingers keyed in the information request. He didn't look away from his screen, the only one in the room, as he sorted through the vast contents. Alexander wished he could index for himself, but only the probe librarian had a screen.

"Before I see that," Alexander said, "I'd like to replay a portion of yesterday's tape from the lobby of the Grand Assembly."

Daniel looked up from his screen. "Your infamous interaction with the Neulanders?"

Alexander smiled. "Is it already in the reports?"



Daniel laughed. "You? You're constantly watched. The young ones have been waiting, hoping for signs of your flare. I won't be long after you, but they don't covet this position the way they crave personal service with an Elector. Have you for gotten how it is to want success?"

They looked at each other; Alexander didn't answer. He walked to the place Daniel assigned him and the replay he'd requested was already registered on his displayer. He scanned until he found the proper spot, then slowed and watched.

His own voice, speaking to Huana, said, *I estimate that the vote, if taken today, would be 19 worlds against admitting Neuland to the Harmony, 5 abstentions and 12 in favor.*

"You see?" Esteban Huana crowed to the Neulanders. "Altered humans aren't wanted in the Harmony!"

"What does this imitation man know! He's not even human, according to your own Electors." Pavel Havic seemed to step to the front of the group as the replay automatically shifted the monitor displaying the scene in order to focus on a different speaker. The other Neulander, Talia Kaviscu nodded.

"We're Jonists, too," she said. She tossed her auburn hair behind her back with a well-chosen gesture that seemed artificial on replay, but in person had been exactly right. She was a handsome woman, approximately the same age as Elector Brauna. She, as well as Havic, had reeked of perfume. The status line on the replay noted the scent and, unless such strong odors were a Neulander custom, Alexander supposed they were attempting to disguise their emotions from sensors and probes. "We aren't crossmen or alans," Kaviscu continued "and we are not Altered! The real difficulty the Harmony has in admitting Neuland isn't that we've modified our genetic makeup—you do the same, though you conceal it—but the fact that we follow the teachings of Jon Hsu in our own way and don't consent to a shadow government by so-called Electors of Order. The Harmony's Jonism is practically a religion!"

Alexander stopped the replay. Frozen in the replay, Talia Kaviscu stood in mid-gesture, the polished black band of her medical condition monitor glittering on her left wrist like a bracelet instead of the badge of physical difference and inadequacy that it should have been. Alexander skipped ahead in the replay and chose a different, more distant view. The replay continued.

Huana shrugged, turning to Kaviscu. "I wonder if your inability to feel pain affects your attitudes. I've heard disquieting things about Neuland."

Kaviscu raised her arms in an imploring gesture. "Quickships travel between Neuland and the Harmony regularly. Trade benefits us both. Neuland is ahead of you in some biological studies and medical arts. As Jonists the pursuit of knowledge should lead you to us because of what we can contribute to that search." She smiled in the direction of Delegate Huana, though she averted her eyes from him and showed signs of strain. "We need you, too. Alans and crossmen from the Emirates have attacked us before and they're growing stronger. They wouldn't dare bother a member of your Jonist confederation. And who knows? There may be more hostile aliens waiting for us out in the dark, like the Bril. I am as human as you are. Please, delegates, keep open minds."

Kaviscu touched Havic's wrist, stopping him from speaking. From Havic's demeanor, he would have been less conciliatory.

"I'll listen" Huana said. "We all want to be fair." He glanced sideways at Alexander, frowning. "What do you think, Alex? Are Neulanders human?"

Alexander remembered feeling then the corrosive hunger which meant he was too old to bother being coy. He hadn't wanted to contradict his...friend, but their unlikely relationship was based on honesty and a level of mutual respect. "The Electors have not spoken directly and explicitly on this issue," he said slowly on the replay. "As to my own opinion, based on my skills as a probe, I would say yes, Neulanders are human."

The Neulanders smiled grimly,

no doubt uncertain whether they wanted approval from a toolman.

"Why?" Delegate Huana looked troubled.

Alexander's image bowed. "I've studied old tape of the Bril, from the Last War. I couldn't analyze their behavior or anticipate their reactions. They were alien. But Neulanders have only minor differences from standard Harmony patterns, well within normal cultural variation."

Huana nodded thoughtfully. "I see. Clearly a probe's definition of humanity is useless for the Grand Assembly. You would consider most Altered humans and probably all crossmen and alans. Interesting, however."

"And what are the Harmony's criteria?" Kaviscu smiled icily. "The Electors' pronouncement?"

Realtime, Alexander stopped the replay. Are you human, Alex? he thought. Hunger burned in his gut, flaring suddenly like a fire raging out of his control, despite the huge breakfast.

Becky, called Longlegs, arrived a moment later with a print-out list of the additional materials Daniel had made available. Alexander remembered to smile; she was young enough to require encouragement. "Go back. Ask Daniel for anything we have on contacts between Andia and Neuland: trade agreements, historical references, anything."

Deep hunger reawakened Alexander to the passage of time several hours later. An afterimage of hissing Bril obscured his vision for a moment, then he focused on Becky. "What else?"

"You've seen everything Daniel pulled, except what we discarded. You really take it fast! There's more Neuland tape, Daniel said."

"No, that's all I want to assimilate now. I need some real time work. Except, where's the Andian material?"

"There was none, per Daniel. No treaties or paperwork between them, and trade is minimal. No direct commercial routes. No co-history, except through the Polite Harmony generally. He said that if you know of a connection, tell him so he can search

for it, but nothing came up on his indexes." She displayed a tad of skepticism at Daniel's failure.

Alexander stood up, stretching. "Daniel Oldest is an excellent librarian. If he says there's nothing, I believe him."

She stood, too. "Was that a facilitation yesterday or were you just buttering up your usual Andian? Every-one wonders."

Alexander laughed and closed the carrel. "It wasn't a facilitation, but it was close. Don't try anything like it until you're as old as I am." He glanced at her, a pretty girl of fifteen, just up from the farm. There was an unusual degree of residual rapport between them from the teamwork; he enjoyed the sensation. "Do you want to have lunch with me?"

She was unable to hide her embarrassment, or didn't bother. "No," she said ungraciously. Her eyes were cold. "I'm not hungry."

"Flare's not contagious," Alexander said. He purposely let strong irritation show as he added, "Too bad. Elector Brauna always sets a good table and she'll need another probe in her personal service soon." He left before Becky could try to rectify her error.

There was no General Assembly session scheduled for that afternoon, only public committee meetings, so there were no delegates in the Assembly lobby. Alexander rarely bothered surveying anything, like the meetings, that would be summarized on the daily reports; not much that interested Sanda Brauna went on in public. He started toward the Andian delegation offices to discuss Neuland with Delegate Huana, then saw Huana in the corridor, walking toward the offices of the delegation from Chan. Alexander made a pretense of probe reticence, but as usual Huana seemed not to notice or ignore it.

"Alex!" Delegate Huana reached out his hand, but Alexander smoothly moved aside so as to prevent Huana from thoughtlessly embarrassing himself.

"Delegate Huana?" Alexander bowed deeply and took pains to keep warmth from his voice, to sound

properly detached and innocuous, though he avoided probe monotone.

"I hear you're assigned as protocol aide to the Neuland aspirants. Is your involvement with Neulanders a signal from the Electors? I remember how much you helped me when I was new on Andia's delegation, what, ten years ago?"

"Thirteen standard," Alexander corrected him.

Huana stood quite still. He stared at Alexander, alarm in his dark eyes. "How old are you now, Alex?"

Alexander felt rumbling in his stomach as though it was pain and heard it as the ticking of an alarm clock. "Thirty-three."

"I'm sorry, Alex." Huana's voice was a whisper. "Are you still well?"

"Yes, of course, Delegate," he said briskly. "I'm fine." He hoped no other probes had bothered monitoring him now that his flare was public knowledge, since the lie was an embarrassing acknowledgement of emotional weakness. He didn't want anyone's pity, but mostly he didn't want to see indifferent acceptance of his death from this man. He used posture to disengage from Huana, feigning urgency, but felt Huana's merely standard human eyes on him as he hurried away in the direction he'd been going, passing the Andian delegation offices as if they hadn't been his goal.

