

edited by Algis Budrys

# tomorrow

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WILLIAM ESRAC • KEITH BROOKE • CHARLES D. ECKERT • OTHERS



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SPECULATIVE FICTION

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## EDITORIAL



One of the publishing trade magazines we get is *CPDA News*, a magazine that comes to us because we have that thing that looks vaguely like a toaster grid on our front cover. Twice a year *CPDA News* publishes the sales figures for the top magazine titles, and while we've never included, still there's a certain morbid interest.

The top twelve selling magazines by title for the first six months of 1993 were *TV Guide*, *The National Enquirer*, *The Star*, *People*, *Woman's World*, *The Globe*, *Woman's Day*, *Family Circle*, *The National Examiner*, *Weekly World News*, *Soap Opera Weekly* and *Cosmopolitan*. The top circulation, *TV Guide's*, was 5,659,323. *TV Guide* grossed \$130,956,734 during this reporting period. We didn't.

The top twelve titles by retail dollars were *TV Guide*, *The National Enquirer*, *People*, *The Star*, *Woman's World*, *Cosmopolitan*, *The Globe*, *Penthouse*, *Woman's Day*, *Soap Opera Digest*, *Family Circle*, and *Playboy*.

You will notice several things. In the first list, there were four, altogether, magazines as you and I understand them—five, if you count *People*—and the rest, including *TV Guide*, were something else. (Of the magazine titles, all were for women.) And no fewer than five on the list were not magazines at all, no matter how you count; they were supermarket checkout counter "newspapers."

On the second list, interestingly, are the two leading men's magazines. It's the first intrusion of a segment of males into the world of leading magazine titles. (Old males apparently are content with *Golf Digest* and *Field and Stream*).

The top 12 unit increases are *Family Circle*, *Fitness*, *Smart Money*, *McCall's*, *Allure*, *The New Yorker* (with an increase of 490,519 copies, or 94.3%), *Redbook*, *USA Today*, *Men's Health* (might this have something to do with the ravages of age in males?), *Soap Opera Magazine*, *Details*, and *TVY Novelas*, (which is a Spanish-language publication, and truly astonishing to find in this Anglo context). Except for Number 22, *Golf Illustrated*, with a 178,345 copy increase, or 128.9% (Aha!), *The New Yorker* is far and away ostensibly the most spectacular of the publications on this list. Notice, too, that the checkout newspapers are apparently plateauing at last, despite Michael Jackson's troubles, Loni and Burt, and Lady Di's gym outfit.

At any rate, I was thinking for a moment of changing this publication's name to *The New Yorker Cosmopolitan Penthouse Playboy*, but then I took further thought. The real comer may be *TVY Novelas*; that's the one that possibly signals a wave of the future in big-time publishing. I wonder...*MAÑANA Ficción Especulativo?*

— Algis Budrys

# tomorrow

## SPECULATIVE FICTION

February, 1994

Volume 2, Number 1

### NOVEL

- DANCE TO THE SUN** by William Esrac 40  
*He was a superman, but all his friends took advantage of him.  
This may have been a mistake. Part One of four parts.*

### NOVELLA

- HARD TARGET** by Charles D. Eckert 18  
*Archimedes was the philosopher who wouldn't bother to fight. A true  
philosopher avoids brawls, but is deadly effective for all that.*

### NOVELETES

- JURASSIC AND THE GREAT TREE** by Keith Brooke 7  
*Three of them were in one head. Where would it lead them?*
- CAMERA MAN** by Felicity Savage 66  
*He took pictures. And something else.*

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*The Earth had been conquered. That wasn't bad, considering.*
- BAGATAWAY** by Mustafa Zahirovic 59  
*The game was life. The game was death.*
- THE WOMAN WHO BLEW UP THE WORLD** by John A. Sentry 74  
*She was very angry. VERY angry.*
- EARLY FALL LATE FALL** by Warren Brown 77  
*The Earth was emptying, and so was he.*

### ARTICLE

- WRITING, PART SEVEN** by Algis Budrys 38  
*Agents; the Good, the Bad, and the Mediocre*

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Cover by Ron and Val Lakey Lindahn, © Copyright 1993, Ron and Val Lakey Lindahn  
"The Woman Who Blew Up The World" was inspired by the cover.  
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Russell Morgan, Margaret Ballif Simon and Darla Malone Tagrin.

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# THE FROGLOVER

Cynthia Ward

Illustrated by Brian Lee Durfee

*The Earth had been conquered. That wasn't so bad*

When the boats came in from the deep sea, Teacher sent us out of the schoolhouse early so the older boys could help with the catch. The little kids ran to the shore to play on the rocks. Gina and I were in fourth grade, too big to do that any more.

"Let's go to my house," I said.

"Dad carved me a new doll."

"I'm too old to play with dolls,"

Gina said. "Anyway, my mom doesn't want me playing with spicks."

"I'm not a spick," I said. "My mom doesn't want me playing with froglovers!"

"Your mom's jealous 'cause we have a better house," Gina said. "We're not froglovers. Just my sister."

"Mom's meeting the boat," I said.

"Okay, I'll come over for a little while," Gina said.

We jumped from patch to patch of blacktop to avoid the mud of the

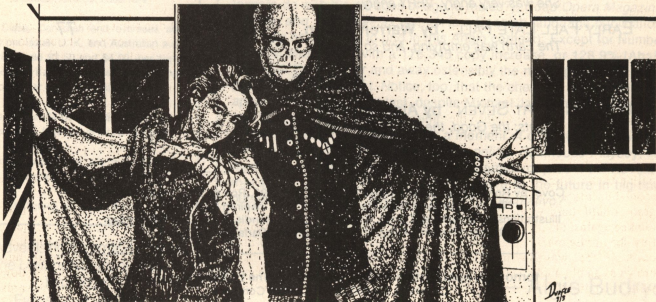
road out of Frogtown. When my view wasn't blocked by the corn, I could see the boats. I saw my dad's boat. I could pick Dad and my older brothers out of his crew because their faces were darker than the others, but I couldn't pick Mom out of the people on the dock and shore. I saw three frogs, bright green heads above blue and gold uniforms, buyers from the frog city.

The fishermen's houses were all outside of Frogtown. They all had nets drying on their unpainted silver-gray walls and fish drying on racks in the dooryards. They all stood far apart, separated by the pastures and crops. The high corn reminded me that I'd seen red leaves in the green of the forest. We'd be getting out of school soon for the harvest. You picked peas and beans until your hands hurt, dug potatoes until your back screamed, but you couldn't stop. I hated harvest-time.

Gina didn't have to work in the fields any more. I hated her for that, even though she was my best friend.

Nobody was home except Gram Liz and the two babies sleeping in the cradle. And Graygram Sally in her bed—she hadn't been out of bed since before I was born. Gram Liz sat near the cradle in the big room, rocking in front of the TV box. She had turned it on. Its glass front was a gray-white haze, and it made such a loud crackling hiss I was surprised the babies hadn't woken up. With Gram Liz in the big room, we couldn't play inside. Gina wouldn't want to.

Gram Liz glanced at the babies and saw us. "Katie!" She scowled. "It's a good thing your mom ain't here to see who you brought home. I got to admit I ain't happy about having a froglover in the house, either. The frogs took the world away from us." She gestured at the hissing TV box. "They took *everything* away from us."



"I thought the Emp and the Little Big Wars took TV away," I said. "Then the frogs came."

Gram Liz shook her head. "That school ain't worth anything. Teaches what the frogs want us to know, and that ain't much. Katie, your Great-grandmother Sally wants to see you."

"I'll be right back," I told Gina.

My parents' house had five rooms plus a kitchen and a bathroom with a real flush toilet that worked if you emptied a bucket of water in it. Graygram Sally and Gram Liz had one room, my parents had one, and my older sisters shared one while my older brothers shared another. The little kids slept in the big room, where the TV box and the table and chairs were. Only our parents and grammies had beds. The babies had the cradle. The rest of us slept on cloth sacks stuffed with hay. I was the oldest in the big room, so I had to change the two littles kids' diapers and rock them back to sleep at night. I wished I could move to the big girls' room. Mom had another baby on the way.

My grammies' room was tiny, almost filled by the two narrow beds. The room was dark, and musty under a strong pee smell.

"Graygram?" I spoke loud. She was hard of hearing. "Graygram Sally? Are you awake?"

"Katie?" Her voice was so faint and cracked I could hardly hear it. She spoke funny, too, like the frogs did, only funny in a different way, but I didn't have trouble understanding her words like Mom and Gram Liz did. "Katie, are you here?"

"Yes, Graygram Sally." Dad once said her name wasn't Sally, it was Consuelo, but few people could pronounce that name, so it turned into Sally. "Do you want me to open the windows?" I asked her. "The sun's out today."

She didn't say anything, so I pulled back a raggedy curtain. This room didn't face the sun, and Graygram could hardly see, but she blinked against the light. She was so tiny she hardly made a bump in her quilt. Her face was as wrinkled and brown as an old apple. Her hair was white and thin, showing the scalp.

I leaned close so she could see me. "Do you want me to change you, Graygram?" The pee smell was really strong. I breathed through my mouth and hoped Gina couldn't smell it.

Graygram didn't seem to hear my question. She said, "I have something to give you, Katie." She raised one arm, thin and brown as a stick; it looked as fragile as a dry leaf. She reached into the neck of her old, old, frilly nightgown and pulled out a leather string. She tried to raise her head, but it fell back against the pillow before she could get the string off. I raised her head, feeling her thin soft hair, and took off the string. Two plain gold rings clinked on the string. They looked like Mom and Dad's steel wedding bands.

"Katie," Graygram said, "I want you to have these. They're Danny's and my wedding rings. My mother used to tell me Danny would never marry me. She said the American soldiers had been promising marriage to the young women of Guatemala since she was a little girl, but they always forgot their girlfriends when they went home. But Danny loved me. He married me as he promised, and he took me with him to his home in the North. When you are older, Katie, you will find a man to love as I loved Danny, and he will love you as Danny loved me. You must have these rings."

I'd never heard this story before. It made me feel so happy and sad that I could hardly talk. "Thank you, Graygram. But you don't have to give the rings to me now. You can give them to me the day I marry."

"Katie, I am ninety-six years old," Graygram said. "I will not see your wedding. Take the rings now. That is what I want."

"Of course, Graygram," I said. "Thank you."

I held out my hand. As she put the rings in my palm, I started to choke up. She was giving me everything she had.

I'd never known my great-grandfather, or his son, my grandfather Robert. They'd died when my father was a little boy, killed by the bandits and pirates that attacked our town

after the Little Big Wars, until the frogs came and stopped them.

As I hung the leather string around my neck, the rings slipped into my wool dress and lay against my chest. The gold was as cold as rocks from the winter ocean, even though the rings had been lying against Graygram's skin. "Graygram, do you need another quilt?"

"No, child," Graygram said.

But she needed to be changed. When she was clean and dry, I kissed her and closed the curtain. I plugged the kitchen sink, poured water from the pitcher, and washed my hands. Gina stood by the kitchen door, staring into the big room with a disgusted look on her face.

"Those babies stink," she said. "Let's get out of here."

I checked their diapers. Both babies were dry. They smelled sweet. Mom had bathed them before going to the dock.

"They don't stink," I told Gina.

"Do too," Gina said. "I smell baby poop. I'm going to my sister's house."

"Gina, you said you were going to spend the afternoon here!"

"No I didn't," Gina said. "Anyway, I don't want to any more. It stinks here. And your mom and grammy hate me. Bye, Katie."

"Can I go with you? Please?"

"I thought you hated my sister," Gina said. "And your mom doesn't want you near Laurie. Or anybody in my family."

"I don't hate Laurie," I said. I hardly even knew her. She used to go to the schoolhouse, but she was so much older, she never spent any time with us. "My mom doesn't need to know I saw Laurie," I said.

"Okay," Gina said. "Come along."

Gram Liz didn't see us leave. She rocked and stared at the white haze on the howling hissing TV box.

**W**e walked to Frogtown. There were no crops or cows here, and the houses stood close together. They were all painted, white and black and gray and blue and yellow and red and pink. Their small yards

were separated from each other by wood fences, or bushes cut to look like walls. The street had more blacktop on it than the country road, but it was just as deserted, even though the men of Frogtown didn't go to sea. Gina lived here now, in one of these painted houses.

"What do your parents do in the frog city?" I asked.

"Clean frogs' houses," Gina said.

I hated house-cleaning. I couldn't imagine cleaning frog houses, then returning home and having to clean there, too.

The frog city stood on the far side of Frogtown, six glass towers rising to the clouds. No human could get in the frog city without a special badge. My big brother said a force field surrounded the city, an invisible wall, too smooth to climb, that went up far higher than anyone could jump. A wall of hard air.

Among the tall glass towers I saw a much shorter tower, made all of gold, with a pointed tip. It hadn't been there yesterday. Even frogs couldn't raise a building overnight.

"What's that gold tower?" I asked.

"A spaceship," Gina said.

I stared. It was creepy to be reminded that the frogs weren't from Earth.

A lot of frogs lived outside the glass towers and force field, in the painted houses. I was scared to see a frog up close, but at the same time I was even more eager to see one after seeing the spaceship. But I only saw a frog car, a silver beetle flying down the road without wings. It didn't look anything like the rusted old cars that lay in the streets, or the colorful cars in the books at the schoolhouse, or my little brothers' old toy cars. It passed us quicker than the fastest horse, and the only noise it made was a quiet hum.

"My sister lives here," Gina said, and led me up on the wide porch of a slate-blue two-story house. My heart beat faster than a galloping horse's hooves. The door had no knob, just a slot. Gina reached into her pretty yellow dress and pulled up a leather string. I put my hand on my breast,

feeling my great-grandmother's and great-grandfather's rings. Gina's leather necklace had a plastic card, a frog key. She put it in the slot. The door clicked and swung in, opening onto an empty hall with shining light-bulbs and stairs going up. Gina stepped inside. She turned around. "Aren't you coming in? You said you wanted to visit my sister."

"I do," I said, even though I didn't want to go in a froglover's house. Froglovers were traitors. Mom, Gram Liz, and Dad and all the other fishermen said so. Mom even called Gina's sister a bad word once. "I don't want to see Gina in this house. Her sister is a frogfucker. The worst kind of traitor!" Gina knew my mother didn't approve of what her parents and sister did, but I never told Gina my mother said *that*.

"Come in or go home," Gina said.

I stepped into the slate-blue house. Gina shut the door with a loud, echoing boom that made me want to grab the knob and see if it turned, see if I was trapped inside.

"My sister lives upstairs," Gina said, and ran up the stairs, her footsteps echoing in the empty hall. I looked at all the closed white doors. They looked like normal doors, but they had keyslots instead of keyholes. My heart pounded harder. I didn't want to be down here alone. I ran up after Gina.

In a bare hallway lit by lots of bulbs, Gina knocked on one of several closed doors. The door didn't open. Gina knocked again, then used her plastic key. The door swung open. She took my hand and led me inside.

No one was in the room. It was the size of the biggest room in my house, and held a bed wider than my parents' bed. But its mattress wasn't covered with quilts made from worn-out old clothes. It was covered with white sheets and a huge white fur, bigger than any cow or deer hide, and streaked with thin blood-red stripes. The white fur and sheets shone like fresh snow in the sunlight pouring through an unbroken glass window. I couldn't believe how white the sheets and pillows were; I couldn't keep

from touching the bed. The fur was as soft as a kitten's, and the sheets were just as soft, and smooth and sleek.

Gina rubbed the white cloth. "It's *ghaniss*," she said. She yanked back the sheets. I saw floorboards. The sheets and pillows floated three feet above the floor. "The bed's made of air." She patted the sheets. "Have a seat."

I sat down carefully, afraid the sheets would collapse and I'd fall and look stupid, but the bed of air just sank down a bit under my butt, like my parents' mattress. But it wasn't lumpy or musty like their mattress. The fur or the *ghaniss* had a faint smell that reminded me of swamp plants, but I stayed on the bed, rubbing the soft cloth and feeling the air, the force field, press against my palm.

On a night-table stood seven tiny frog ghosts. I screamed.

"Did *this* scare you?" Gina asked scornfully, leaning past me to point at the ghosts. I nodded. "That's just a holo, dummy." She passed her hand through the three-inch-tall ghosts. They reformed instantly. "A holo's nothing to be scared of. It's like an old photo. It's a holo of his family."

They still looked like ghosts. I looked away, and saw a huge picture on the wall across from the bed. It was so big it covered most of the wall, but it was as sharp as the best-preserved photo I'd ever seen. It showed a landscape which looked nothing like the rocky shore, blue-gray ocean, fields, pastures, and forest that surrounded Frogtown and the city. Even the sky was different: pale green, with clouds of a lighter green, like clouds from a dream, high above a forest with leaves redder than the forest here got in the fall, the bright red of human blood. I realized the clouds were moving, exposing two fat blue suns.

I remembered what Gram had told me about the time before the Emp, the wonders that had been in the world in those days. I pointed at the moving picture. "That's a TV!"

"Yes!" Gina waved a small black plastic box covered with buttons. She pressed one. Sound burst out of the picture, filling the room with whistles

and howls that didn't sound anything like the cries of birds or coyotes or wildcats.

"It's not Earth!" I whispered.

Gina pushed another button. The picture changed. It showed a bunch of frogs facing a group of humans with wild faces and wild beards, and pistols like the ones my dad and the other captains wore under their jackets, and rifles like the ones hidden on the fishing-boats.

"Gina, what happened to the picture?"

"I changed it," Gina said.

I jumped as the wild-looking men shot their guns with painfully loud booms. The wild men couldn't hurt me, I told myself; they were just a TV picture. And they hadn't been shooting at me, anyway. But none of the frogs they were shooting at fell. The force field that stopped the men's bullets didn't stop the light-beams from the frogs' weird glass rifles. The wild men screamed and fell with tiny black holes in their bodies.

"Are there any more pictures?" I asked eagerly.

"Hundreds of pictures that change all the time!" Gina said, and pressed the button as fast as she could. Image followed image, dizzyingly fast; images of frogs holding objects I didn't recognize, a frog head with its big mouth open wide, a swirling pattern of jagged golds and blues, a group of uniformed frogs standing in front of a spaceship, a giant hairless cat with green skin and six legs leaping on a six-legged black deer with green stripes, a group of frogs fighting giant gray spiders, two frogs punching each other, two frogs holding each other so close I couldn't find out what a female frog looked like. The sounds all ran together, and as the images changed faster and faster, the sounds became a hissing howl like the noise of Gram's TV box.

The drifting green clouds and two blue suns came back, and Gina threw down the button-box.

"Why'd you stop?" I said angrily.

I wanted to see more moving pictures.

"I've got something better to show you, dummy." Gina held out a

tiny, pale brown square. "But eat this first!"

It didn't look at all appetizing, but its faint, unfamiliar smell was pleasant. I put it in my mouth and bit down. It melted over my tongue and flavor filled my mouth, so strong and sweet it made my mouth hurt. I wanted the flavor to last, but I chewed fast, swallowing, gulping.

"My sister doesn't need to wait for spring and maple sugar-making time to have a sweet," Gina said. "He brings her *shona* all the time."

"Is there more?" I said. I had to have more.

"Yes, but you can't have it now!"

Gina jumped off the bed and turned the knob of a white-painted wood door. The closet held some frog clothes, bright blue and gold uniforms, bright red and purple and orange shirts and pants, but mostly it held women's clothing that didn't look like anything I'd seen outside of an ancient magazine Gina had. I ran my hand over the dresses. They were so soft they made my hands feel disgustingly rough, but I couldn't stop touching them.

Gina took off her dress and put on a beautiful dress of rose-pink *ghaniss*. It would be very short on her sister, but on Gina it almost touched the floor.

"Come on, Katie," she said. "Dress up!"

I couldn't imagine wearing her sister's clothes, but she pulled another dress out of the closet and glared at me, so I took off my dress and put on her sister's. It brushed the floor, but I found I didn't care. It was the same pale green as the clouds in the moving picture, and it was as light as a cloud must be. I loved its feel, nothing at all like itchy heavy wool; the *ghaniss* was so soft and cool I never wanted it to leave my skin.

Gina put on a pair of slim red shoes with high heels, and I took off my shoes, ugly old cowhide shoes handed down from my older sisters, and stepped into a pair of pale green shoes that matched the dress. The shoes flopped and clonked on the floorboards as Gina led me to a white

table covered with little bottles, a brush and comb, a large button-box, and something that looked like a flat TV box. In front of the glass-faced box, a white mask lay face-up. It was shaped like a woman's face. A perfect woman's face.

Gina pressed a button, and the blank gray glass of the TV box turned into a mirror. She opened a drawer and pulled out a box of fancy gold and silver jewelry set with rubies and emeralds and sapphires. They weren't as bright as the gems in the old magazine, but they were the most beautiful things I'd ever seen. Gina put some jewelry around her neck and wrists and fingers, then put several heavy necklaces and bracelets and rings on me.

Then she held the mask close to my face, and in its eyes I saw my own face.

"Close your eyes and *keep* them closed until I tell you to open them," Gina said.

I closed my eyes. A moment later, the mask pressed against my face. A cool squishy material covered my face, blocking my nose and mouth. I couldn't breathe. I started to pull my head back, and the mask stopped pushing against my face. Then I felt something brushing my skin and lips and eyelids. It tickled me, and made me want to push the mask away. But just when I couldn't stand it any more, Gina lowered the mask. I reached up to rub my face.

"Don't touch your face!" Gina said. "Keep your eyes shut!"

I waited for what felt like hours. What was Gina doing?

"Look in the mirror," Gina said.

I opened my eyes. In the mirror my face was white as snow, my eyelids blue-black, my lips and cheeks redder than the apple on the "A" page of the alphabet book. I looked like the ladies in Gina's old magazine. I touched the necklaces, then reached up to touch my face and stopped myself. I looked gorgeous.

"The mask is part of this frog machine," Gina said, touching the flat TV box. "It's for helping frog women put on their makeup, but since there's hardly any frog women

on Earth, the machines here are for Earth women."

Gina studied herself in the mirror, and picked up her sister's brush and ran it through her hair. Looking at her beautiful face, looking at mine, I remembered words from the old magazine: powder, rouge, lipstick, eye-shadow. Magic words.

Gina lay on the bed and picked up a tin box I hadn't seen before. "Now we can eat the *shona*," she said.

She popped a sweet in her mouth, then grabbed the button-box for the moving picture and changed the images as fast as her finger could move. I lay beside her and put a sweet between my smelly-feeling lips, taking care not to get lipstick on the candy. I couldn't believe anything could taste as delicious as *shona*. Nothing could feel as soft as the *ghaniss* cloth of these sheets and dresses. Nothing could be as wonderful as the moving pictures.

"I'm going to be a frogfucker," I whispered.

The hall door opened to reveal a beautiful woman with a made-up face and a *ghaniss* dress. Beside her stood a frog in the blue and gold frog-soldier uniform. His face was green and flat and had no nose, just two slits for nostrils. His round eyes were gold, all gold, except for the pupils, which were black as frozen mud. His mouth was a big, lipless slash. He didn't have a hair on that smooth shiny green head, not even an eyelash. He was the handsomest man I'd ever seen.

"Gina, what the hell are you doing here?" Gina's sister demanded. "They're eating my candy!" she screamed. "You bitches get off my bed and out of my clothes!"

"Laurie," said the frog, "you are being ungracious to your guests, and one of them is your kin." His voice had a flat, almost metallic sound, under a sort of burble as if he were talking under water. He sounded like a stream.

"But that's candy you gave me!" Laurie said.

"Laurie, I will buy you more *shona*, as I always do," the green man said. "We share with our guests."

When I went home, it was after dark. I'd washed off the make-up in the frog-house's bathroom, with hot water right out of the sink faucet. I'd scrubbed and scrubbed with a mild, snow-white soap, and looked in the bathroom mirror to make sure I'd gotten rid of every trace of make-up, but I couldn't get rid of the thought that I'd missed something. If Mom saw the slightest trace of make-up, she would know where I'd been, and she'd spank me. Dad might even beat me, even though he never hit his kids with his belt like some fishermen did. I was worried, but I still felt happy. I skipped home, and didn't care that my ugly heavy shoes splashed mud all over my ugly itchy dress. I kept whispering, "I'm going to be a frogfucker."

When I saw my parents' house, I remembered the rings Graygram gave me. I took them out and looked at them in the light pouring out the windows; my parents must have lit every candle they'd made, and even turned on the electric lights. The light showed the rings were plain and covered with scratches. I remembered the fancy gold and silver rings covered with diamonds and emeralds and rubies. How had I ever thought Graygram's rings were pretty? I pulled off the crude leather necklace and threw the rings as far away as I could.

I went in the house and Mom fell on me. Her face was gray and twisted with emotion, and her big belly made her weight so great I could hardly stand up. I knew she would see a streak of white and slap me.

"Oh, Katie!" Mom said in a broken-up voice. "Your Great-grandmother Sally died."

I pushed away from her and ran outside. I looked up at the stars and they blurred as my eyes filled with tears. I didn't want Graygram Sally to die. She never tried to tell me who I could have for friends, the way Mom and Dad and Gram Liz always did. She loved me and I loved her. But I wasn't sorry I'd thrown those ugly rings away. I'd have better when I got older. Everything would be better when I was a frogfucker. ■

## OUR ARTISTS

Ron and Val Lakey Lindahn run a studio in Georgia, but have come there from Hollywood—where Ron was a photographer—and Val's years of solo work. But they have now been together for quite some time, both illustrating. They reinforce each other uniquely, to the point where their illustrations, although often signed individually, cannot be told apart. They collaborate frequently, as on our cover for this issue. Both are judges in L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of The Future Contest.

Susan Van Camp came into SF art by way of comics. She's been drawing since Kindergarten, when a teacher scolded her for rendering an elephant with its head emerging from its stomach. It looked right to Susan, and she's been proving it ever since. Brian Lee Durfee was raised in Alaska and Utah, and won an art scholarship to Brigham Young University, where he is currently majoring in illustration and minoring in fine arts. Brian likes to listen to hard Rock 'N Roll. He lettered in football for three years in high school. Last year, he won a prize in L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of The Future Contest. Kandise Elliot works as a biological illustrator for the University of Wisconsin, and provides illustrations for her own and others' science fiction stories. She is also Production Manager of this magazine. Kelly Faltermayer is a graduate of the High School for Performing and Visual Arts in Houston, TX. He first came to public notice in L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of The Future Contest a few years ago. He works as Promotion Assistant for a chain of weekly newspapers in Houston. Russell Morgan was born and raised in Northamptonshire, England. He has spent most of his 31 years trying to be a good artist. He has only been seriously illustrating since 1990, and only appeared in English Magazines. His illustrations for "Jurassic and the Great Tree" previously appeared in *Interzone*. Margaret Ballif Simon has served two terms as president of the Small Press Writers/Artists Organization, is serving as president of the Science Fiction Poetry Association and editor of their magazine, and has won both the Best Artist and Best Writer/Comic Artist of SPWAO Awards. Darla Malone Tagrin has won SF illustration awards nationwide. Her B&W illustrations are found in the Carol Nelson Douglas books from Tor, but she considers her 2-year-old daughter to be her greatest work-in-progress. ■



# JURASSIC AND THE GREAT TREE

Keith Brooke

Illustrated by Russell Morgan

*Three of them were in one head.  
And the head hurt.*

Outside, it is like any other spaceport, any other planet. The sky is a high grey, touched with saffron, the surrounding hills ragged and tinged with the green of vegetation. The air is cool but despite this it is good to be free of the cloying atmosphere of the lander. I assume it must also feel as good to Rafe and Cezarro, but just now they are quiet, and I feel for a moment that the body is mine.

A two-tiered bus is skimming towards the 'port, along a narrow road which leads back to the city of Lupert-Grijns; around us our fellow passengers start an uncoordinated drift away from the lander. Lupert-Grijns is Pavonis Minor's main population centre, situated 18 degrees north where the equatorial landmass thrusts out like Hokusai's wave, sloughing off a spray of islands along its course. It is a city approaching its 150th year, founded by the second influx of settlers; the first immigrants, landing farther to the south, had been less successful, the survivors patchily distributed and rapidly reverting to a savage barbarism. It is the descendants of this first colonization attempt that we have come to observe. They call themselves the Burul'chasi and they live in the depths of the equatorial jungle. They have successfully resisted intrusion into their territories for many years, yet now they want us to come, now they want us to see. "Only one man," they said, through their intermediary. "Only one man may come." And so we three are here, riding in the body of one.