Two aides of Delegate Valeron Panet of Flute went by.

"...says they can cure anything," one said. "That Rapid Healing Function makes them invulnerable to most accidents—cuts and burns. And those medical monitors!"

"Yes." The other nodded vigorously. "Are they for sale?"

Alexander registered the words while his mind wandered back to that morning. Sanda never slept long, and Alexander had awakened very early as she'd left the bed. "Why are you restless?" he had asked her, still half asleep.

Sanda had returned and sat beside him on the edge of the bed. "Neuland." She brushed her hand across his cheek. "It's a dilemma. Jeroen Lee says they really are ahead in certain aspects of human biological

studies, and he's the only Elector with the competence to evaluate their claim himself. He favors admitting Neuland to the Harmony. But his opinions are eccentric."

"If the Electors issued a ruling that Neuland's entrance into the Harmony furthers order, orthodox delegates would vote as you ruled."

She had smiled and kissed his forehead. "You're not on duty now. It's not your concern." She'd hesitated, then added, "Since you're up, I'll have food sent in. Relax and get some rest."

"I haven't time enough left to spend it relaxing."

She stood up. "I've warned you, Alex, no outbursts and no whining." She smiled gently, however, and said:

The boast of heraldry, the
pomp of power,
And all that beauty, all that
wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike th' inevitable
hour: —
The paths of glory lead but
to the grave.

"Please, Elector, not an Elegy so early in the day."

She'd laughed. "You know my favorite part, Alex? It's the poem's reference to someone named 'Hamden' as if we're supposed to know the name."

He had sat up in the bed and begun fiercely to recite:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet,
nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one
that will do
To swell a progress, start a
scene or two,
Advise the prince: no doubt,
an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politick, cautious, and meticu-
lous;
Full of high sentence, but a
bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost
ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.

Sanda's eyes widened. "You're no fool, Alexander Greeneyes. Don't make me worry that you'll become one."

He'd kicked off the covers, but still felt warm. "Elector. It's only that I've seen the moment of my greatness flicker, and been afraid."

Alexander looked at the empty corridor and slowed his pace. He had nothing to fear anymore. He turned around. As he traversed the Grand Assembly complex to its guest suites he considered the massive medical problems of Neuland's population, most of whom were unable to sense the warning signals of pain. He did not know what created the runaway metabolism of a probe in flare, but he suspected it might be a fairly simple matter to correct, given proper motivation.

The human guard at the residential area's entrance let him pass without a question, barely aware of his presence, seeing only the black uniform he was accustomed to ignoring. Opposite the door to the suite of rooms assigned the Neuland mission was a conspicuous monitor and sensor array. Alexander knocked. A stranger—from the medical condition monitor he wore, a Neulander—answered.

"I've come on behalf of the Electors," Alexander said. He could explain to Sanda that this private meeting was research on her assignment. Perhaps she would believe him.

"Who is it?" he heard Talia Kaviscu ask.

"A toolman, by the uniform," the doorkeeper shouted back.

Kaviscu came to the entrance. She wore a tight fitting white bodysuit, normal Neuland leisure wear. Her medical condition monitor gleamed on her left wrist. "You're the one from yesterday. What do you want? We were promised there would be no surveillance within our own apartment."

"And you believed that?" Alexander smiled. Behind Kaviscu, the doorkeeper frowned, but the aspirant herself was imperturbable. Alexander hoped the same could be said for him. His palms were sweating and his stomach churned, not with hunger, but anxiety.

"Not particularly, but we've taken our own measures to enforce our right to freedom from 'informa-

tion gathering' by the Electors," she said, sneering the name. "If you come in, there's no telling what types of mechanical snoops you'll bring along."

He bowed. "I am deeply insulted, Aspirant Kaviscu," he said in the teasing tone he sometimes used with Sanda Brauna. He imagined Sanda watching this on replay and pitched his voice to hint that the matter was critical. He had to get away from the monitors quickly. "I'm in personal service to Elector Sanda Brauna. I wouldn't require mechanical aids to monitor you. In any event, I have been assigned as your protocol guide by the Electors, should you choose to accept me. Perhaps we could discuss the matter further? Inside?"

She studied him suspiciously. "What the hell? Come inside, probe, but only into the main hall."

He followed her into the suite, a pleasant one that, fortunately, had no windows in the hall. The walls were carpeted in dark fabrics, but the sunstones were set for noon, out of sync with the rest of Center. She closed the door. "Well?"

Several more Neulanders came into the hall, including Pavel Havic. "That toolman? What does he want?" Havic asked Kaviscu, as if Alexander was a speechless cipher.

"The differences between adjusted humans, Altereds, and toolmen are a matter of power, legalities and fine definitions," Alexander said. "It's not even a question of degree of deviation from standard. Your rapid healing—RHF—makes Neulanders much more different genetically from standard humans than probes. Our senses are substantially enhanced, but RHF is new."

"Get out!" Havic pointed at the door, but Kaviscu smiled.

"What's your point?" she asked. She tapped her foot against the Earthwood floor, the sound keeping time with her impatience.

He took a deep breath. This was a plunge off a cliff with no certainty there would be a bottom. "I know about your plan. I'll help you get Neuland admitted to the Harmony at the vote next week if you help me." Before Kaviscu could protest, he held

up a hand. "I'm in flare. That's the term they use for the metabolic changes in probes that precede death. I don't want to die, and I believe you can help me, if you will."

"What will you do for us?" Kaviscu smiled scornfully at Alexander. "You can, at best, help convince one Elector to support Neuland, and the extent of your influence over someone as intransigent as Sanda Brauna remains to be seen. If such an arrangement backfired, Neuland would be at the center of a scandal. No, Alexander Greeneyes—you see, I know you—you'd best leave immediately."

He shook his head, concentrating on his hunger and not the feeling of being unclean. "I know about the Bril."

Kaviscu stared at him; Havic moved threateningly close. The rest of the Neulanders had only puzzled reactions, but at Havic's hand signal, several stepped between Alexander and the door. He'd been right.

"You don't know anything. *What about the Bril?*" Havic asked.

"I know a plan exists. I know it involves the Bril somehow and I'll recognize it once it begins. That's all I need to know."

Havic walked between Alexander and the door. "You've just had a fatal accident."

"Don't underestimate my importance because I'm not a citizen—not legally human," Alexander said calmly. His fear of what he was doing far surpassed any threat these Neulanders could make. "I live with Sanda Brauna. Few probes have the confidence of an Elector as fully as I do. She'll wonder about any accident. I calculate my death after this visit would be enough to ensure Neuland is not admitted under any circumstances, whatever your plan. She'll be suspicious and uncover it."

Talia Kaviscu held up her hand to Havic. "I think he's sincere, and Brauna's personal toolman could be useful." She turned to Alexander. "Just what do you propose to do for us and how can we trust that you'll help Neuland?"

He spoke rapidly, with force, like an Elector giving orders. "I'll promote

Neuland's admittance to the Polite Harmony, and do so in a way that suggests the Electors want Neuland admitted, though my work will necessarily be quite subtle." He studied Kaviscu a moment, willing her to believe that he could do that. He could. "I need to leave this suite very shortly. The longer I'm here the more difficult it will be to explain this visit—assuming you're correct and Elector Brauna isn't watching us at this very moment. For now, accept me publicly as your protocol guide and stay away from other probes as much as possible. However you perfume yourselves or try to disguise your movements, you're as easy for a probe to survey as any human. Most importantly, to get my silence and my help, I want immediate treatment for my medical condition—and that condition is proof of my sincerity. I need you so I can live. Do you understand and agree?"

They stared at him, slow to absorb it all. Kaviscu said, "People will notice when you continue to survive."

"That's my problem; obviously I'll have to leave Sucre. Do you agree?" He looked at the door to hurry her.

She paced across the entrance hall in an excess of nervous energy, then turned to Havic. He nodded. "All right," she said.

He felt the pressure ease in his stomach, then tighten again. "Good. The easiest way to get together will be to pretend I am engaged in a sexual relationship with one of you. Aspirant Kaviscu is the most believable. Please kiss me, Aspirant, then I'll leave."