A Pavonian emerges from the settling bus and comes across, smiling ingratiatingly. He is a head shorter than us, with shaggy hair and a patchy, adolescent beard. I can sense that both Cezarro and Rafe dislike him immediately. I remain neutral.

The man speaks and his words take a strange form, but still I understand. Language is a shared neural centre and Pavonian is Rafe's—and therefore Cezarro's and my—native tongue. "Welcome, Jurassic"—the name belongs to our current employer; we have no legal status, no single name—"I am Silas Breir, representative of the Lupert-Grijns Select. I am to be your guide."



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A city councillor, although his youthful and shabby appearance conforms with none of the usual stereotypes. That one so young could attain such office implies either an unusual resourcefulness or, perhaps, that the Select does not come high on the Pavonian political hierarchy.

We follow Breir onto the bus and indulge in the polite inconsequents that form the basis of social introduction almost everywhere, according to Cezarro, our ethnologist and social interpreter. Cezarro is full of insights and penetrative analysis and he is the most willing of us all to share his wisdom. He attributes this to his Capellan upbringing, although it is possible that he only uses this explanation as a means to remind us of his aristocratic background.

But he rarely goes much further: for each of us our biographies are sketchy in much of the detail—in squeezing three personae into a single cranium a degree of editing takes place, and one is left only with the psychologic forms which underpin one's essence, one's identity. Each of us is a *me* without the specifics. We have both mother and father, but they have no faces, no names (except for Cezarro, as the family name carries such psychological significance for him); they merge into our mental landscape, our psychoforms.

More recent details are there: my technical command of the skills of reportage is comprehensive, my knowledge of human history is both broad and detailed. I even have specific memories from assignments I have undertaken in my other self, my whole self: riding with the resource adventurers of Umbriel and Miranda, uncovering the human-anthrocin chimeric experiments on Tau Ceti IV, tagging the Martian cyborg gangs. Somewhere, *that me* is alive and utterly discrete, an individual living off the proceeds of selling his talents in this way. Yet here, on Sigma Pavonis Minor, I am still *me*, if somewhat less so.

Cezarro disputes my view of our condition. He argues that we have no self, no set of selves: we are mere

analogues, filling a shared body. We are here for a task—to observe the Burul'chasi, the descendants of the first colonists, and to file our reports with both our employer and our contractee in Lupert-Grijns. Afterwards we will be re-assigned and this body will be destroyed. We are a tool of Jurassic Informatic, no more. Cezarro enjoys these debates; he immerses himself and revels in attempting to undermine my self-belief, accusing me of diluting my professionalism with pop-philosophy.

And all the while Rafe sits back, remote. For practical reasons, we inhabit one specially developed body, one control-grown brain, yet we remain discrete; no more intimate, in many ways, than a man and his marriage partner. Consequently, my knowledge of Rafe is limited: I know that he comes from a pastoral family on the northern fringe of the jungle, that he professes distaste for the Pavonian lifestyle; yet here he is—or here is his analogue—returning, his nervous enthusiasm so strong that it breaks the bounds of our mental blockades, giving our shared body an adrenaline high.

Within minutes, we are at the edge of Lupert-Grijns, and Breir informs us that we are to spend the night in the city. "What else?" says Cezarro. It would be foolish to set out into the jungle at this hour.

All eight of Pavonis Minor's hotels are to be found around the commercial and administrative centre of Lupert-Grijns; five of them have been constructed or converted in the two years since the Consolidation Treaty re-opened the planet to the interstellar community. Our room in the V-K Splendide is adequate but unremarkable. It will be useful to relax, to discuss what is to come, to prepare.

Evening falls sharply, and sooner than I hoped. Now Silas Breir escorts us to a gambling house where we are to be introduced to Carnegie Voller. "He has control of Voller-Kalder," Breir tells us. Voller-Kalder is one of the planet's largest family business combines, which means

Carnegie Voller is highly placed in the grey area behind the planet's President-Select-regional council power hierarchy.

"He has political influence?" I ask, testing to see how much Breir knows, how much he chooses to share with us.

Breir shrugs, then shakes his head. "He would think so, perhaps, but..." Which means yes, of course. "He is a less positive facet to the Pavonian story," Breir continues. "I am not sure why he asks to see you."

I choose to say nothing, but Cezarro speaks up. "He hired us," he says, and he chuckles inside our head at the discomfort written on Breir's features. It is not entirely true that Voller hired us—our contract is between Jurassic and the Lupert-Grijns regional council—but the deal was instigated by Voller's private office.

"A representative of the Select cannot be aware of everything," Breir says, as we thread our way through the casino to Voller's private wing. "I hope my words will not be misinterpreted."

Carnegie Voller is a slightly overweight man of middling years. When we see him he is wearing a formal white body-stocking, softened by a grey tunic and gloves. His black hair is tied back with a length of silk ribbon and his stare is penetrating. He has the manner of one accustomed to power, and I can sense Cezarro warning to him immediately. Rafe hangs back, in our head, and we both acquiesce as Cezarro takes control. Although we are three discrete personae, our one body necessitates a form of consensual command: a bio-processor grown into our left cerebral cortex assimilates mental commands to the body's muscles and assesses the correct response. Thus, if one of us wants to speak, or to walk, or to jump, and the others are compliant, that one is in control and we speak, walk, jump; if there is a conflict of desires then the majority takes control—if Rafe and I wished to remain silent, Cezarro would be unable to say, as he does, "Mr. Voller, it is good to make your acquaintance."

Rafe and I let Cezarro and Voller establish an amicable relationship. I observe, as ever, noting that Breir hovers nervously in the background, occasionally eyeing the bodyguards placed strategically around Voller. At one point, while Voller is being consulted by one of his assistants, I ask Cezarro why he has taken such a liking to the Pavonian.

—Kieran, my friend, he replies. It is a question of rapport, not one of like or dislike. You must open yourself, if you are to truly experience another world, or another person. You must immerse yourself if communication is to proceed.

He often speaks in such a vein, but this time I suspect that he is hiding something, a trait of his own of which perhaps even he is unaware. In short, I suspect him of simple snobbery, that he has recognized in Voller's casual authority an echo of his own noble origins. I do not communicate my suspicions. We have to live together, after all.

"The land the Burul'chasi occupy is high in mineral potential," says Voller, later. "We require full information about the region before any decisions are taken. You will report directly to me and, if necessary, I will go there myself. I am a participant, gentlemen—I get things done. This project is my personal concern. We are an expanding colony with expanding needs; more so since our Consolidation with the Interstitial community." He spreads his hands. "The potential of this region could be pivotal to Pavonis Minor's renaissance. We must consider the requirements of the entire Pavonian population."

—And Voller-Kalder, adds Rafe.

Now I wonder if my cohabitee is politically motivated, but I keep my thoughts to myself. If he is, then he has kept it remarkably well concealed. I do not believe that his reason for returning to Pavonis Minor can be as simple as that. Anything unsavoury would have been screened out during our construction.

Voller's statement is the first indication that there was a commercial motive for hiring us to investi-

gate the Burul'chasi people, although the cost of our deployment, alone, would indicate such a probability. At his words I felt, as so often, the momentary spark of protest, the hope that my skills are not to be put to a negative use, but I calmed my thoughts. Our observations, the pictures from our eyes, will be delivered to Voller, but simultaneously they will be transmitted to Jurassic Informatic for multimedia dissemination. Our observations will enter the public domain. If I have a single principle it is that knowledge should be spread, that data should be free. In that way, perhaps, I am an intellectual revolutionary.

This morning, Silas Breir came early to the hotel and watched as we ate breakfast. "What if your tastes conflict?" he asked, at one point. There was clearly a lot he would like to ask, if social propriety did not intervene.

"They do not," said Cezarro. "Not now." We spooned the chilled lentil stew into our mouth. "The social class structure of Capella Gregoria forbids me to eat pulses," he continued, gesturing at our meal, "but that ethic was not copied into the analogue that rides this body." Knowing our body so well, I detected Cezarro's sneer, but I doubt that Breir noticed. Cezarro is such a snob.

The city streets were thronged with people, out early for their work. Market traders, garbage compilers, goods being transported on horse-drawn carts. Levels of technology were low, in general—a sign of Pavonis Minor's traditionally isolationist politics, Cezarro observed. Before setting out we had dressed in a protective skin-suit: complete environmental isolation from the chin down, it allowed the body to breathe and moisture to pass out, but nothing could enter unless the outfit's fabric was breached. Breir wore his normal clothing, along with a pair of gauntleted leather gloves he produced as we approached the docks. Our attire attracted a ripple of curious glances, following us from street to street.

Now, we sit in the boat, soothed by the throb of its engines and the chatter of the two-man crew. The estuary is several hours behind us and the vegetation growing in the River Burul's shallows has steadily changed as the acidity has crept upwards. The estuary, where the acid was regularly diluted by tidal inflow, had been fringed with Terran reeds and succulents, their rich greenness at odds with the gentler hues native to Pavonis Minor.

—Spikes of wavering-grass grow up from twisting masses of racemose moss, says Rafe, contributing the native's commentary as I focus on the nearest bank. Our eyes are tank-grown, giving a precision normally only available with non-biological optics. A memorychip, located where the optic nerve interfaces with our brain, saves the images; auditory, tactile and olfactory data can also be stored. We are a recording machine.

—The clusters of small flowers you can see are, in fact, seed pods which will be dropped into the river where the acid will break their shells and they will take root downstream. Nobody knows how they spread upstream.

This is all worthy stuff, and will no doubt be scrapped. Breir is sitting by us and now he breaks into our work. "You do not, I think, realize what an exclusive opportunity the Burul'chasi offer you."

He is clearly unaware that one of us is a native Pavonian and so we are fully aware of the opportunity afforded us. We have also been briefed. We wait for him to continue, as it is apparent he wants to say more.

"Very few Pavonians can enter Chasi territory in safety, you know. Perhaps a few of the Pastorals do—some even trade a little—but anyone from farther afield is at grave peril. And yet you come from the stars to record them. It took much effort to persuade them to allow you in."

"What are the dangers?" asks Cezarro.

"Individuals and teams have tried to penetrate the Burul'chasi jungle, but many have not returned. Voller-Kalder have sent in teams to assess

resource potentials of the area, by air and by boat, and many report sabotage, ambush and even open aggression. That, presumably, is why they have hired you to report for them: to learn how to defeat the Chasi people and claim their territory."

The three of us consult, but we agree that, as our reports are agency property, they will be a public commodity and, as such, we cannot be held responsible for use or misuse of publicly held information. I think it unlikely that Voller could gain in this way, in any case. I think, perhaps, he has merely tried to tackle an unknown in his own crude way and failed, so now he is casting for more information.

"The Burul'chasi are a fascinating people," says Breir. "Every native Pavonian feels an empathy with their ways and their intimacy with the great jungle."

"Even Voller?" asks Cezarro.

Breir thinks for a moment. "Perhaps especially Carnegie Voller. He has a lodge on the fringe of the jungle which he visits often. We are all drawn. There is something magical about the forest: you can feel it inside your head at times. If there is intelligent non-human life on Pavonis Minor, I sometimes feel that the jungle must be the prime candidate...." He looks embarrassed, suddenly, at having opened himself up to such an extent. "I wish I could accompany you," he says. "I would like to see the Chasi again."

It's clearly an intentional slip: his admission that he is one of the few to have gained access to the Burul'chasi. Perhaps he wishes to distract us from his lapse into airy mysticism.

"But they specified that only one person should come to observe them," says Cezarro, "and that that one person should be an outside reporter, someone from across the great Interstice of space."

"No," says Breir, apparently enjoying his disclosure. "Their messenger added that specification in order to ensure that the situation on Pavonis Minor should be disseminated as widely as possible, and there-

fore that any assault on the Chasi—by Voller or whoever—would also be a public affair. They took a great deal of persuasion."

During our conversation with Breir I have become aware of something new in Rafe's familiar nervous tension. Presumably it is because he is now in his home territory, a region he left some years ago for reasons of his own. I decide not to press him.

The jungle is rising on either side of the river and the heat has become intense. The only Terran life that persists this far south are the hordes of tiny hunchbacked mosquitoes which hang over the river's surface, making the occasional foray towards the boat in search of sustenance. The trees are a mere ten or so metres in height here, but their spread is immense. Each trunk is perhaps forty metres from its nearest neighbour, but its branches begin from near its base and spread vigorously outwards, merging with each other so that it is impossible to identify the extent of a single tree. I think again of Breir's words. It is as if the jungle is a single organism, anchored at regular intervals by these wide-boled trunks. Rafe informs us that the pattern repeats itself below the ground, with the roots running together like the branches. It is immediately obvious why we enter the Burul'chasi jungle by boat.

One of the crew comes forward and gestures at the sky, now heavy with bulging brown clouds. "It will rain," he says simply.

We shelter together towards the rear, under the boat's single canopy. The rain will be almost as acid as the River Burul's waters. Perhaps not potent enough to do any lasting damage, but still enough to cause a degree of discomfort. We sit and watch the rain and the passing jungle, and in our head I marvel at how the mosquitoes still dance unharmed over the river's surface.

**W**e are on our own now. The boat deposited us in a clearing over an hour ago and left, with Breir's reminder echoing back across the water that he would return for us as

soon as we called. A trail led away from the clearing and we are now following it, relying on Rafe's knowledge to ensure that we do not trigger the defenses of any of the dangerous plants which are occasionally to be found.

Eventually, Rafe picks out a sound from the background hisses and crackles of the vegetation and the invertebrate life, and we know that we have found them, or that they have found us.

We turn carefully, hands held palm outwards, twisting at the waist. Two men occupy the trail ten metres back. One holds a spear, ready to throw. They are both about our height, with lean, athletic bodies, clothed only in loin cloths and arm-bands. Leaves are tied into the hair that grows from patches on the back of their heads and their skin is—

Cezarro is panicking. It feels as though moths are trapped inside our skull, beating at its interior, trying to find a way out. He has noticed their skin, or perhaps their spears. No...it is definitely their skin.