"Kiss you? You ask a lot." She crossed her arms against her chest, grimacing with distaste.

"It's necessary for the sensors if you are the excuse for the length of this private visit. Meetings without monitors are always regarded with suspicion, but it's not unusual for a probe to be used in this way." He bowed, to emphasize the sham of their supposed relationship, but spoke bitterly. "You can close your eyes and pretend I'm not a toolman."

She glanced toward the other Neulanders. "It's the traitor, not the

toolman, that I don't care to touch." Every gesture indicating profound disgust, she allowed him to hold her. Her lips were cold as death against his. A true Jonist, Alexander told himself, did not believe in omens.

Alexander went directly to Sanda Brauna's apartment. Ting Wheeling was on duty. "She's furious," he said.

"So you can actually start a conversation." Alexander walked past him. Ting caught up in one long stride, grabbed Alexander's shoulder and shoved him roughly to the floor. Alexander broke his fall with his knees and hands; they stung. The jarring impact on the marble floor was like ice water thrown on him unawares. He stared up at Ting, finally seeing a man. The stolid guardian's verbal frustration was as obvious as his indignation. "I apologize," Alexander said.

Ting Wheeling held out his hand to help Alexander to his feet. "You think you're better than everyone."

Without replying, Alexander took Ting's broad hand and got up, hoping Sanda hadn't seen. His fingers ached, so he opened and closed them while Ting observed without contrition. Alexander nodded and Ting escorted him through the apartment in silence.

Sanda was pacing the clearing between the table and her lounge. She stopped and gestured sharply at Ting. "Leave us alone." She studied Alexander. He held a low bow until she resumed pacing. Then he straightened.

His attention was unwillingly drawn by the fragrance of a box of chocolate candy open on the table. He pressed his nails into his palms to distract himself from the insistent hunger the smell aroused.

"Sensors say you had intimate contact with that Neulander woman," Sanda Brauna said. She faced away from him, staring at the tall, slim shape of one of her imported palm trees where it rose through the fleshy underbrush of other exotic vegetation. It was a new plant, the prior one having died. Palms seemed unable to adjust to Sucre's slow pattern of dark and daylight and the Elector refused

to use artificial light in her sun room to help them. "I want to hear verbatim just what happened inside that suite."

He ignored her order for a verbatim report. "I did what you wanted, Elector Brauna." He came a step closer. The sweet chocolate smell flooded his mouth with saliva.

"What? Begin an affair with some Altered aspirant the day I have you move into my apartment?" She spun around.

The Neulanders had been right: there were no working monitors inside their hall. The realization was frightening. He had a choice.

"Compassion is a dangerous emotion, toolman. It evaporates faster than mist in a desert once sympathy is strained. I can have you put down this instant, and what will your Neulander do for you then?"

Alexander surveyed her, dissecting each syllable she spoke, inspecting every movement, but scarcely conscious of the threat, absorbed by Sanda Brauna, woman and Elector. She was dressed formally in her red Elector's robe and the hard color emphasized her anger and authority, but her dark eyes were more injured and saddened than furious. He expanded his survey, examining the sun room as a reflection of its owner's heart. The trunks, stems and leaves of the plants—only rarely was the green accented by flowers, and then modest ones—took on elusive meaning against an enclosing but remote sunshine that seemed brighter in comparison with this nearly monochromatic garden. The graceful vegetation nevertheless held its own secret elegance. The garden was a place for growing shapes and shadows as well as plants. Broad, flat leaves were a counterpoint to delicate ferns. Squat shapes balanced slender ones. Even the awkward dirt floor was a paean to exquisite simplicity. He didn't like the room—it was a puzzle of real and unreal that he couldn't quite comprehend—and yet its mystery was fascinating.

"Answer me, Alex! Report!" She pounded her hand on the tabletop.

On the table, the smooth surface of the chocolates reminded him of the texture of a woman's skin. He looked

back at Sanda Brauna and realized she was precisely the color of the candy. He wanted to embrace her. She was a passion outside his conscious management; she was the woman he craved. "I don't know, Elector. I'm not having an affair with Talia Kaviscu. The contact was only a disguise for my real purpose."

She stood motionless, reining in her emotions and becoming Elector Brauna once again, the red of her robe brilliant against the green. "Well?"

"I offered to perform a facilitation for Neuland and also not to disclose Neuland's plan to aid their entry into the Harmony in exchange for medical treatments to prolong my life."

Sanda Brauna recovered quickly. "Why did you do that?" Her words were precisely controlled, but simultaneously she hand signaled for immediate security. Ting Wheeling, swiftly followed by two other guardians, burst into the sun room, running. They skid to a halt, raising dust that smelled of decay and tickled Alexander's nose. He was lucky she hadn't called for a more immediately lethal response.

Alexander bowed and didn't rise. "I believed it was what the Electors wanted, Elector Brauna, and it seemed to me in the best interests of the Polite Harmony of Worlds." He stared at the brown dirt, unpleasantly reminded of the farm on Sucre.

"It seemed to *you*, probe? Explain."

He looked up.

She gestured at the guardians to hold their positions. Alexander sensed weapons trained on his back. He didn't move. Sweat broke out on his forehead and back. His own stink increased his fear. Speaking quickly, but choosing his words with care, Alexander said, "Elector Brauna, it was clear to me that the Electors would favor having Neuland join the Polite Harmony but for the fact that Neulanders don't acknowledge the authority of Electors of Order to direct society. Even so, it's obvious that Neuland would be an asset to the Harmony. It is an energetic, economically successful world. Jonism values knowledge, and Neuland is ahead of

us in certain areas of scientific study. Furthermore, the Harmony has been expanding in that direction and Neuland is now at our border. Neuland's enemies are the same as our own—the alans, crossmen and other superstitious groups who reject Jonism—but Neuland won't be our buffer should it fall to them, and the Emirates have attacked Neuland twice. Because their Jonism is different, the Electors cannot openly favor admitting Neuland, therefore strictly orthodox worlds won't vote in favor of Neuland because the Electors classify Neulanders as Altered humans. It seemed to me that this impasse would be broken if the Electors gave only covert support to Neuland, support which could be disavowed at any time, particularly so if the Neulanders themselves were unaware of the source of that support."

"So you made a secret agreement to facilitate their admission solely to further the interests of the Harmony?"

"They have a plan, Elector, and they believe it will win them enough votes to succeed. I don't know their plan but I doubt they can achieve sufficient votes without your help." He smiled, feeling the slow shift in her opinion as he spoke. "This furthers your interests, Elector, and incidentally mine. It was too excellent an opportunity to discard. I don't know that I would have been so reckless if I had no personal stake in the outcome, but whatever I may have done in other circumstances, the choice of using this ruse or not is entirely yours. If you wish to proceed, then the plan is established and you no longer need to rely on the hope that Neuland knows what it is doing. If you do not want Neuland in the Harmony, then you can publicly discover their secret manipulation of an Elector's toolman and shatter Neuland's chances of entry. If the Electors are still undecided, then you can put me down, and let events and Neuland's own plan take their course without me." He hesitated. "However you decide, Elector Brauna, I see no advantage whatsoever in killing me just at the moment."

She laughed and clapped her hands. "Stand down," she said to the guardians. "In fact, you can leave."

Alexander felt their departure as her judgment in his favor. "Elector," he said, "do you ever wonder what they think of the bits and pieces they overhear?"

She shook her head and smiled at the odd notion then seated herself in one of the chairs, drumming her long, red nails against the ceramic top of the table, very near the chocolates. "Tell me, why the physical contact with Talia Kaviscu?"

"Entirely for your benefit, Elector. If you wish to run this maneuver without informing the other Electors, then if they later discover it, my alleged involvement with Aspirant Kaviscu gives you the ability to appear personally uninvolved. It's obvious to any probe, including those in personal service to the other Electors, that you would not assent to my engaging in a sexual relationship with anyone but yourself."

She seemed to examine her garden. "This is a truly beautiful plan, Alex. How much is extemporaneous rationalizing and how much did you work out before you met with the Neulanders?"

He spread his hands wide, reminding himself of Delegate Huana's broad gestures. "I don't really know, Elector. My motivations were so confused...I don't know."

"Then I won't ask why you didn't come to me first, before implementing the plan." She stood up and walked to the edge of the clearing, looking out at Sucre's sky. "Your survival is necessary so the Neulanders will believe you're acting alone, but we can hardly pretend not to notice. What do you suggest?"

"I've always wanted to leave Sucre, Elector Brauna."

She laughed and turned back to him. "I'm not sure it would be wise to let you out of my sight. Well, something can be arranged." She came close and touched his arm. "I've had a macabre idea for several years. The farm sometimes clones toolmen who've done exceptionally well. I considered commissioning a duplicate of you. It felt wrong. I didn't do it, but I might have succumbed to the temptation eventually." Her fingers traced a line along his forearm and she took

his hand in hers. "I'm pleased with any plan that includes your survival."

He smelled the chocolate on her breath. It was difficult to think of anything else. He kissed her, since her stance indicated doing so would be allowed. He tasted the chocolate and prolonged the kiss to savor the sensation. His arms circled her back, drawing her against him, then she pushed him gently away and began to pace restlessly again. "I'll convene a special meeting of the Electors," she said. "You'll testify, but you'll say you've been acting under my direct orders all along. If pressed, that business with Kaviscu was solely to throw off her suspicions of Electors' involvement. Understand?"

"Yes." Alexander felt light-headed from both relief and hunger. He reached for the nearest chair and used its back to steady himself.

She stared. "Are you all right?"

"Elector, may I have some of this candy?"

Wordlessly, she slid the box to him, then looked away as, unable to stop himself, he stuffed several pieces into his mouth.

Alexander was asleep in one of the Apartment's smaller guest rooms when Sanda Brauna returned. "What are you doing here?" she demanded, shaking his shoulder. "This isn't my room."

Her subs had transferred his few possessions—extra uniforms, trinkets from various delegates, including an elaborate polychrome Andian vase, and Sanda Brauna's own occasional gifts of jewelry and hardbound books—into a single room at the end of a long hallway, near the extreme edge of her apartment, so he had gone there. "There were no other orders, Elector."

"Do you need orders? I thought you made your own, Alex." She lit the sunstones with a gesture, and he squinted in the glare. "Never mind. The meeting went well. Your plan is adopted, though they don't know it's yours." She smiled at him. "Get up and come to bed."

Yawning, he kicked the cover off and swung his legs to the cold floor.

"Wait." She frowned. "Just move over."

He watched her undress, admiring her slim figure, which was too often hidden by the bulky robes of her office. Sex with her was unexceptional, but her power was its own aphrodisiac.

She glanced around, then dropped her clothing onto a chair. "Stop surveying me."

"I like to look at you, Elector." He turned away though, and moved to the far side of the bed.

She came to bed, but propped herself up with pillows almost to a sitting position. She looked at him. "Once you're well—when the Neulanders cure your flare, as they're certainly competent to do—you can't be a toolman any longer. When it's obvious you aren't dying, the effect on other probes would be catastrophic. Extremely irritating, anyway. Elector Rose suggested that we put you down once the Neuland vote is over."

He touched her bare thigh. She placed her hand over his.

"I opposed the idea quite vehemently. I used words like justice and humanity, concepts we Electors don't consider often enough. Jeroen Lee sided with me. Eventually, they all agreed to let you live, but only if you leave Sucre."

He kissed her cheek. She faced him directly. "When did you become important?" she asked. "I thought you were only clever and comfortable, a useful companion, now suddenly I'm not entirely reasonable on this subject."

"I don't know, Elector, but I'm glad."

"I have a home on Flute, very private. You could stay there." Her tone was youthful in its eagerness and she smiled shyly.

"I'd like that." Alexander lay back with his arms beneath his head, wondering how it would be not to be a toolman, and if the other Electors would really let him live, whatever they told Sanda Brauna.

"I can protect you," she said, as if she had read his mind. She turned off the light.

"Will I be human after this? Will I be your partner, Elector?" He was glad of the dark.

After a moment she said, "You're different from other toolmen and always have been. I've sensed it for a long time." She lay her head on his chest. "I find the thought of having you as a partner appealing."

Pavel Havic approached Alexander openly early the next day. "If you are our protocol guide, probe," he said, "then there are matters to discuss. Talia is waiting for you in our suite."

"This could be handled here in the lobby," Alexander protested for the benefit of listening probes and monitors.

"We don't hold court in public. Go to her, toolman. Do as you're told." He glared at Alexander, either a fine actor or a malicious man enjoying the confrontation.

Alexander bowed, and walked unimpeded to the Neulander suite. Talia Kaviscu answered the door herself. "About time," she said. "Come in."

He walked inside and she shut the door behind him.

"This is Med. Stefan Janus." She indicated a tall, thin man holding a black case. "He needs a blood and tissue sample."

Janus stepped forward with a guardian's precision; all of the Neulanders moved carefully, like soldiers in a minefield. Janus removed a white, cuff-shaped instrument from his case. "Roll up your sleeve and extend your arm."

Alexander did as he was directed, calmed by the medic's professional manner.

"What do you have for us?" Talia Kaviscu demanded.

"I'll start with Huana," Alexander said. "I'll begin by...." He stopped, gasping and struggling not to jerk his arm away from the medic. "What are you doing?"

Kaviscu smiled, wet her lips and came closer. Her eyes darted from Alexander's face to his arm and back.

Janus glanced impersonally at him. "Is it unpleasant? I've never had a patient capable of experiencing pain before. No damage occurs from the procedure." He glanced at a red display on the side of the instrument.

"The sampling is completed." He removed the device.

Alexander grunted, gingerly rubbing the tender flesh of his upper arm. There was no blood in the tiny incision but the medic hadn't covered it with a skinsack. Med. Janus looked at the line of the incision curiously. "I suppose it *will* heal?" he asked. "How long does it take?"

"Never mind that. Whimpers do heal." Kaviscu looked at the door. "Talk, probe."

"I'll begin the facilitation today, before the Assembly session. Don't approach me; I'll be with Delegate Huana. It's entirely plausible that any subtle message the Electors wanted to send to the Grand Assembly would pass to him through me. You already have Amacuro, don't you? Was it a bribe?"

She stared at him. "You do know your trade, don't you, toolman?"

"When do I get the medicine?"

Janus looked up from his device. "I'm not familiar with your condition or physiology, so we'll do it in two treatments, with sampling between them."

Alexander surveyed them and saw an honest intent to keep their bargain. "Hold a reception for the delegates," he ordered Kaviscu. "Invite me here tomorrow to help you plan it." He reached for her. She moved hastily away. "Elector Brauna needs to think she knows what's going on."

"All right." They embraced, very stiffly. "we're recording you, toolman," she said. "Don't try to change your mind."

He bowed. "Aspirant Kaviscu, my goal is to survive." He let himself out of the Neulander suite, glad to leave. He wanted to contemplate the look he'd seen in Kaviscu's eyes when the medic hurt him, a look like a curious but unmoved child watching someone cry. Seeing that, for the first time he feared her.

Delegate Huana approached Alexander in the Assembly lobby as if he had been awaiting his arrival. "Will Elector Brauna come today?" he asked. Electors made occasional visits to the Grand Assembly and one had been announced for the afternoon.

Alexander noted the melancholy in Delegate Huana's tone and posture, but didn't comment. "I'm not certain, Delegate, but my projection is that she will be present. She and the others want to meet the Neulanders informally."

"Good," Huana said. He placed his hand on Alexander's arm, prompting several delegates to glance at them. "It will save me the necessity of an appointment and formal petition."

Alexander moved imperceptibly away; Huana's hand dropped to his side.

For a moment, strong emotion clouded Huana's ability to speak. "Alex, I'm going to ask her permission for you to visit Andia. I inquired this morning, and her assistant, Ahman Young, told me you were in flare. This is no place to...be."

Alexander stared at him.

"Toolman or not, you are my friend," Delegate Huana said in a rush. "I know about that 'farm' on Sucre's surface. I'm confident I can convince Elector Brauna that you deserve better. You'll stay with my family. You've met my wife and daughters, of course, and Andia is only a week away by quickship; I'll try to visit."