It must be the acid—it falls as rain, native plants trap and concentrate it for defense and predation, it runs in all of the jungle's rivers and streams—it must be the acid that scars them so. I look at the native who stands, spear resting on the ground. His ears are reduced to mere stubs, his nose has been eaten entirely away. His eyelids are absent so that he constantly stares through watering eyes, the tears running down over the rough scar-tissue landscape of his cheeks. His lips are ragged and partially dissolved, so that he wears a permanent snarl, made all the more threatening by the gaps in his teeth.

We had been warned of the effects of life in the Burul'chasi jungle but there had been no images to make it real. We are the first reporter to get this close.

For myself, I find their appearance interesting but not disturbing. I am a neutral observer, I have seen far worse. But there is something more...something I cannot quite identify. Cezarro is over his initial reaction and is now pretending that it never

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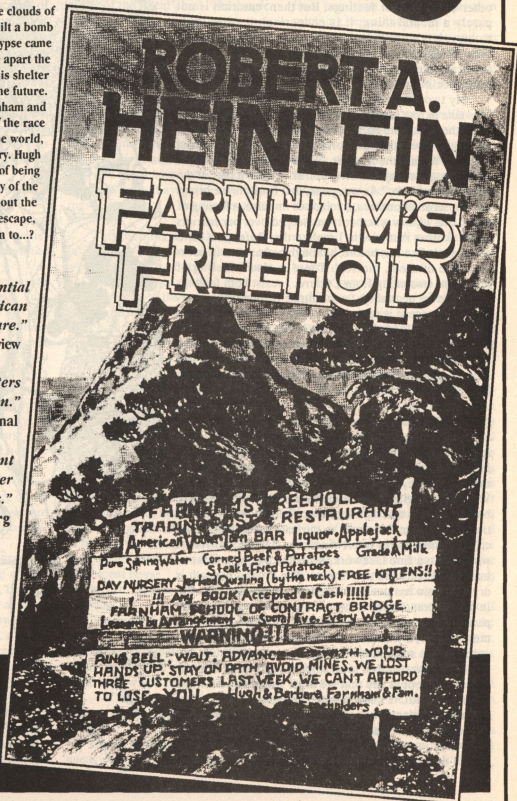
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happened. And now I realize why my feelings are tinged with something else: Rafe. Our partner is expressing a peculiar mix of emotions—fear, yes, but there is a memory there, a feeling of nostalgia and, perhaps, longing—and they are seeping over to affect me and, I presume, Cezarro. In theory such a thing should not happen: within our single cranium we are still three people, or three analogues according to Cezarro. We do not know each other's thoughts or feelings. But then, emotion is not purely a mental thing, it is endocrinal, cardiac, pulmonary: it is a whole-body experience, a state of arousal to be interpreted and promoted by the mental processes of the brain. Perhaps it is through our shared body that Rafe's feelings seep out.

My two partners swivel the body again, so that our eyes take in four more Chasi who have appeared ahead of us on the trail. Rafe speaks, our language different again, although some Pavonian words are common to the Chasi dialect: "We are the Jurassic. We were brought by Silas Breir along the majestic-river Burul. We are a part of the Great Tree of Life." As we speak, that final phrase brings me to a sense of oneness, a religious impulse, a feeling of awe. I don't know whether it has seeped over our barriers or the feeling is my own. I realize that Rafe must have seen people like this before, although he has clearly never been one of them, himself. There is also a feeling of repulsion, emanating from Cezarro. I resist both feelings and strive for neutrality; I concentrate on our eyes, ensuring that the scene is recorded as effectively as possible.

"You would be dead already if that was not so," says one of the Chasi. He turns and heads off along the trail so we follow and, in turn, are followed by the two who had initially appeared behind us. It would appear that we have little choice.

**T**he village of the Burul'chasi is an impressive creation.

There is a central tree trunk which is decorated with leaves and bones and appears to have some deep spiritual importance. They call it simply the Tree, as opposed to the Great Tree, which is the name they give the forest. Where branches grow from the base of the Tree they have been guided up and then across at a height of a little over two metres; here they form an intricate canopy, branches crisscrossing, twigs intertwined, the hair-like air-roots woven into a fine lacework, all filled out by a mass of leaves and buds and new shoots. The ground beneath is dry, as if rain has not penetrated the canopy for decades. In places, branches have been drawn downwards to form partitions and screens, private areas for family groups, a men's room, a women's room, a holy booth for what appears to be some kind of shaman-cum-leader.

No one has spoken to us since we arrived at this settlement, except to say that we must stay away from the shaman's booth. "I know," Rafe told them, but since then he has been silent. I am a little worried by him, but I do not know what we can do; perhaps it is more a worry for him—this journey has clearly been an emotional one. What I do know is that his local knowledge has already



proven both invaluable and informative. I ask Cezarro what he is thinking and he replies, —Look at the women. They dress just like the men—a loin cloth, a set of arm-bands—yet look at their skin, their hair.

He is right. It is true that they, too, are scarred by acid-burns; but as I noticed on our arrival, the extent of the damage is far less extreme. Their ears, eyelids, lips and noses are intact, their scalp has not been burned away in uneven patches, their bodies are marked but not heavily disfigured. Their scarring, on the whole, is more superficial than that of their male counterparts. The children, too, are barely marked. Our eyes record this fact, and Cezarro asks me what I think.

—It is not my place to think, I tell him. I observe.

—Nobody is your perfect neutral observer, he replies. We all must think. Perhaps they never leave the settlement? Could that be it?

But my powers of observation are more refined than Cezarro's. I am a professional. I have noted already that the women are constantly coming and going along the various trails that branch out from the settlement. They return with fruit and dead animals and sloshing buckets; they are not a protected elite. I ask Rafe for more information but he refuses to reply, so I return to my observations, my recording, and Cezarro watches the women.

**W**e have been here for five of the long Pavonian days and we are on the verge of a notable breakthrough.

Our presence is still begrudged but now the Chasi are more accustomed to us following them, recording their conversations, their actions. Cezarro has come into his own. His encyclopedic knowledge of the diversity of human cultures both informs his commentaries and yields him insights that are hidden from me, the observer. He is able to note a gesture, to spot its echo in others, to classify a whole range of body language that has evolved since the Burul'chasi and their relative groups

throughout this jungle branched away from the human mainstream over 180 standard years ago. We have observed the activities of the settlement's shaman; we have listened to his sermons and commandments and from this Cezarro has pieced together an idea of the spiritual life of the Burul'chasi. The jungle, the Great Tree, is central to their beliefs. It gives life and it nurtures them and teaches them and finally it returns them to the soil. Cezarro says this is fundamentally a Christian ideal, with the pagan symbol of the Great Tree as a God-surrogate. In his view of this matter I detect a cultural bias: an implication that the Chasi are primitives and therefore mistaken. I had never suspected that cynical Cezarro might have religious leanings, somewhere in the depths of our mind.

This morning something important is happening and, although we were not invited, we follow and have not yet been turned away.

We woke to the sound of female voices, raised in a jarring cacophony which threatened to befuddle our senses. We sleep in the open, so as soon as we awoke we were able to survey the settlement and establish that the women had gathered in one of the larger enclosures, which they were sealing off with a branch drawn down from the canopy. The settlement's children were in another enclosure, listening to an old man's story.

Our head jerked towards the shaman's booth and we saw that the men were gathered there, beginning to process out along one of the trails, led by the shaman and a group of adolescent boys.

All in agreement, we rose and followed.

The procession was brief, punctuated only—in our head—by Cezarro's observation that this was clearly some kind of rite of passage: these boys would become men today.

—If they are brave, said Rafe, before returning to his customary silence.

It was then that I began to feel uneasy.

Now, we stand in a small clearing, sky above us for the first time since our journey along the River Burul. I try to remain calm, detached. I try to remain unaffected by Cezarro's excitement and Rafe's indecipherable feelings, but it is hard, with our body humming with adrenaline, our heart thumping, our skin prickling beneath its protective suit.

I concentrate on observing, on recording. I swivel our body at the hips to take in the jungle rising behind us, around us and, after about forty metres, ahead of us.

The clearing occupied by this group of men and boys is uneven and rocky, overgrown in places by a bristly green mat which exudes acid underfoot. Between the far side of the clearing and the return of the jungle there is a pool, fringed by one or two wisps of vegetation but otherwise apparently lifeless. A mound rises by the pool and now the shaman pauses before it.

He gives a signal and, as the men and boys form a semi-circle around him, they begin to chant, a deep sound that reverberates through the rock and up into our body, matching the pace of our heart, the blood in our arteries and veins.

We stop at the fringe of the semi-circle and watch as the shaman crouches and lowers cupped hands into the pool. A boy steps forward and squats before his elder. He gives a faint whimper as the cupped hands open over his head, the liquid runs down onto his scalp, and his hair begins to melt. He stifles his cries as more of the pool's acid is poured over his head. Somehow the shaman's hands are unharmed by the process; presumably the scar tissue is so thick as to be protective.

Cezarro says something about the expressions of compassion on the watching men's faces. He is right. They have all been through this themselves. The term he uses is *savage nobility*, and for a moment I see what he means, before I return to observing, and Cezarro to his commentary. He says that this is not an unheard-of phenomenon: the mental strength necessary to survive the rite,

the respect and acceptance it earns, is a common currency of status right across the human spectrum. Some of the ritual scarifications practised on pre-exodus Earth were far more severe, he says.

Now, the shaman has baptised four of the seven boys. The man we have identified as his understudy has started a second stage of this rite. He reaches into a bucket and comes up with a handful of a thick greasy substance. The first boy—his expression now glazed over with resolve—removes his loin cloth and the man smears the boy's genitals with his grease. Our body flinches at that, but the substance does not appear to burn or to do any harm at all. Cezarro says this stage must have some kind of fertility significance.

We watch, we wait, as the last of the boys has his genitals daubed. I wonder what will happen next.

The men change their chant to a faster one and I can sense Rafe's intense anxiety, the urge to run, to flee. I realize that he has witnessed this ritual before and as his emotions flood our body I sense that on that occasion he had, indeed, fled.

We stand still, at the fringe of the group of men and the now separate group of burnt and daubed boys.

The first boy clambers up the mound, the shaman barks a command and the boy jumps clear of the mound, out over the still pool. He screams as he breaks the mirror surface, and then his scream is cut off as he is entirely submerged.

My calm neutrality is finally shattered. I want to do something but our body does not respond, my impulses being overridden by my two partners.

—Observe, says Cezarro. Understand.

His voice simply adds to my discomfort.

The second boy jumps and then the first returns to the surface, limp at first, then moving, slowly. The pool cannot be deep as he appears to be standing with the burning liquid up to his waist. The second boy rises and, as the third jumps from the mound, the first two struggle back to the

bank. As they pull clear of the pool, the extent of the damage becomes painfully apparent and still I am anchored to the ground.

The skin of each boy has been almost entirely eaten away except, apparently, for that area protected by the daubing of the shaman's assistant. They are both a mass of raw flesh, bone showing through their hands and feet, teeth exposed. Somehow, when they are clear of the pool they remain standing, supporting each other as the shaman showers them with some kind of dust. The third boy escapes the pool more rapidly and is less seriously burnt.

I watch in horror as the fourth, fifth, and sixth boys dive from the mound and struggle out anew, as men, not boys. The seventh has watched the others and, standing on the mound, is clearly terrified. He jumps and screams, and then has trouble standing and has to be hauled from the pool by the shaman and his assistant.

My professional detachment has fled me and I am immensely grateful that the whole thing is over. I start to voice that thought in our head for the others when I realize that something has changed.

Our body begins to move and I sense that it is Rafe in control. I query my partners and all Cezarro says is,

—Observe, my friend. Just observe.

I start to panic as Rafe reaches for the release hasp of our skin-suit and starts to unpeel our protective layer. I...I think I know what he....

We reach for the bucket and smear our sexless crotch with the shaman's protective grease and I struggle to seize control of our body. We stagger, remain upright, as I fight Rafe for control. Nearby, one of the boys has finally collapsed.

Why isn't Cezarro helping? What does he think he's doing?

We straighten as Cezarro finally intervenes. My gratitude towards him is tempered by anger that he took so long to join me in overpowering Rafe. And then we step towards the mound.

—What are you doing? I scream into the void of our head.

—This isn't our body, says Cezarro quietly. It is a vehicle. We are not us—we are merely analogue reproductions of selected parts of our real selves. We have nothing to lose.

The coolness of his voice shocks me. Horrifies me. We climb the mound and look around at the silent men of the Burul'chasi.

—The only way to understand a culture is to merge with it, to become one with its ideals and its ways. Believe me, Kieran: this is the way to comprehension.

We step to the front of the mound and look out over the mirror surface of the pool. There is nothing I can do. Our body is in Rafe's hands.

We breathe in, hold the air in our lungs, and jump.

**T**ime has lost its footing. Pain is so familiar as to have shrugged off all meaning. We survive. Here, in our skull, we survive.

I am not aware of how long we have been like this.

We are in a camp apart from the main settlement of the Tree. But the Great Tree is around us, protecting us, and for that we are grateful. We are tended by the shaman and a small group of adult males who are not true men. They bear only the scars of the rain and the plants, they never passed to manhood in the pool of life. They nurse us, soothing our burns with ointments and powders and damp leaves from the Great Tree. For that, too, I am grateful.

Although I have tried, I am unable to recall anything after we jumped from that mound and the mirror-surfaced pool was suddenly below us. It is all blank. It is purely a mental thing: every detail will be recorded on our storage chip but we are unable to access it—professional facilities are required for that.

As time has progressed in its erratic way I have decided to be grateful for that memory gap. The body remembers, that is enough.

I know I have ranted and raged, here in our single cranium. To that the only response was Cezarro's gen-





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tle reassurance that this is the only way to know, the only way to see. Cezarro merely frustrates me, but he did break through to Rafe, on one occasion. All he said was,

—Why?

—I was brought up in the Meth'uran settlements, farming on the fringes of existence. I didn't like it, I wanted to be free.