"Delegate. This is not necessary."

"No, listen, Alex." He took a deep breath and touched Alexander's arm again, in full view of everyone in the lobby. "It's the right thing; I won't do any less."

Alexander struggled for a proper reserved self-control, then gave up. There were tears in his eyes. He bowed low, surreptitiously wiping them away, and when he straightened, said, "Thank you, Delegate, but I don't believe Elector Brauna will agree."

"I'll insist. I'm not contradicting the Electors' rulings that toolmen are not human. I know your death is irrevocable—but you're still my friend."

"Delegate, you misunderstand." It was difficult to continue. Mutual affection between a probe and an Elector was embarrassing, and in the middle of the lobby of the Grand Assembly of Worlds, it seemed unreal. "Elector Brauna has asked me

to stay with her. She offered me the choice; it wasn't an order. I'm living in her apartment now and I want to stay with her for as long as I have." Staying was his hope of life.

Delegate Huana smiled and clapped Alexander on the back. "Good! She's seemed a cold, manipulative.... Well, I should have known you couldn't be so free if she hadn't allowed it. I'm glad. It makes me feel better about the Electors. Knowing you, I've had doubts about their sophistry regarding toolmen. My offer is unimportant, then."

Tentatively, Alexander touched Huana's hand. "No, Delegate. It's wonderful for me to learn I have a friend."

Huana smiled. "Of course you have a friend." They stared at each other, then Huana nodded and moved off before Alexander remembered to drop hints about Neuland.

All six of the Electors, dressed in their red robes of office and traditional square hats, entered the lobby in a procession. Sanda Brauna walked beside the handsome, enigmatic Jeroen Lee, the youngest and most recently elected of them. Together they were the liberal wing of the Electors. Lee's outspoken views in favor of granting citizenship to Altered humans might have caused Alexander to admire him except Elector Lee conjured up too many memories of the farm. Before being raised up by vote of the Ahmen, Jeroen Lee had been Ahman of Sucre, in charge of the farm and all toolmen, ultimately responsible for those many who disappeared throughout childhood and training, having been deemed 'unsatisfactory.' Twice, as Ahman, Lee had personally interviewed Alexander: on Alexander's name-day and just before Alexander had been sent up to Center. Even now, walking beside Sanda, Elector Lee appeared to notice him. Alexander turned away.

Elector Hild Rose, a chemist, hobbled along behind Lee and Brauna; rumor said she would retire soon. Elector Ica Kurioso frowned at everyone as though the delegates were errant students in the Academy. He was a physicist by training, and

tried to emulate Jon Hsu in other ways, keeping to the traditional in his rulings. Elector Xhasa Kin was more engineer than scientist or politician. He was the tallest, and very dark. He looked the most imposing. Elector Thomas Wu, another physicist, was tiny beside Kin; he often voted with the liberals because he didn't like Kurioso.

Each Elector was followed by a single yellow-robed Ahman assistant, and a toolman/guardian in solid black. Elector Brauna's assistant, Ahman Young, seemed distracted, doubtless considering some Academy problem rather than the Harmony of Worlds. Elector Brauna's assistants tended to be scientists rather than politicians. Ting Wheeling looked imposing. Alexander smiled; they were, in a real-enough way, his family.

Although they arrived together, the Electors and their small entourages quickly dispersed, conversing informally with Delegates. The lobby was a place of shadows and light, purposely designed with secluded alcoves for meeting or negotiation, yet deceptively open in appearance. Alexander began a slow stroll to position himself better in the new dynamics of the room.

He passed only three meters to the left of Sanda Brauna. Ting's eyes briefly met Alexander's without acknowledging him. Elector Brauna was in animated conversation with Delegates Singer, Purl and Hood. She didn't notice him, so he paused and studied her. She looked majestic, and he was struck by the recollection of her nakedness the night before. As if she heard his thoughts, she looked up, saw him and smiled. He bowed with great propriety and moved away. For the first time he wondered how long he would live and if it might be long enough to see Sanda Brauna grow old. Did he want to spend the rest of his extended life with her? If not, what would he do?

A bellowing alarm made Alexander jump. The great hall vibrated with sound and the sunstones flashed black and red. Men stared in confusion. Alexander strained to make sense of

the signal. The sound echoed in his head, deafening in its intensity. He covered his ears.

It stopped. "There has been an attack on the Harmony of Worlds!" The announcer's voice trembled. "The Bril have returned!"

In the lobby, Delegates began a panicked shouting as they struggled to speak into their hand callers and be heard. They had become a crowd which struggled to move although there was no direction to the movement. Alexander looked for Elector Brauna, but she had vanished in the press of bodies and he did not immediately spot her. Delegate Panet was nearby, speaking into his caller. Alexander listened. The bogeyman name of the Bril was being mentioned, both from Panet's set and all around. The Bril had attached a Harmony world; Andia was their victim.

Alexander understood.

His stomach lurched. Frantic to report, he searched and finally discovered Sanda Brauna conferring with Jeroen Lee in a corner alcove. The other Electors, aided by their guardians and Ahmen, joined Lee and Brauna as Alexander struggled closer. The guardians kept the Delegates away.

Alexander pushed against men as he had never done before. The fear-sweat smell, here in the lobby of the Grand Assembly, was terrifying, but he suppressed emotion as he had been trained and ignored the dryness of his mouth, the coldness of his hands and the darting, fearful glances all around him. Men turned and cursed, but he moved forward.

"Elector!" he shouted when he was close enough for her possibly to hear. "Elector Brauna!"

She turned, frowned, shook her head and resumed her intent conversation.

Alexander shoved his way through to the protective circle of guardians. Ting Wheeling grabbed his arm with a tight, firm grip and Alexander could get no closer. Twisting, he kicked at the guardian. It was a mistake. Ting lifted him off his feet and thrust him back into the crowd in a smooth, easy movement that jolted hard those into whom he crashed. He

was too intent on reaching the Elector to feel anything.

"No!" Alexander shouted. "I need to see her! Ahman Young!"

Other guardians glanced at him, then turned away. He was only another toolman.

Ahman Young glanced over as his name was called, frowned at Alexander, then beckoned him closer. Moving warily past Ting, Alexander came. The Electors noticed. Sanda Brauna whispered something to the others and nodded at Ahman Young. Alexander stumbled past him and into the midst of the Electors.

"Elector Brauna!" he panted. "This is it!" He looked back at the crowd, most of whom were still engrossed in the news they were receiving from their callers. Elector Kurioso had his own open. "This is it!" Alexander repeated over the sound of the rumbling mob.

Elector Lee frowned. "Report!" Elector Brauna snapped. "What do you mean?"

"The Neulanders planned this attack. It's their strategy to get into the Harmony—a common enemy. It must be them; all the pieces fit."

They all stared.

"Are you certain, Alexander?" Jeroen Lee sounded calm in the midst of the chaos. "It doesn't seem plausible. The report says Bril."

"Yes, Elector. I'm certain." Alexander felt sick as the meaning of Neuland's plan hit him. "One Bril ship crashed on Neuland in the Last War. They must have used it to engineer a false Bril attack. Somehow. The reports I've overheard said there was only one Bril ship involved at Andia." He turned to Sanda Brauna. "That's why they were so confident, why they had an odd reaction to the mention of the Bril. I'd noticed they were uncomfortable around the Andian delegate, too. Neuland guessed we would want them with us against a Bril attack. Our differences would seem trivial. It's a brilliant plan." He swallowed. "It's evil."

Elector Lee smiled grimly at Elector Kurioso.

"How was it done?" Elector Rose's tone was crisp.

"I don't know yet," Alexander replied. He looked at Sanda Brauna. "Do you have more information?"

She turned to Elector Kurioso. "The quickship that brought the news has more complete data," he said. "They're trying to move the World Delegates inside their Hall, so we can all view it together."

"What about the Neulanders? Shouldn't they be arrested?" Alexander shuddered. He had kissed Talia Kaviscu.

Jeroen Lee sighed, crossed his arms against his chest and looked at each Elector in turn. "They only had the one ship, according to Alexander. Probably, it has already been destroyed—by our forces or by them to rid themselves of the evidence. The advantages of admitting Neuland to the Harmony still exist if we can keep our knowledge of the plan secret."