His words and sentences were spaced out and awkward, but once he had started, Rafe was unable to stop. He continued,

—It's the trees...the Great Tree. Everyone who knows the jungle knows the pull of it, the need to be a part of it. It calls to you. Maybe in that respect I was no different to everyone else. I explored. Each time I went deeper, deeper, until finally I made contact with the Burul'chasi—not this group, another, many kilometres away—and eventually I earned their acceptance...and then they led me out with a group of other boys and...and I couldn't do it. I ran. They let me go, I had failed. I lived in Lupert-Grijns, and then when the Interstitial ships came I worked my passage out.

I wondered how his desire to return and do what he had done had survived the persona selection and compression we had all undergone in order to be fitted into this one body. I voiced my query and Cezarro replied with a question of his own,

—Did you plan to do this, Rafe?

The silence was enough for me to realize that the only way such a suicidal urge could have survived was if it had been hidden even from its originator. Finally, Rafe spoke again.

—I have done it, he said. Now I am Chasi.

—We all did it, said Cezarro.

—We? I? said Rafe. What is the difference?

And Cezarro could not reply.

I have been delirious, here in the bosom of the Great Tree. Visions have come and gone, like dreams, only more so, or less so; or analogues of dreams, Cezarro might say. The branches of the Great Tree have engulfed me, swept me up, and my

body has felt blissfully cool and at peace. I have been dashed against the ground, against the banks of the River Burul. I have been dragged out of their snug embrace, born again into a world that is immediately alien, immediately familiar. I have been a young, aristocratic man, persevering with my studies even though I have always felt there was more to life than learning, that there was experience, that the universe was out there, waiting to be lived. I have been an adolescent running, fearfully, through an awful, frightening jungle, losing my way, struggling, suffering acid burns from the plants I stumble against, even as I run from a fear of pain. I have been a young reporter, watching slaughter and injustice on planet after planet and doing nothing because I am neutral, uninvolved.

I surface in order to eat and be tended. Cezarro and Rafe are no better. We three suffer in unison. Rafe repeats yet again that he has done it, whatever it is, but Cezarro contradicts him.

—No, Rafe, my friend, he says. We are doing it now. This is where we become Burul'chasi. This is "it."

—We're not Burul'chasi, I say. We are independent. We are observers. We have to report.

—Can't you feel the Great Tree? asks Rafe. Can't you feel it embracing our mind?

I think of those cool branches, soothing me, engulfing me. I remember feelings of empathy with a beneficent sentience too all-encompassing to fully comprehend. I don't know what it means. I remember the delirium we suffered following our construction and wonder if it has recurred. I try not to think. I am merely an observer.

—Everybody feels it, continues Rafe. Or at least a trace of it. That's why we're all so drawn towards the jungle. We all want to be one with the Great Tree, with the world. Some of us fight it, some of us flee...and some are so scared they lash out and attempt to destroy it.

—Voller, says Cezarro.

—We have to get out and report, I say, trying to remind myself of our

duties. I cannot cope with all this debate. I have to remain neutral.

—Impossible, says Cezarro. We are Burul'chasi. We cannot leave. It is not allowed.

I don't know what to think. I'm not sure I know how to think any more. There is truth in what we say, what we think. I have seen the things Cezarro and Rafe have seen but I still believe them to be delusions, a part of the recovery process. One has to remain rational.

I have to be honest with myself and admit to the awful compulsion to assimilate with the Burul'chasi, to become a part of the Great Tree. I try to think of reasons, of psychotropic secretions that addict us to the jungle, of vast, alien organisms that can grow over hectares and hectares and communicate with humanity through visions and dreams. It is all so fantastical. I sometimes feel that I have come close to the truth, but if so, I am barely skimming the surface. I feel that if there is any truth then it is far too big a Truth to be encompassed by a single human mind such as our own.

We are walking now, and have been accepted back into the settlement of the Tree. Our body has healed with remarkable speed—the shaman and his assistant must be skilled in the arts of healing—and there is even a sense of vitality lurking in our every movement. We have passed through an awful trauma and now we are strong. There is little, after this, that can daunt us.

I remain, detached within our skull. Trying to understand, and never quite grasping what has happened.

Cezarro and Rafe have rediscovered a sense of purpose. They know that if we do not return to Lupert-Grijns, then Voller will lose patience and might attempt something we would all regret. He must not attack the Great Tree, mineral resources or no.

We found the transmitter on our old suit and called Silas Breir. He was ready for us, even though we had been some weeks longer than

expected. He said he was glad we had called because Carnegie Voller was getting impatient. Then he added that he was also glad that we had survived, although he had never doubted we would. The shaman had taken some persuasion before he would let us leave, but he had finally given his consent.

When we climbed onto the boat, Breir studied our appearance for a long time before nodding and giving the command to start up to the boat's driver. Back in Lupert-Grijns he provided the facilities we requested—an editing console so that we could manipulate our recording—and then he brought us here to the offices of Voller-Kalder.

Carnegie Voller is in his favoured body-stocking and tunic. He flicks his tail of black hair over his shoulder and tips his chair, appraising our ravaged visage over steeped fingers. I remember his words at our first meeting: "I am a participant, gentleman. I get things done." He nods slowly and then voices a command to his desk. The formalities are over and he is eager to view our report.

He plays it on a wide wall-screen, skimming forward through the jumbled succession of background shots and natural-history commentaries. He wants to see the Burul'chasi. He wants to understand them. He wants them—it is so obvious—out of his way.

He reaches our first encounter on the trail to the Tree and I can see that he is fascinated and appalled. I can sense that he is drawn—the Rafe in me recognizes the feeling. And the Cezarro speaks.

"They are weak," we say. "They are there for the taking." It is our duty to report to Carnegie Voller, it is our professional ethic. He hires us. Voller skims onward through our first few days and then to the initiation. It is here that Silas Breir's console has been put to use. We try not to betray our tension. The screen shows the boys being baptised, their heads doused in the holy water of the pool. It shows the men looking on. The viewpoint shifts until we stand on the mound.

I do not dare look at Voller. Either he is hooked or we have failed. An analysis of the report will reveal our editing but we expect him to be too eager to commission one.

The viewpoint jumps, hits the pool, goes black.

At last we meet Voller's eyes and know that he has not spotted the joins. "Our sight went at that point," we say. "Currently we can see, but not record. It can be fixed, if necessary."

"And you say they treat you like a god, now?" He still harbours doubts, naturally.

"I would not be so extreme, sir," says Cezarro. "But they granted our every wish. Total immersion made us so much more holy than mere baptism, we believe. The shaman has potions that hastened our healing—we only took so long to return because we enjoyed the sense of authority so much." We smile.

"You think I could do it?" It was unexpected for his arrogance to lapse in this way.

"I did," says Cezarro. "Fear is understate—"

Voller's arrogance snapped back into place. I recognized it: it was so Capellan. The idea that we could do something that was beyond Carnegie Voller was inconceivable.

"And a body can always be repaired," says Cezarro.

As Voller snaps commands to his assistant, we know, now, for certain, that he will accompany us back to the home of the Burul'chasi, that he will immerse himself in the pool of life and then, without a doubt, he will embark on the self-learning that is central to the healing process. And when the Great Tree has embraced him, when it has shared the shape of his mind and opened him to the wonder of all existence...then he will be Burul'chasi and the jungle will be safe again, for a time. We close our eyes and picture him jumping, and now the Great Tree within us is content. ■



## OUR WRITERS

**Warren Brown** lives in Tulsa with his wife and daughter. He has published fiction in *Amazing Stories*, *F&SF*, *Omni*, and others. He has just completed a novel. **Keith Brooke** lives in England. A previous story in the present series, "Anthrocline," appeared in *TOMORROW* Number 4. "Jurassic and the Great Tree" previously appeared in the English magazine, *Interzone*. **Charles D. Eckert** is an active member of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. His work has sold to *Analog*, *Weird Tales*, *Amazing Stories*, and *Writers of the Future Volume VI*, among others. "Hard Target" marks a noteworthy debut in *TOMORROW*. **William Esrac** lives in Australia, where he is a well-known dance teacher. His only previous sale was to L. Ron Hubbard's *Writers of the Future* Contest, and the resulting anthology. But he has since then produced a number of notable works, and *TOMORROW* is proud to begin bringing them to you. **Felicity Savage** is 19 and a graduate of Clarion East in 1992. She grew up mainly in the British Isles, moving to the U.S. when she was 14. The places she has lived range from Connemara in Ireland to an apartment in Paris to Cambridge, Mass. She is currently a sophomore at Columbia University. **John A. Sentry** had a career in the 1950's in *Astounding Science Fiction* and *Fantastic Universe* magazines. Having retired from a humdrum job, he is now writing again. **Cynthia Ward** attended the 1992 Clarion West workshop. She has lived in California, Germany, Spain, and Maine. She was born in Oklahoma. She has had stories published in *Sword and Sorceress*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, and *Nova Express*, among others. She has stories forthcoming in a number of publications. **Mustafa Zahirovic** is 24 years old, and lives in Melbourne, Australia. He has been writing in one form or another since the age of about 15, and he has interests in writing shorter fiction as well as novels, poems, and film scripts. He works with his hands for a living. "Bagataway" is his first professional sale. ■



# HARD TARGET

Charles D. Eckert

Illustrated by Margaret Ballif Simon

*Archimedes was the philosopher who wouldn't bother to fight the Roman soldier and had his philosophical work terminated permanently. A true philosopher avoids brawls but is a deadly effective fighter for all that.*

—John W. Campbell, Jr.

## Prologue

I have reason to conclude that he who would get me into his power without my consent would use me as he pleased when he got me there, and destroy me, too, when he had a fancy to it; for nobody can desire to have me in his absolute power unless it be to compel me by force to that which is against the right of my freedom, i.e., make me his slave. To be free from such force is the only security of my preservation; and reason bids me look on him as an enemy to my preservation who would take away that freedom which is the fence to it.

—John Locke

“The operation of a plasma hand weapon is simplicity itself.”

That's what it says right here in the owner's manual, known in some circles as *The Heathen's Handbook*.

[HEADS-UP DISPLAY: ACTIVATED]

And they don't stop there.

Following the obligatory Read-This-Before-Doing-Anything warning, and hidden among general background information, complete maintenance instructions, product warranty and liability disclaimers, are these profunctorily nested lines, to wit: “The new PFH-1A1b functions via a deceptively uncomplac-

ed method which is not merely an improvement over prototype but a radical union of venerated traditions and startlingly original design concepts....”

[TARGET ACQUISITION: SEARCHING]

“...1) With either hand, grip the butt of the weapon in the conventional manner...”

[NOTE—The receiver assembly is unblocked by this preliminary action—NOTE]

“...2) With either hand, a shielded magazine of glass and gold pellets filled with deuterium & tritium is then inserted into the receiver...”



[CAUTION—The weapon is electrically charged by this second process—CAUTION]

"...3) Utilizing the Automatic Laser Sighting Mechanism (The Red Dot®), take careful aim at a JUDICIOUSLY SELECTED target..."

[REMINDER—Under no circumstances point a loaded weapon at any object you do not wish to hit—REMINDER]

"...4) Introduce your index finger into the trigger-well..."

[WARNING—It is recommended that this movement be practiced by DRY FIRING until a LIGHT TOUCH becomes second nature—WARNING]

"...5) Prudently increase the pressure of your index finger upon the trigger plate..."

[EXTREME CAUTION!—ALL ADDITIONAL INTERNAL SAFETIES ARE AUTOMATICALLY DISENGAGED DURING THIS PROCEDURE—EXTREME CAUTION!]

"...6) At a response adjustable from .5 to 10gm, the solar-rechargeable-battery-powered, touch-sensitive disk engages the static 'sear' which discharges..."

[LOCK-ON: TACTICAL DRONES LOCATED]

"...thereby, 7) initiating a LASER-ACTIVATED MICRO-MINIATURIZED CONTROLLED FUSION; which subsequently—

[FIRE!]

"...8) exits the magnetic containment tubing—"

[FIRE!]

—of the weapon's barrel—"

[FIRE!]

—in the form of a PLASMA PULSE..."

[★★TARGETS DESTROYED★★]

So far, that's straightforward and technically titillating.

Not to mention fun.

What they *don't* tell you: It's a bitch to break down and clean.

The IAlb has no moving parts when fully assembled. How something so elegantly simple can stand revealed as such a jig-saw of pieces is anyone's guess. Maybe the design engineers at the fun-loving firm of SIG-Sauer/Zeiss were more enamored with the inherent beauty of their solutions to the initial problems rather than with field maintenance and serviceability.

Typical.

I'll say this: the PFH is appropriately named inasmuch as that makes sense to be sound the bugger haps when you touch it off (PUFFFHHH). It's a humorous little report discernable only on a specially equipped indoor facility. In the vacuum of space, naturally, it's completely silent. That's no surprise. So is everything else.

Anyway, allowing for dispersion at maximum range it will gnaw a 20cm hole through a half-meter-thick section of Chobham/Tokeavov armor. (I know, I know; I thought the same thing when I originally came across that snippet of news. But, believe me, truth has nothing whatsoever to do with credibility.) What the pulse will do to a human being—not to mention the smell it leaves in the wake of tissue under proper conditions and environment—must be experienced (or, rather, avoided) to be believed. I'm serious. Forget body armor. It's a joke. If something's dropping in the pot and you're anywhere near, I'd suggest an MFG, belt of vest, and even then the magnetic field might bend the pulse around the shield but it won't stop it.

I suppose you actually *can't* have everything.

The weapon is a nasty item. Expensive, too. Darned thing is a hell of a 'last resort' in personal protection. It certainly replaced my old Linear Induction model, although I've kept *Madeleine* for sentimental reasons. Sad. I guess that's progress. I'm not sure I want to know what's next from Santa. In any case, the Plasma Fusion Handweapon is here and now.

By the way, it's also illegal. On Earth, that is.

The statesman who should attempt to direct private people in what manner they ought to employ their capitals, would not only load himself with a most unnecessary attention, but assume an authority which could safely be trusted to no council and senate whatever, and which would nowhere be so dangerous as in the hands of a man who had folly and presumption enough to fancy himself fit to exercise it.