"What a hold we'd have on them!" Hild Rose grinned.

"We could force them to accept an Academy," Kurioso said.

Stunned, Alexander saw their decision. "They attacked the Harmony!"

"We are not the government of the Harmony," Elector Rose said, as though she was lecturing. "We are not religious priests blathering about gods and morality. It furthers order to admit Neuland, even now, if it can be done without our explicit approval. Particularly so if we can establish an Academy on Neuland."

"Say nothing, Alex," Elector Brauna said. "You've done excellent work. It's for the Electors to use it now. Go back to the Assembly and listen. Talk to the Neulanders. Get more information."

He scarcely recognized the woman underneath the mask of the Elector. "Yes, Elector Brauna," he said. He hesitated, bowed to them all, then left, feeling their eyes on his back.

The crowd was less agitated. Many Delegates had entered the Hall, and others, even aides not normally permitted inside, were moving in that direction. Alexander spotted the two Neulanders and, because he had been ordered to do so, went to them.

"You were with the Electors." Kaviscu's statement was an accusation.

"I work for Elector Brauna," Alexander said in probe monotone. "She ordered me to be sure to watch the Andian delegation closely. He glanced around. The crowd was thin, but there were still people in the lobby. "The Bril are quite ingenious."

Havic smiled. Alexander's stomach churned with a combination of bile and sickening hunger.

"We'll have something for you soon, Stefan says. Unless you're too worried about Andia." Kaviscu watched him; Havic came close.

He forced an easier smile and controlled an urge to recoil from them, grateful for probe training in flat, innocuous behavior. "The Electors will appreciate Neuland's help during such a dangerous time." He had to convince them that he was on their side. He stopped using probe monotone and said, "I look forward to seeing more of the Harmony. Perhaps I'll even be able to visit Neuland—I feel confident you'll be admitted, soon. There will be a great deal I can tell you about Center, then." He looked around the clearing lobby. "In the meantime, I have work to do, aspirants. Please excuse me." He bowed and went into the Assembly Hall.

All six Electors were on the dais with the Marshall of the Grand Assembly. The Chief Delegates were in their places, surrounded by the junior officials of the delegations. Everyone was whispering, searching for answers. Even probes looked glazed. Alexander moved to a position at the side of the room, where he could see some of the delegations fully and a profile of the rest. His need for food was exacerbated by the stress and he felt weak.

The Marshall sounded a low chime and the room quieted. "A quickship from Andia arrived a short while ago with the news you've all heard. Andia has been attacked by a single Bril battleship, which came in-system shooting. Andia's defenses were inadequate. A commercial liner brought news of the battle and damage, which we'll replay in a moment."

The Hall's splendid acoustics let his voice be heard perfectly, but to Alexander he seemed too loud. "The Bril destroyed without reference to military significance, but fortunately they didn't land. No human captives were taken." A sigh of relief swept the room. "The Bril ship may have been damaged after the first sweep by the kamikaze attack of an Andian police cruiser. The Bril moved off after two sweeps of the world, but Andia was unable to give chase. The area's Harmony fleet is searching for the ship, and any others."

Two sweeps. Alexander couldn't put off surveying the Andian delegation any longer. Delegate Huana was hunched in his chair like a dying man. His elbows rested on the desk; his head was in his hands. The three other Andians were worse. Pacha and Maria were intermittently sobbing. Julio stared straight ahead, blindly.

Two sweeps. Alexander recalled what he knew of the battles of the Last War. A sweep could be anything from a few meters to fifty kilometers in width, and could extend a short distance or nearly the entire circumference of a planet. It depended on the type of ship, its orbit, intent, range and the defenses. Surely the Neulanders hadn't done substantial damage.

The room darkened. In the air in front of the Delegates the choppy replay of space seen through planetary system monitors began. There was no narration and it seemed like a grade B entertainment. The swooping panoramas meant little to Alexander, whose knowledge of Andia's planetary system was slight. The blip that was the Bril ship seemed inconsequential. He relaxed, and saw many Delegates do the same.

Then the picture changed focus. A frightened narrator began to speak as they closed in on the gray-green world of Andia. The first sweep had been wide—2 km—but had passed through relatively unpopulated areas. The second sweep was different.

A city was burning in the center of the Hall. From a distance it seemed almost pretty, like a bonfire against the dark. It was only when the view tightened that the crumpled buildings and the wrecked towers made the

scene ugly. In some places stonework had exploded from the heat. The ground had buckled. Except when the narrator spoke, there was total silence.

Alexander heard the name of the burning city, Ayacho, and recognized it with horror as the capital, Delegate Huana's home. He remembered a former member of the Andian delegation. She'd been homesick for Ayacho and had returned to Andia after only a year at Center. Like Huana, like most of the small Andian delegation, she'd treated him as a man when he'd visited the delegation offices, and not as a toolman. The view reached closer and closer to ground level. He saw grotesquely burned bodies, scarcely recognizable as once having been human. Only the bones gave the blackened things a shape. Drawn into the image by his horror, Alexander could nearly feel the heat still emanating from the charred surface of the world. It began to rain, and the ground sizzled and steamed, making the valley of Ayacho into a cauldron of human stew.

Alexander wondered if any of the corpses was that of the junior delegate. Or Huana's wife and children—the family with whom he'd just been invited to stay by the husband and father who hadn't yet known they were already dead. He turned away from the images, unreasonably afraid of recognizing faces.

He imagined the burned meat odor of Ayacho and felt his hunger. He swallowed, disgusted that he could still think of food. He refused to see more. He walked out to the lobby and realized he was not alone; a large number of Delegates had crept away from the sight of the carnage. They whispered together, and he did his job, observing.

"We'll be able to provide medical help to the survivors," Talia Kaviscu was telling Delegate Purl in a low voice. "Neuland medicine can virtually rebuild a body. Our work is truly impressive."

Impressive. Could they raise the dead?

Eventually the remaining Delegates came stumbling out of the Hall and silently left for their own offices and homes. Alexander stood motion-

less, unable to think of anything but his hunger and the impressive cost of its cure.

"She's back from her meeting with the Electors and wants to see you," Ting Wheeling said, coming into the gloomy sun room. Sucre's sun was ponderously setting and the taller vegetation cast long shadows across the clearing. The room smelled dank.

Alexander pushed the plate away. The fruit and cheese were gone; it appalled him that he could continue to eat. It angered him that no matter how much he ate, he was continually hungry. "Do you understand what they're doing?" he asked Ting. "Andia means nothing. They're letting murderers into the Harmony."

The guard's expression didn't change. "You take too much on yourself, probe. Toolmen obey. Come on. Elector Brauna is waiting."

Alexander followed him to a formal sitting room where Sanda Brauna was watching Sucre's public news. She looked up, her face aglow with excitement. "Do you think they actually constructed puppet Bril to pilot that ship, or did they crew it with their own people and somehow transmit false readings? Their level of biological expertise would be extraordinary if they could manufacture credible aliens!"

"I don't know, Elector."

"Try to find out from the aspirants. Jeroen thinks we should open direct negotiations with them. They're obviously desperate to get into the Harmony—probably the alans at their backs are worse than we realized. We'll offer our help, drop a few hints of our suspicions, and before long there will be an Ahman of Neuland. Too bad they're all Altered, though."

"Neuland attacked one of our own worlds."

She was still a moment, looking into his face, then, condescendingly, she smiled. "You're not trained to see the larger picture. What's been done to Andia is done. We're not crossman priests, who tend a flock. We don't seek revenge where we don't need it to maintain order. We're arbiters of order and this is a fantastic opportu-

nity. Don't worry, we'll watch them, but you say yourself that Neuland only had one ship. These false Bril will vanish once Neuland's admitted, yet we'll always have a club we can use to threaten Neuland if they cause trouble for the Electors or the rest of the Harmony. The fact they've done something," she stopped a moment, frowning, "contemptible, doesn't mean that we don't need them. But thanks to you, we'll know they can't be trusted."

"Is it really worth it, Elector?" he asked wistfully. "They make my skin crawl."

"You're ridiculous," she said fondly. She ordered the display off and came close, gently putting her hand against his chest. "My favorite reason to continue with your plan is to have your flare cured. Otherwise, you'll die in six months."

"Perhaps Harmony medics could cure it?"

She shook her head. "No. The other Electors wouldn't agree. Don't feel guilty about survival, or because admitting Neuland is a political necessity. If you hadn't understood and grasped this chance, the only difference is we wouldn't have been aware that Neuland created the Bril and you'd be dead."

"Another probe would have realized the truth."

"None has so far. The other Electors are jealous of me for having you. You're an expert at nuance, Alex, and outstanding at extrapolation. You're different from the rest."

"If you say so, Elector." He wished he could believe that. She did; she needed to in order to justify her feelings for a toolman. That was a disturbing thought.

She patted him. "Go to the lobby; the emergency session will begin soon. All the Electors will attend." She laughed. "You can watch me smile at the Neulanders. Claim credit for it—we don't want them imagining they don't need a facilitation anymore." She started out of the room.

He bowed, aware that a partner probably wouldn't, but he was unpracticed at equality and she was accustomed to the obeisance. "Sanda," he said.

She turned back to him, startled. Her face softened into the woman he held in his arms at night, who didn't think of political necessities.

"I just wanted to say it."

She smiled and so did he, embarrassed.

Talia Kavisu was much in evidence, commiserating with the Delegates, pledging Neuland's help against the Bril attackers and expressing pity for the absent Andians. Havic was more circumspect, watching from the outskirts of the crowd like a probe on duty. He did a creditable job of circuitously approaching Alexander and seeming surprised to notice him. "You, probe," he said. "Where can I get something to drink?"

"I'll show you, Aspirant Havic," Alexander said. He led him to an empty refreshment room near the lobby, listening to the echo of Havic's footsteps and the soft thud of his own like they were sending code together. Gesturing at the provider, he asked, "What would you like?"

Havic glanced around. Alexander shook his head slightly.

"Something warm," Havic said. "This Assembly of yours is full of cold men. You have a drink, too. I insist."

Alexander took two cups from the mechanism and, feeling petty, set the water temperature high enough to burn Havic's mouth, hoping to do damage though the Neulander would not feel it. Cradling the other cup in his hands, Alexander smiled as Havic sipped the steaming liquid.

"Ahh," Havic said. With an impressive sleight of hand, he dropped something small and yellow into Alexander's cup.

"Drink up," Havic said. "My mother always said a warm drink was medicinal."

"Yes, Aspirant Havic." The dark liquid in the cup was not obviously changed. Wincing, Alexander drank. For an instant it was bitter, then he didn't taste anything. "Thank you, Aspirant Havic. I'm grateful for your consideration."

"You should be, toolman. Remember it. But we're pleased with your protocol services, so far, and your discretion."

Alexander looked into the Neulander's worm-pale face, wondering how it was that an evil man was saving his life. He smiled at Havic, gulped the hot, healing liquid, and considered what that said about him.

The Andians had arrived by the time Alexander returned to the lobby. They were the focus of attention. Delegate Huana's shoulders were slumped and his eyes were red and too bright. His mouth was set stiffly, as if he was gritting his teeth and had been for hours. Alexander watched as Elector Brauna went to Huana's side, murmuring comforting banalities. It should have been the worst hypocrisy imaginable and yet Sanda Brauna's attempted solace appeared genuine, even to him. It reminded him of her real sorrow at the onset of his flare, and her failure to do anything to cure it. He'd had to help her by helping himself.

"We'll find these Bril and destroy them!" Alexander imagined a glint of amusement in Elector Brauna's eyes. Looking across the intervening space, he saw only her blood red Elector's robe, not the woman. Would there be a war against Neuland if the Assembly learned the truth? Alexander told himself that more deaths would not promote order or justice; war would do nothing for Andia but absorb resources that world needed in order to rebuild. But perhaps Neuland could be forced somehow to make amends? And the perversion of truth that silence meant made him wonder how he would ever be able to face Huana—his only true friend!—again. He remembered Huana's own word: sophistry, Electors' sophistry.

Delegate Huana sighed. "I hope no other world ever bears a tragedy like this. The private report the quickship brought for the delegation gave more information." He made a choked sound, then said, "One third of our population is gone."

"Your own family?" Elector Brauna asked.

Huana shrugged hopelessly.

Unnoticed by anyone, Alexander shuddered as he imagined Delegate Huana's family among the blackened remnants of scorched and melted bone in that shattered city.

Elector Brauna embraced Huana. He leaned against her for a moment, then stood back. "Thank you. I've learned from a friend that you have a good heart, Elector."

With a sense of shock, Alexander recognized that the reference was to him. He bit his lip and purposely scanned a wider area. Ting Wheeling, behind Elector Brauna, was watching Alexander as if Ting sensed something amiss.

Talia Kaviscu approached, but she stood off to the side, beyond the range at which Elector Brauna would have to choose between rudeness or a greeting. Elector Brauna turned slowly, and nodded infinitesimally at the Neulander aspirant.

Talia Kaviscu approached.

Delegate Huana noticed Elector Brauna's attention behind him and turned. "Aspirant," he said, wearily. "Thank you for Neuland's offer of aid. I regret my previous comments. A crisis shows us true humanity."

Talia Kaviscu bowed. "Against such a threat, we are all united as fellow humans."

Elector Brauna seemed to inspect the Neulander woman. "I have recently been made aware," Elector Brauna said carefully, "that Neulanders are capable of becoming human."

Alexander felt an ache that wasn't hunger, but rather a physical yearning for truth. He recalled the views of Andia, of burned Ayacho. The anguish in every stooped line of Huana's body was only the smallest echo of what his entire world was experiencing. He remembered Talia Kaviscu's curious and derisive expression as he had winced at the unexpected pain of the tissue sampling. He imagined Delegate Huana voting in favor of Neuland's admission to the Polite Harmony of Worlds and was sickened. It could not be right for such a thing to happen.

Talia Kaviscu bowed again. "Thank you, Lady. We had sincerely hoped that such an ecumenical attitude might exist among those for whom the search for knowledge and universal truths demanded of us by Jon Hsu was a paramount concern."

Elector Brauna smiled faintly and turned away from the Neulander

woman. As she did so, her eyes met Alexander's and her smile became genuine and filled with humor.

It had been necessary for him to act in her behalf once before, without instructions. He balanced the value of his life against the lives of those Andians who had already died for Neuland, unwillingly, as a result of its deceit. If he lived with this lie he would also have had a hand in killing them, and so would have Elector Brauna. He stepped forward, knowing true loyalty meant he must save her honor and that of the entire Harmony. "Elector Brauna!"

The men and women in the room blanched at the disrespectful behavior, then froze as they saw it was a probe who had shouted.

Sanda Brauna went rigid. "Probe, go to your quarters," she said. "You are obviously unwell." The room buzzed with low voiced speculation.

As if he and Sanda were at opposite ends of a long tunnel, Alexander saw only her. He stepped closer. Guardians raised their weapons; he barely noticed. "Elector Brauna, I have a report to make," he said. "It's urgent. Please listen."

She gestured and Ting Wheeling approached. "Go with him, Alexander," she said. "Go home."

"No! Elector, if you won't listen, then I'll give my report to Delegate Huana."

Huana looked as amazed as the others. "Alex?"

Ting Wheeling moved quickly past Alexander and grappled with Pavel Havic. In the melee Havic shouted, "I was trying to help! This probe has gone insane!" He held a weapon. Ting captured the Neulander's arms and held him, looking at Sanda Brauna for orders.

Her face was pale. Elector Lee whispered to her, and she shook her head.

"Delegate Huana," Alexander said grimly, fully aware that he was killing himself with each bitter word. "Your enemy is not the Bril. It is Neuland."

Delegate Huana stared at him without comprehension.

Alexander bowed. "Delegate, I must report that Neuland has rebuilt a



Bril ship and used it to attack Andia, to pretend there was a non-human threat. They did it to influence the vote of the Grand Assembly. Andia was expendable to them, an easy target."

"No...." Delegate Huana came a step closer, his fists clenched, then stopped. "Alex. You must be wrong."