—Adam Smith

The comm-link crackled in my earpiece and I raised my helmet's gold visor out of habit.

"Hey, Sgt. York," Muri Inouye said. "Time out. Duty calls."

She's got a sense of humor, that woman. Just because my given is Alvin, Muri thinks it's cute to nickname me after some early 20th century military sharpshooter. In a way, I'm flattered. I hear he was deadly. Still, the patronymic is *Clarke*. Alvin E. That's "Al" to my friends and "Mr. Clarke" to everyone else. I could almost see a delicious smirk on the strong face behind that resonant contralto voice.

"On my way," I acknowledged, realizing my wild and happy free time was over and it was back to work. I stowed the PFH, then lazily turned my Manned Maneuvering Unit using the small nitrogen thrusters. It's easy to see why we call them gas-passers. Handy little hummers they are, though, funny or not.

I wheeled, adjusting for frame-of-reference, and headed in.

If you've never seen the view from here, I'm all sympathy and solace. It's what has taken the place of Naples as the thing to do before you die. The bulls of Pamplona are manure machines, in comparison, and Kilimanjaro is an annoying pebble in someone's shoe.

Four objects dominate: Sol, Luna, and Earth—with its volcanic dust-choked browns, yellows that taste of flowers, greens you can smell, reds suggesting embers in faraway fires, and those swirling whites billowing over beryl blues—joined by

the O'Neil-inspired pristine loveliness of the Colony itself, possessing a different color altogether. And the soundless song of the LIBERTAS, suspended in ink and rotating with majestic solemnity in that blackest of skies, flings you against a background forever strewn with ice-pure flecks of light and caresses your soul like the solar wind.

If that doesn't say *Home* to you, if you're not moved league-deep by a picture like that, crawl back into your casket and pull down the lid. The rest of us want to get on with the business of living.

God, she's beautiful.

Sol is our main power source. Luna, the Asteroids, and part of the Jovian system are phenomenal resource bases. Earth, and everybody else, is our Agora. Things are popping on the mudball now, as usual. But maybe someday the U.N. could—what, am I crazy? The United Nations couldn't secure an Amsterdam warehouse, much less a peaceful world.

I matched spin at Omega Hub.

Most colonies have structural similarities. They're not identical by any means but the columnar centers, the solar panels and collectors, airlocks, docking stations, and communications are fairly standard. At least they're compatible. Parts and repairs can be facilitated more efficiently if primary systems are interchangeable (with, in some instances, the well-worn Finagle Factor). It makes economic sense and that's what counts.

"Kick in some boost, Al," Inouye said, over the comm. "Don't you know better than to keep a lady waiting?"

"I didn't realize your mother was with you," I whispered.

"I heard that!"

"Just kidding."

"Sure you were," she said. "I'd be careful eating sushi from now on, if I were you."

Can you believe that?

Anybody would think I wasn't technically her boss, much less President & CEO of ProTech, Inc. For those who've spent their formative years screwing with incense in a kiln-

dry cave somewhere, we're the company who beat out AttackProof, Ltd., the security division of Brinks, BattleShield Corporation—for what that's worth—and Wells Fargo, for God's sake, to snare the contract for LIBERTAS. Not the easiest thing, I think you'll agree: neither winning the bid, nor fulfilling the terms. Besides the lies we could swap about backroom bloodletting, colonists tend to be pioneering, individualistic, self-motivating, and endearingly cantankerous folk who don't appreciate regulations. Well, neither do I. So we have that and more in common, including stock options and mutual funds. Beyond that, you don't get out here in the first place if you're unable to handle the business you've chosen being both free *and* on your own. (To anyone who thinks the preceding statement is redundant: run, don't walk, to the nearest transportation available and travel in all possible haste to the old screened porch at Grandma's house. Your rocking chair misses you desperately.) Finally, a low bid for a contract better not mean low-quality work. Not if you want to stay in business. If that's hubris, so be it.

Aligning with an airlock, I cycled through.

The colony's Board of Directors: as hard-nosed a bunch as ever met a payroll. To them, community is not abstract theory. It's the reality which makes LIBERTAS possible. Physics gets you here. But economics and community keeps you viable. In fact, all three are vital to everyone's survival.

The hatch irised closed behind me.

I wish I could remember who said the concept of civil rights and civil liberties presupposed the existence of a civil order. Whoever he was, I'd like to have met that crystal-sharp mother. Historically (I've been told) people have argued, fought, and killed one another over how to obtain that elusive "order" for centuries. Then they argued, fought, and killed one another over what to do with it—once they'd achieved it—for a few centuries more. (They're still doing

that dance in various locales on Earth; to some people, a day without blood is a day without sunshine.) "Rights and liberties may be morally grounded in Nature," the fellow said, "but they can become concrete actualities only in circumstances or 'societies' strong and capable enough to combat those elements within (and outside) them who threaten the safety and property of their neighbors." Long-winded, maybe, but aim is dead-on. Otherwise the largest, strongest, most ruthless animals among the campers make the rules. Okay, so you've heard it before. I know there are *some* people who claim I have a problem with originality. But that doesn't mean I'm wrong.

The oxygen indicator flashed, so I removed my helmet.

The fact that many criminals are motivated by political impulses in no way excuses pathological behavior. "Thugs On Drugs" or "Claws With A Cause." What difference does it make to their victims? Simply put, the only choice is: *Those who deal with one another voluntarily vs. Those who deal with others by force.* The answer? *Self-defense, plus.* In other words, if these eccentric ladies and gentlemen precipitate disagreements which cannot be arbitrated normally, a neutral third party is indispensable. Someone everybody respects—even fears—is needed. That's where my company comes in.

For lack of a better word, I guess I'm a cop.

## 2

At all times sincere friends of freedom have been rare, and its triumphs have been due to minorities, that have prevailed by associating themselves with auxiliaries whose objects often differed from their own; and this association, which is always dangerous, has sometimes been disastrous, by giving to opponents just grounds of opposition.

—Lord Acton

Amal Rasheed reveled in his adrenaline flow.

B-section was calm and humming.

*They are so arrogant, he reflected, so self-confident. It is going to be so pleasing to 'trip them up,' as they so boorishly put it. And the time is approaching. Are there truly hours in Paradise?*

He would soon know.

The one darkening aspect of it all was the unfair fact no one would know his name when it was done. Revolutions always demand martyrs. There are unsung soldiers in every battle. He would simply be one of them. That was all.

Allah would know him and that would suffice.

For his organization to acknowledge direct co-responsibility would be to court overwhelming retribution. The times when a group could strike and blend back into the civilized infrastructure were fast receding. Civilian populations were increasingly unwilling to aid or cover for the various cells. Even more frightening was the development not only of more efficient anti-terrorist squads among the police and other authorities, but the emergence of *ad hoc* counter-terrorist networks among the civilians themselves. These 'vigilantes' would attack any overt fronts and all the 'safe houses' they could locate. They were often more effective than police because they rejected local laws as the basis for their actions.

People were *not* suppose to react in that manner.

*Yet even sheep learn, Rasheed thought. They turn our blade against us. Cutting in ways not anticipated.*

*Apparently, fear has its limits.*

All actions had to be planned and executed in total anonymity. This lost the media advantage, unfortunately, but some journalists seemed naively sympathetic in any event. After all, how could they claim objectivity if the devil had no advocate?

It was strangely different here.

These people looked to be another breed. They were not, of course. But something wasn't right. Their rampant individualism precluded any sense of collective insecurity. If everyone took care of themselves and

each other, the community gave every appearance of taking care of itself.

"Society is nothing more nor less than those individual human beings who comprise it," they said.

And they believed it!

It was illusion, naturally. It had to be. The group *must* be more important than the individual. If not, why—

"Amal," Alexei Volkhov said, "are you asleep?"

"What?"

"You look as if you're somewhere between here and Tycho."

"Sorry, Alexei," Rasheed told the B-section supervisor, "just daydreaming. I'll do it on my own time from now on."

## 3

Great part of that order which reigns among mankind is not the *effect* of government. It has its origins in the principles of society and the natural constitution of man. It existed prior to government, and would exist if the formality of government was abolished. The mutual dependence and reciprocal interest which man has upon man, and all the parts of civilized community upon each other, create the great chain of connection which holds it together. The landholder, the farmer, the manufacturer, the merchants, the tradesmen and every other occupation, prospers by the aid which each receives from the other, and from the whole. Common interest regulates their concerns and forms their law; and the laws which common usage ordains, have greater influence than the laws of government. In fine, society performs for itself almost everything which is ascribed to government.

—Thomas Paine

Shedding the pack, I inserted my DebitCard into a chosen slot and the corresponding receptacle hissed open.

I stowed my Unit and EVA gear, feeling as self-conscious as I always do floating there in faded Damarts for the few moments it invariably took to slip into my jumpsuit and transfer weapons. I closed the lid

when I finished and the device spit the plastic back at me.

"Your account is duly logged," it purred, "and payment is now current. Thank you for using InterLock. Have a good shift."

"What do you mean 'payment is now current'?" I said, catching myself as I was about to tell their accounting department what they could do until their next audit. If you start talking to machines, out here in the locks, the medtechs look at you with that gaze of concerned professionalism which pisses you off at the best of times.

Mental health may be a matter of opinion.

A smug and smiling Muri Inouye waited on the farside of the interior hatch as I emerged.

*Ah, sweet civilization.*

Do all men wonder what women are thinking? Maybe not, but I always do. Not that it helps. Women and cats do what they do, proverbially, and your guess is as good as mine. Yet I'd been seeing that leonine smirk wandering through my dreams, lately. It wasn't blue lights and vintage B.B. King cuts on microdisc, but it certainly had its points of interest.

"Hail the Prodigal Son," she said. Delicate lines laced the olive-bronze skin around her epicanthic folds. Thin lips spread warmly in a familiar smile. Everything enclosed in a glistening framework of raven-black hair.

"A man can't practice marksmanship anymore?" I said.

"You can tell the men from the boys by the price of their toys," Muri said through her grin. She anchored casually to the bulkhead, her jump-suit impeccable as ever.

"Funny," I said, following her example at anchor, "and not very original, as you never tire of telling me."

"What's the matter, AI? First time you've heard that joke today?"

The gold necklace gleamed at her throat.

*You can tell the girls from the women by the cost of the trimmin', I thought, running my hands over the salt-and-pepper speckling my hair. "It's an honest-to-god plasma weapon," I told her, "not a toy."*

"Oh," she said, eyes wide and childlike, "of course not. As for being original, at least I read."

"So do I."

"Technical manuals and data printouts," Muri pushed smoothly off the bulkhead with the effortless grace so much a part of her. "I think you ought to expand your view. Not everything is quantifiable, you know."

"And not everything is fuzzy at the edges, either," I said.

"Touché," she said, nodding, as we hovered above the 'floor' of the bay.

I'm not certain I understand Muri but I trust her. She's good at what she does. Accept no substitutes. The incompetent rarely make it to LIBERTAS and don't last if, by chance, they slip through. Nothing to worry about with Inouye. Her grandparents were among the premier émigrés from the gravity well. She grew up in a lifestyle which is necessarily intolerant of mistakes. I've never had a better exec. I don't believe there are any. She'll take my job, eventually, but that doesn't bother me. Nothing in this life is forever. She's gorgeous, too. I know that's not suppose to cut silicon anymore, but I can't help it. I'm funny that way and I'll be damned if I'll apologize for it.

We struck off down the corridor, going hand-over-hand along the rungs—expertly skipping half a dozen at a time—until the spin of the column slowed us and we could stand upright. As the 'floor' became *the floor*, we automatically reoriented ourselves to 'up and down' and having our 'weight' gradually return. At the equivalent of .9 gee we arrived at the regional lifts, right on schedule.

Muri stepped aboard and I followed.

"This one's on me," she said, materializing a Deb from some secret feminine place known only to others of the gender. Some things will always amaze and confuse a man no matter how experienced he fancies himself. A skilled illusionist is a perpetual treat. And so is a woman to most men.

"Thanks," I replied.

The doors oozed together and she retrieved her Card, which disappeared before I could catch what happened to it. Maybe someday. Meantime, I ignored a standard spiel from the lift: "...and thank you for selecting Upstairs/Downstairs, Inc. Remember, 'We Lift You Up When You're Down and We Let You Down Easy...'"

The lift slid to a sibilant halt and the brushed metal doors retracted. We debouched onto South Mezzanine, swung left, and headed toward one of the Mall lounges. It was late and the place seemed deserted. But that wasn't as unusual as it looked. Shift changes, repairs, fad and fashion, you call it and you're probably close.

Richochets whistled around us before we knew we were knee-deep.

#### 4

From my infancy I was taught to love humanity and liberty. Enquiry and experience have since confirmed my reverence for the lessons then given me, by convincing me more fully of their truth and excellence. Benevolence towards mankind, excites wishes for their welfare, and such wishes endear the means of fulfilling them. These can be found in liberty only, and therefore the sacred cause ought to be espoused by every man, on every occasion, to the utmost of his power.

—John Dickinson

Raoul Octavio Bernal Alvarez was a second-generation colonist.

His grandparents had fled Cuba, carrying Raoul's father (a blissfully unaware infant at the time), and precious little else, to Miami in the Mariel boat lift. They'd wanted nothing but freedom and a chance to work for themselves.

Simple.

And as hard as it sounds.

Thomas Alvarez went to college on an earned scholarship, his expenses covered primarily by his own work and the savings generated by his parent's dry cleaning business. On campus, Felicia Rodriguez saw in Thomas a strong young man who had a personal vision and was not afraid



to work for it. He saw in her a tough-minded young woman whom the regime in Havana could not keep and the streets of the Miami barrio could not destroy or corrupt.

Their love had been molten.

Upon graduation, he with a degree in computer technology and she with a degree in biological science, they talked, quarreled, cried and decided. LIBERTAS. Their children would be born where the only barrier was ability.

And Raoul Alvarez had celebrated all 23 of his birthdays here.

His parents had taught him well. So much so that, inasmuch as formal education on the colony was as competitive as everything else, his best proved more than good enough. He had friends, a few boyhood fights—which led to renewed respect and friendships with former adversaries—study, work, training, and lovers when he came of age. Yes, this life he'd been granted and been taught to appreciate was worth more than anything except the freedom which made it all possible. It was worth every effort to protect.