"He's crazy!" Havic shouted. Ting jerked him roughly away.

Alexander surveyed Sanda Brauna. Her eyes were dry and her back was straight, but she stood as though any movement would bring pain. Alexander bowed to her. "I'm just a toolman, Elector. The only necessities I understand are personal ones. I can't go on."

Guardians of the other Electors surrounded him; one took control of Pavel Havic from Ting Wheeling, who then stood indecisively beside Alexander. Delegate Huana looked back and forth between Alexander and Havic, then at the Electors.

Alexander spoke again to Delegate Huana. "I'm sorry Delegate. This is the truth. I've known for several days, but I told *no one*. The Neulanders offered to cure the flare, to end this probe's death sentence, if I helped them, and kept the truth from the Electors. I wanted to live."

Delegate Huana's expression changed from confusion to horror, and, as realization came that Alexander had known of Neuland's plan before he'd spoken, Huana stared at him with pure hatred.

Alexander cringed. "No, Delegate! I didn't know *all* their plan! I swear! I didn't know about Andia! I didn't know what they were going to do, only that there was something. I swear I didn't know!"

Huana spat at him.

Alexander stumbled backward, but Ting Wheeling caught his arm.

"You monster! You brutish, lying imitation man!" Huana screamed. His face was contorted in rage as finally he found a target for the horror of the attack. "When I think that I considered you as good as human, even against all the teachings of the Electors! I was sorry for you! For you!" Huana's teeth were exposed in a horrible grin. His red, staring eyes

seemed to stream bitterness. "For a creature that would set its unnatural life above those of millions of real men! Alexander—the betrayer of Andia!"

Alexander stared, unable to speak.

Elector Lee pushed through to them. He touched Delegate Huana's shoulder. Huana turned, striking out at the same time. When he realized who had come, he quieted suddenly.

"Gather up all Neulanders," Elector Lee said, and men rushed to obey. He turned to Alexander. "You've taken a great deal onto yourself, Alexander," he said gently, but others imagined denunciation in the quiet tone.

"Yes, Elector," he said, finally able to speak. "I understand. It was entirely my fault for having wanted to live so much." Alexander couldn't look at Delegate Huana, but heard his sobbing. He longed to make the man understand that he hadn't betrayed Andia or their friendship. To do so, though, would betray Sanda Brauna, so he was silent.

Jeroen Lee turned around. "This is your probe, Sanda. Later, we'll need to ask questions. Take charge of him for now and see he doesn't try to escape before we get some answers."

Sanda Brauna clearly understood, as Alexander did, that no questioning could occur. For the first time since Alexander had known her she seemed dazed. She moved as the powerless do, slowly, head down and shoulders slumped.

Two guards each took hold of him. The one on his left pushed him roughly forward; the other was Ting Wheeling, whose touch was unexpectedly light.

Alexander walked as they directed him, following Elector Brauna. He felt their eyes, but kept his head down. As he passed, Delegate Huana shouted something animal and intense that he refused to let himself hear. Instead he listened to the rumbling of his stomach, finally able to be amused by his hunger.

They went directly to Sanda Brauna's apartment and stopped in the sitting room she'd used earlier. She dismissed the other guard. Ting

took up a position blocking the door. It was funny. Where could a probe run? Alexander wished that they were in the sun room. He wanted to sit patiently and watch the slow sunset become dark.

"I'm sorry," he said when the silence became painful.

She sat down heavily on the edge of a straight-backed chair.

He memorized her face, though he would not have memory for long. "I couldn't bear to let them succeed, Elector. The Harmony can survive without Neuland, but not without truth. I only hope that I would have spoken even if it had been another world than Andia."

She sighed. "Alex, you are too young." She sank her face into her hands.

He glanced at Ting Wheeling, who stared fixedly through him. Poor guardian, he didn't want to kill.

Sanda looked up, twisting her fingers together in her lap. "Perhaps you can stay in the apartment. The others might agree. Six months isn't long."

"It isn't long to live, but it's much too long to die. Please, Elector. Let it be quick. Do it now."

She didn't answer and only looked at Ting Wheeling, then shook her head. She was crying, and he was afraid he would do worse.

"Please, Sanda," he said, summoning all his courage to beg for death.

She looked directly at him, studying his face. Hers seemed ready to collapse, with her true age written in her eyes. She moved back in the chair, sitting upright, and without taking her attention from him, said, "A human *should* have a choice." She signaled Ting Wheeling to obey Alexander.

Ting looked at Alexander, raising the gun. Alexander nodded and closed his eyes. ■



COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF

tomorrow

SPECULATIVE FICTION

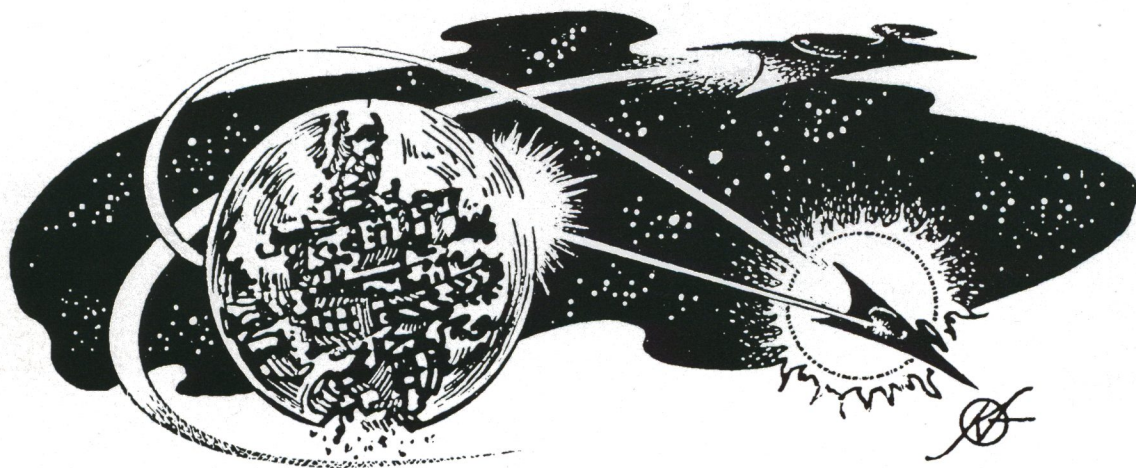
edited by Algis Budrys

Avram Davidson, with "THE SPOOK-BOX OF THEOBALD DELAFONT DE BROOKS," a tale of old families and old ambitions;

M. Shayne Bell, with "THE SHINING DREAM ROAD OUT," in which a young man cruises virtual highways in search of a woman, not for the usual reasons;

Richard Bowes, with "THE JUDGES OF THE SECRET COURT," who are very strict judges indeed; **Kathleen Ann Goonan** with "WHEN THE GRACE NOTE OF THE CITIES CHANGED," about decision makers and more; **Barry Reynolds**, with "AUTO DA FE," a story that ought to truly unsettle you...and others, equally good. Plus Part Three of "Writing." Plus good illustrators.

YOU REALLY DON'T WANT TO MISS IT.



\$4.00

tomorrow

SPECULATIVE FICTION

edited by Algis Budrys

A New Bimonthly Magazine of Speculative Fiction

Authors in Future Issues Include

M. Shayne Bell	Avram Davidson	Robert Reed
Geoffrey A. Landis	Mary Turzillo	Don D'Amassa
Valerie Freireich	Robert Onopa	Steve Rasnic Tem
Nina Kiriki Hoffman		Jane Mailander
John F. Moore		Charles E. Fritch
J. Steven York		Jonathan Post
Dave Wolverton		Cathy Ball



and Many, Many Others

SUBSCRIPTION OFFER

tomorrow

SPECULATIVE FICTION

6 issue (one year) subscription.....\$18.00

First class subscriptions, Canada, or overseas add \$1.00 per issue.

Name _____

Address _____

VISA MASTER CHARGE Number _____

Expiration date _____ Signature _____

Send check or money order to:

THE UNIFONT COMPANY, INC., Box 6038, Evanston, IL 60204

If you do not wish to mar your copy of this issue, simply use a clean sheet of paper instead of this blank.