And that was what he chose to do with his life.

Alvarez adjusted the .50 caliber on his left hip and shifted tiredly in his seat.

*This is the only thing that's boring,* he mused.

External Observation, it was called. Everybody had to sit through it. And according to the ProTech rotation schedule it was his turn in the Fun Hut.

*Wonderful.*

Omniphase array radar, wide-angle visuals, infrared—*Key-Hole: 24* quality and better—you name it, and nothing out of the ordinary ever presented itself. A person could scan the Earth regions only so often before you'd seen practically everything there was to see. It was a big backyard, Raoul knew, but one you eventually got used to and that was that, as had been said since before *Sputnik*.

The computers clicked out data for evaluation and the techs studied it and security made suggestions and

the Board said Yea or Nay and the day-to-day job limped on and if it weren't for special assignments, his shifts and other posts, and Jennifer Lanne, the beautiful blonde who owns the Friedman Lounge, he would probably—

Wait a minute.

*What the hell was that?*

## 5

The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is *self-protection*. The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. *His own good, either physical or moral is not sufficient warrant.* He cannot be rightfully compelled to do or to forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinion of others, to do so would be wise, or even right... The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.

—John Stuart Mill

Muri vanished to my right and I dived behind a servo-counter.

First consideration: changing my underwear at the earliest opportunity. Damn, it happens every time. You should see the nasty notes I get from the Wash House Cleaners, along with my bill.

Consideration #2: the PFH on my right hip, as my fingers brushed the position out of habit.

"You're inside, idiot," I mumbled, to no one in particular.

So, I reached under my left armpit, coming out with *Madeleine*. At least she wouldn't punch holes in the colony's neoteric Kevlar/Foam-Steel hull, because the same composite that impeded micrometeoroids on the way in performed a serendipitous function by inhibiting most exits, as well. And with a cyclic rate of up to 4,000 flechettes per minute, the old girl could definitely ruin somebody's

afternoon. Although I fervently hoped it wouldn't be mine.

Besides, there's something to be said for tradition.

"This is Al Clarke of ProTech!" I bellowed. "Whoever you are, drop any and all weapons and come out with your hands on top of your head!"

Inouye had her Colt Selectrix out and was being as fine a back-up as anyone could want. My word for her was *respect*. We exchanged hand signals and prepared to move.

Carefully.

"Mr. Clarke?" a plaintive voice squeaked.

"Who wants him?"

"Mary," came a quavering reply. "Mary Collins."

*Hangfire,* I thought.

There was something about that name which brought to mind ferns and fronds and the like. Yeah, then I remembered. Collins was one of our horticulture specialists. Pharmaceutical Research & Application. She was also 65 years old. The only safe way to find out what additional good news this situation had in reserve for us was to ask.

So I did: "What's this all about, Mary?"

"It's hard to explain," she said.

"Try me."

"This is Muri Inouye," my partner broke in soothingly. "Before anything else goes wrong, Mary, put down any weapons and come out. You know us. And you know we won't harm you."

"I can't," she sobbed, and we could hear her pain and fear.

"Why not?"

"Because Joe is here and he's angry with me. I have to protect myself."

Her husband, Joe Paellon, was one of our computer techs. Also in his 60's. I couldn't believe this. These two were among our most peaceful and nondescript residents. Their idea of excitement was Three-Dimensional Majong.

"Joe!" I shouted hoarsely at the unseen man. "Whatever the problem is, we both know better. It stops here and we go to Arbitration. You know the alternative. Now, come on out."

"She's cheating on me, Mr. Clarke," Paellon said.

At 65?

Why not? I shrugged. *Micro-gravity works wonders.*

Yet I said: "I understand how you feel, Joe. But that's a court case."

"Our courts are fair, Mr. Paellon," Inouye added. "You signed a contract. We can't tolerate less than full compliance. Arbitrate. If you still can't work it out, you have the option of squaring off at each other outside and at a safe distance from the colony. *You can't do it here.*"

Silence.

I hoped they'd listen to us. Talking out two senior citizens is no sane, decent person's idea of a good time. I had enough trouble sleeping already.

"I will, if she will," Joe finally said, dejection palpable in his voice.

"All right," I said, grinning, relief budding cautiously. "Mary?"

"O-okay," the elderly lady said.

"I'll get them, Al," Muri said.

"Be careful."

"Don't worry."

Famous Last Words.

Inouye moved professionally and wrapped it in minutes, as I backed her. She holstered her weapon (twinge), calmly approached the suspects, and returned with two ancient Smith & Wessons—a matched pair, no less—along with a similar set of sheepish gray-haired children in tow. I tucked *Madeleine* gratefully away and shook my head to see the cause of my next reprimanding laundry letter.

*Why do people always seem so small afterwards?* "Are you going to put plastic on us?" Mary said.

"Shouldn't we?" I asked them.

"Only if you must," Joe said.

"What do you think, Muri?"

She glanced down and the diminutive relics and said: "It would be like cuffing my grandparents."

"Right," I nodded.

6

The noblest of spirits, the highest of philosophies, can be eliminated if their bearer is beaten to death with a rubber truncheon.

—Josef Goebbels

Liam Connelly left his maintenance unit at 1400 hours. He was prepared to feel many things as he began his trek to B-section, but remorse was not one of them. The training he had undergone was quite complete. Yet sorrow, which had supposedly been weeded from him, apparently wasn't. The sacrifice for which he had volunteered, the life he'd led here, the role he had played, had developed into something he was finding difficult to terminate. Bother-some. This had never been a problem in the past. A lot of things had been, but not this. Another side of the Belfast Blues?

Or maybe he just wanted a drink. *Strange*, he thought.

There was indeed something insidiously subverting, seductively attractive about this place. Perhaps the propagandists were right? Maybe this was the ultimate in bourgeois decadence. They would be certainly repulsed by the unfettered capitalism one found here. The unashamed selfishness, the unabashed love of profit, the unchanneled creativity, it was all overwhelming. It seemed anarchy. Yet no one was hungry. Everyone worked. There was peace—such as there ever is—privacy, and little, if any, visible government.

LIBERTAS products were prized and sought after by all. Everyone here, or so it appeared, went about personally armed. Money was in hard currency or real goods, or DebitCards backed by hard currency deposits. Colonists did not claim it to be a paradise. Nor, in fact, was it. But those few people who were genuinely unhappy either left, or stayed. How they 'felt' was considered to be a personal problem.

Liam knew all about personal problems.

Still, on Earth there remained all the conditions these people had fled. By what right were they to live like *this* while others stagnated? The United States was fact-of-life. Little, it had been painfully learned and observed, could be done about it. At least in the "short haul." But this place, *this* abomination, was an example which cried out for retribution.

*We will not be left behind, damn it!*

Yet these were intelligent, capable, caring human beings. They did not appear to be the wild, unfeeling fanatics their lives and philosophies proclaimed them to be. Why was that? What held this madhouse together?

Ah, well, he thought, *no matter. It will soon be academic.*

7

Almost all the revolutions that have changed the aspect of the nations have been made to consolidate or to destroy social inequality. Remove the secondary causes that have produced the great convulsions of the world and you will almost always find the principle of inequality at the bottom. Either the poor have attempted to plunder the rich, or the rich to enslave the poor. If, then, a state of society can ever be founded in which every man shall have something to keep and little to take from others, much will have been done for the peace of the world.

—Alexis De Tocqueville

The Arbitration Courts are as informal as most of the cases.

Yet they're important beyond their form. There's too much at risk. And the economics of it are plain. Justice delayed is justice denied, or so they tell me. Efficiency has a place in everything, particularly in justice and the fairness of any proceeding. That means, among other things, there is little conflict between economics and people aboard LIBERTAS.

It's an idea Earth's politicians haven't stopped screaming over. Makes their jobs as superfluous as foreskin. Even children on the colony make sing-song fun of them:

*My gang's better than your gang;*

*My gang's tougher than yours.*

*My gang's ruthless and we've got Air Support.*

*My gang's bigger than yours.*

Kids say the cutest things, don't they?

Economics reigns on LIBERTAS. It's a free market *lassiez-faire*

dust-'em-up. And when you say that, many think: chaos. But that isn't what we have because chaos is nobody's friend. As simplistic as it may sound to more than a few people, honor isn't just a word. It's a necessity of life—at least for a life worth living among other people. And people are only as good as their honor. That means contracts, which are the backbone of any civilization. But in order to be worth anything, they must be enforceable. And enforced. If not, we might as well become groundlubbers again.

Hell, who'd want that?

In this case, Joe and Mary Collins Paellon turned maudlin and pathetic. It was painful to watch. Judge Twilling made brisk work of it all, scrupulous and fair.

No one had been physically injured. That was the most important circumstance in favor of the accused. They had to post bond—individually—and surrender their weapons for a time, during which they would seek counseling. In addition, they'd be required to pay all costs of restoration to the decor they had "disturbed." No one had filed a personal endangerment or damage suit against them, as yet. But that remained a serious possibility.

They were, of course, on what is euphemistically known as "behavioral probation." If anything happened again, they risked expulsion and exile. The cause of their original dispute was docketed for thirty days hence. If they could patch things up between themselves before then, well and good. If not? It was either that or a shuttle to the pre-paid destination of their choice.

The space stations of Earth's various governments were out of the question, by and large. There was always the Luna colony, or the Asteroids, or even the fledgling Mars effort. But after that, the alternatives fell off precipitously.

At their age and after 40 years off planet, well....

## 8

You cannot bring prosperity by discouraging thrift. You cannot strengthen the weak by weakening the strong.

You cannot help the poor by destroying the rich. You cannot keep out of trouble by spending more than you earn. You cannot build character and courage by taking away Man's initiative and independence. You cannot help men permanently by doing for them what they can and should do for themselves.

—Abraham Lincoln

HELLO:

MY NAME IS PHILLIP D. FORMALDEHYDE, PRESIDENT & CEO OF TRANSYLVANIA CASKET COMPANY, INC., HEADQUARTERED IN TOMBSTONE, ARIZONA. I'D LIKE TO TAKE A FEW QUIET MOMENTS OF YOUR TIME TO BROADCAST AN ADMITTEDLY DELICATE SUBJECT: THE FINAL REPOSE...AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT.

"Somebody turn that ghoul off," Blair Keitel pleaded.

WE AT T.C.C. BELIEVE ONLY THE BEST SHOULD SUFFICE. THIS HAS BEEN OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLE FOR NEARLY A CENTURY. WE OFFER A VARIETY OF THE FINEST INTERMENT DEVICES AVAILABLE TODAY TO FIT THE MOST DISCRIMINATING TASTES...AS WELL AS THOSE JUST 'SO-SO.'

"It's a free colony, Blair," Benjamin Avimba said, delighting in his friend's discomfort.

THEREFORE, BEFORE YOU ARE CONFRONTED WITH "THE INEVITABILITY OF IT ALL," CONSIDER TRANSYLVANIA CASKET COMPANY...

"That doesn't mean I've got to approve of everything," Keitel told him, getting up to switch channels.

"Fiddling with frequencies again?" Avimba quipped.

...WHEN YOU CARE ENOUGH TO "SPACE" THE VERY BEST—

"Blessed silence," Blair said, searching the bands for respite.

—AND THAT WAS GINNY MAE AND THE BLIND TRUST WITH THEIR MEGA-HIT, "TAKE THIS REG AND SHOVE IT!" NOW, KEEPING YOU ON TOP OF THE TRACKS HERE ON KLJB, LEND US YOUR EARS FOR EROTICA'S PRIESTESS SINGING "LET'S DO IT TILL THE SUN GOES NOVA—"

As Keitel clicked off the receiver, Avimba suggested: "Maybe you ought to buy a station and program it yourself."

"That's a possibility," Blair said. I walked in on my regular rounds and found the place quiet, just the way we like it. Optimum condition is all screens blank and all lights green. That's the way it was. But we knew it wouldn't last. It never does.

Saturday night.

What can you say? It's the same everywhere. LIBERTAS has a low crime rate. Still, there's no such thing as no crime at all. So, inasmuch as everyone agrees that—depending on definition—the less criminal activity you have the better, we keep trying.

Oo-rah, oo-rah.

New colonists arrive periodically, replacing those who've decided they're not in sync with the life-style, work, the responsibility, the feelings of isolation, or even the view of Earth from a Lagrangian orbit. Not to mention the "Nobody Loves Me" syndrome. There are some who are asked to leave, to be polite about it, for one whyfor or another.

For example: thieves are not tolerated.

There was an unconfirmed rumor that a few had been "spaced," i.e., cycled through an airlock sans life-support—the local version of the proverbial "long walk off a short pier." With one or two "suicides" every year, we don't have firm data.

Rape?

The one confirmed case wound up recycled through an ore processor before we could get to him. It seemed the young lady's brothers took exception to the bastard's bedside manner and had engaged him in an in-depth discussion regarding his character flaws. In other words: there was enough left to identify, but just barely.

Murder?

Only three in the eight years of my watch, thank God. They were domestic disturbances, typically enough, and they still trouble my nights occasionally. Unfortunately, that's in no way unusual. It's part of the job.

### Self-defense?

Remarkably few, when you consider our heterogeneous population. If you can name a race, creed, color, place of national origin, or what-have-you, that doesn't have at least one or more representatives among us, I'm sure our statistics honchos would love to hear from you. And we like it that way. Do your job. Mind your own business. Play by the contract rules.

One big happy—

"We've got a live one, Al," said Benjamin Avimba.

A #4 monitor screen popped alight, CDT flashed data, and its red alarm signal blinked rhythmically. Security cameras had kicked in as the client activated her panic tog. NANA immediately read out name, address, voluntary visual I.D., retinal patterns—both the client's and, in this instance, the assailant's—plus personal information, as the security lock placements and configurations, etc.

"It's a new fish in G-section. Looks like one of the professional ladies is having problems with him."

Every once in a while some vacuum brain reads the contract, signs it, but has seen only what he chooses. Thinks freedom means license. Jeez, you leave your stupidity and bad attitudes behind or why bother to leave home? We certainly didn't want them. Not only do they get in the way of business but, by God, they hurt people.

And that's unforgivable.

"Fill me in," I said.

"Do not ask me how," Avimba said, "but he has managed to separate her from her equalizer."

"Getting old, is she?"

"Must be."

"Who's on call?"

"Muri Inouye," he said, reading from the roster.

"Send her out," I ordered. "Put Stowiski with her. She's smart. He's big."

"Right," Avimba said, sending the data to Muri's beeper, and to Paul's, with a snake-quick at his terminal.

"Talk to the bastard, Ben. Keep him off-stride."

Avimba nodded and keyed his headset: "This is Benjamin Avimba of ProTech. You are under surveillance and have been positively I.D.'d. Cease and desist—" Ben glanced down at his readout—"Mr. Stossen. We have you on REC. A security team is en route and you have nowhere to go, much less hide...."

"Back him up, Blair," I said. "Keep an ocular on—"

"Sure, Al," Keitle said, an easy competence suffusing his features. "We're all professionals here."

"Sorry," I shrugged.

Okay. So I'm overprotective of my personnel, sometimes. I care.

Sue me.

Paul Stowiski finished his daily workout.

A "zero-gee" gymnasium presented peculiar challenges. So did his job. There was nothing like either back home in Kentucky. Nothing was as bruising as football at the University, and there was no doubt about everything being cleaner than summers down a Mullenburg County coal mine.

But that didn't mean it was easier.

Dressing quickly in jumpsuit and deck treads, Paul strapped on his Heckler & Koch Caseless Sabot and a Gerber MK V blade. You couldn't be too careful. Standing six-five and tipping 260 pounds was not always an advantage in this environment. It helped, sure. But there was no guarantee. Then, again, there never is. So what was he complaining about? His beeper tweeted in his locker. Paul retrieved it just as it displayed a curious readout.

G-section.

He moaned inwardly.

It was down town on a Saturday night. Old Hong Kong or Taipei had nothing on this place. What had he expected? There was a price for everything. Freedom and high pay translated to long hours and hard, often dangerous, work.

A swift but thorough second check of his equipment and he pushed off down the pipe toward G-section.

Muri Inouye didn't like this part of the job.

Coyotes could usually take care of themselves. Indeed, so could everybody. A situation such as this was mercifully rare. Yet so was the fact she hadn't bathed in hours. She felt disgusting. Everything and everyone was physically clean on LIBERTAS. It had to be because the system was, to a large extent, closed. In a way, the entire structure resembled a hospital in that if someone got the crabs everybody eventually scratched. However, each section possessed its own ambience. A few years ago, for example, G-section had been designated "Freight/General" or "F&G." It was now known as "Fun & Games." And that brought Muri back to the problem at hand.

*Where's Stowiski? He ought to be here by—*

"What say, Muri?" Paul said, appearing behind her.

Inouye spun on him.

"How many times have I told you not to do that?"

"Sorry." Stowiski's shoulders rippled like a mountain range. "I can't help it. It's my training."

*Tell me another one, Inouye thought. How can someone so big move so quietly?*

"Okay," she said, "you know the situation. The client's name is Dorothy Smith—"

"She's not in Kansas anymore, huh?" said Paul.

"I'll ignore that," Muri said. "She's in her late 40's. A bit old for the trade, maybe, but that's her choice. The new fish is one Carl Stossen, early 30's, a docking handler who's been with us a mere two weeks. Somehow he's relieved her of her Beretta. Now, she's trying to jolly him along to save her life. Smith has hit her alarm. So, now it's our chance."

"Are we still talking to him?"

Dorothy Smith screamed in agony.

"Not anymore! Hit it, Paul!"

Stowiski pulled his H&K and blew the security lock through Smith's door. He kicked the portal open, dived past the smoking ruin,

and shoulder-rolled over the floor of the hooker's room. He came up aiming his pistol, as Muri braced her arm against the edge of the bulkhead and thumbed her Colt to full-auto. Stossen whirled away from the limp figure on the bed, blood raw and visible between the serrations on a matte-black blade he held casually in his right hand. Paul squeezed his trigger. The top of Stossen's head exploded, as Muri's Selectrix stitched a ragged line across the assailant's chest. The body crashed into a bookcase and came to rest in a steaming heap.

Dorothy was unconscious as the medical team trundled her to the infirmary.

But she was alive.

9

Value(?)

*Some men seek a better way to die  
By lifting off on "laughter-silvered"  
wing.*

*While others raise adventurous sails  
on high*

*Blue waves to hear the Humpbacks  
"sing."*

*Still many more spend wasted days  
and nights*

*On faceless sins bereft of form and  
name;*

*In silent hope that all the withered  
sights*

*Weren't wretched minutes clothed in  
fear and shame.*

*Yet dawns I've shared by sleeping  
here with you,*

*Those tender loving moments in  
between,*

*Have proven that the way we chose is  
true.*

*So, both of us have time to pause and  
dream.*

*Solitary hearts, who claim to  
die alone,*

*Proclaim our human fear of  
going home.*

—Anonymous verse found on the  
wall of a lavatory in B-section.

Muri Inouye sat in her quarters and cried.

I buzzed.

"Go away."

I'd expected that. So, I backed off from her door and leaned against



the opposite bulkhead, waiting. It wasn't long. She opened the portal and stepped into the corridor, looking surprised to see me. That was an act, I think. I'd like to believe she'd have been more surprised had I not been there.

"Going my way?" I said.

"When are you ever going to say something original?" a tear-streaked Muri Inouye said.

"When I've got something original to say, I suppose."

She looked at me with the darkest eyes the Lord God ever made.

"Want a drink?" Muri said.

"Do you?" I replied intelligently, if a rock has an I.Q.

"Maybe just talk, okay?"

"Good enough." We set off for the Friedman Lounge. I let Muri choose the route, which she would have done anyway, and it proved a long, quiet way around the colony. She really wove us through the alphabet soup. A-section is docking and departures, Shipping & Receiving; B-section is power supply and electrical generation, without which we'd not only be in the flipping dark but cold as a politician's heart. She passed C-section, the communications array next to our ProTech offices, without word or glance. That bothered me. D-section sounded like the unmarried dormitory it was. And as a startling contrast came the pharmaceutical labs, in E-section, as they silently prepared the ultra-pure drugs for many conditions and diseases which would otherwise go untreated, or be treated inadequately. We skipped "Fun & Games" altogether. At least *that* was understandable. H, I, and J-sections were exotic metal alloys, optical fibers, and ultra-pure silicon plus the resulting chips, respectively. She finally led the way across the axial and we arrived at the lounge. Coca-Cola had just opened a plant in L-section, so we placed our order knowing that you couldn't get it any fresher unless you worked at the mixing tank.

Muri sat staring at her napkin on the tabletop.

"Does it ever get any easier?"

"What, precisely?" I said, hoping I wasn't making *too* ludicrous a botch of it.

"Shooting someone," she whispered.

"No, it doesn't get any easier," I told her truthfully. "At least it shouldn't. That's what separates a decent human being from an uncaring predator. The fact that what you had to do bothers you deeply is—clear testimony to your values and compassion."

"I'd like to think so," Muri said, producing a tissue from somewhere, "but why do I feel so empty?"

"I know," I said, wanting to touch her but very uncertain if I should. Women can be extremely unpredictable about such things. So, I didn't. I simply said: "I remember what it was like for me, the first time. Yet I still don't know what to say to you. I know you're hurting. I wish I could make it stop. But I can't. And that...hurts me."

The servo delivered our drinks and I paid the check. It seemed the least I could do although, technically, Muri had invited me. Her gold is as good as mine, of course.

"You know, Al," Inouye said, as the bot rolled away, "I sometimes think I'm talking to an ancient memory when I speak with you."

"I've just been insulted."

"No, you haven't."

"I'm *not* old," I said. "So all right, I'll never see thirty again. And maybe I'm not a poet. I know that, too. And what the hell are you laughing at?"

"Never mind," she said, grinning. "You're a good man, Gunga Din."

"Speak English."

"I love you."

That I didn't expect—not at all—and I waxed eloquently silent as usual. If any man claims he *knows* what a woman is thinking, he's a liar. They invariably take you by surprise.

"You don't have to say anything, Al," Muri said, taking me out of the cross-hairs. "Just stay my friend, for now."

"That you've got," I nodded slowly.

We didn't speak for a time.

Jennifer Lanne, the proprietor of the Friedman Lounge, came over to our table.

"Sorry to bother you, Muri," Lanne said, "but you've got a call from Rachel, at Caduceus. About some patient. She said you'd know."

"Thanks," Inouye said. "I'll be right there."

"I heard about what happened. If you need any help, let me know."

"I will. Thanks, again."

"I'm fine, too, Jen," I said.

"Thanks for asking."

Both women looked at each other.

*Men.*

"Did you pay the check?" Lanne said to me.

"Yes, I did."

"Good." She turned and walked back to the bar. "Well," Muri said, finishing her drink, "I still have a job that needs doing."

"Are you all right?" I wanted to know.

"With friends like you, I will be," Muri said.

## 10

The accumulation of all power, legislative, executive and judiciary, in the hands, whether of one, or few, or many and whether hereditary, self-appointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny.

—James Madison

Paul Stowiski and Benjamin Avimba were on break.

They had fallen prey, along with two other fools, to a deliciously hot poker game in the ProTech personnel's lounge. Safe combat. Fun defined by sweaty tension.

*I have him by the short 'n curlsies, this time,* Avimba thought.

The old so-called "Homelands" west of Pretoria were a long walk away. Benjamin had not grown up with this curious game of chance, as had Paul and the others. However, he'd learned well and quickly. What true descendant of Zulu warriors could not? It was a child's game played with adult's money.

The stakes were high and his purpose clear.

"Three kings, ace high," Stowiski said, grinning, after the others had folded and Paul spread his cards triumphantly on the table.

"Three aces, king high," Avimba said, quietly, showing his hand.

"Why you little—"

"Now, now, my rather large friend," the African commiserated, "it comes to each of us in time."

"What?"

"Learning to lose."

Avimba raked in the gold, silver, and copper coins in the pot.

"Tomorrow is payday," Stowiski said, slumping back in his seat. "The next time we sit at this table, I'll be the one who files you."

"The lion roars," Avimba said. "And the hyena laughs."

Raoul Alvarez had been sitting in the Fun Hut for hours. He had tracked a strange object in Earth orbit nearly all that time. At last, the object accelerated! It broke out of its orbit, and was heading towards—

"Hey, guys!" Alvarez called out. "Come in here!"

"Why?" Paul growled.

"I've got a bogey!"

"What?" Ben said.

"Affirmative."

"This better be good," the big Kentuckian said, stepping into the darkened Fun Hut with Avimba in his wake. "I'm in no mood for anything insignificant."

"Scope this," Alvarez whispered. "I'm not sure what to make of it."

The greenish glow of the phosphor screen reflected off their faces as the men watched the strange blip blink, fade, and revive.

"It's not a shuttle," Stowiski said.

"No."

"And the jackals circle," said Avimba.

"What are you mumbling?" Paul said, glancing at his friend.

"I know what it is."

"Well?" Raoul demanded.

"A warhead."

Silence.

"Are you sure?" said Paul.

"I would stake my life on it," Ben said.

"Maybe we all have," Raoul said. The luminescent intruder advanced inexorably on course.

"Sheeeeeeeeyiiiiiiiit," Stowiski drawled. "My momma told me there'd be days like this."

11

"...The most important reason for the people to retain the right to keep and bear arms is, if necessary, at last resort to protect themselves from tyranny in government...."

—Thomas Jefferson

The Infirmary of Caduceus was brightly lit.

Muri Inouye stood at the foot of Dorothy Smith's bed, ambiguous feeling flooding through them both. And pleasing neither.

*Why does she want to talk to me,* Inouye wondered.

The antiseptic aroma collided with Muri's sensibilities, as did the charts, I.V. tubes and bags, plus a variety of monitoring equipment. It was as if life had been put on hold.

Other than gender, what did a security officer and a Coyote have in common? In an odd way they were sisters and yet, because of personal liberty, they could be viewed as quasi-competitors. That's the nature of freedom of choice in private actions. Perhaps the only difference, in *unemotional* fact, was the currency charged for payment: sentiment vs. gold.

But either way, wasn't payment always forthcoming?

"Ms. Inouye?" Dorothy Smith said, cotton-mouthed. "Thank you for seeing me."

"You're welcome," said Muri. "How are you feeling?"

"Better," came the reply from a pale lined face that appeared much older than her stats. "Considering everything, I suppose I'm lucky to be here."

*True*, Inouye thought, but said: "Rachel Meijers said you had something you wanted to tell me. What is it?"

"I'm not sure it matters."

"I'll listen to whatever you have to say, Dorothy."

Smith sighed, obviously troubled, then said: "That trick who knifed me, Stossen?"

"What about him?" Muri said, fainling to avoid the memory of his riddled torso.

"I try—" Dorothy faltered, "we all try—to be careful of the new fish. You're never sure. But he was recommended."

"By whom?"

"Art Twilling."

Inouye stared as though Smith had asserted that Earth was flat.

"Judge Arthur Twilling?"

"Yes."

"How did he and Stossen know each other?"

"I don't know," Smith said. "I always thought Art was my friend. But why would a friend send someone he didn't know and trust?"

*Unless he's not a friend*, Inouye thought, shocked by the cold speed of that specific intuition. But said: "That's a good question, Dorothy."

"How could my friend send someone like that—?"

"Calm down, now," Muri soothed. "I'll look into it. You have to rest and get well. That's the important thing."

"Thank you," Dorothy said. "I am tired. Think I'll sleep, now."

"I'll be in touch," said Inouye, as Dorothy drifted away to whatever dream awaited her.

Muri eased out into the hall and flagged down Dr. Rachel Meijers.

"How's the Cut & Stitch market, Rae?"

"Bearish but steady, Muri. How's Crime & Punishment?"

"Bullish, right now. What's the spin on your new patient?"

"Privileged information."

"Come on, have I ever betrayed your trust?"

Rachel brushed a fine stray strand of red hair from in front of her face and immediately repeated the action to prevent it falling back into her slate-grey eyes. Meijers then peered over her favorite pair of old-fashioned glasses. "She'll make it but it was very close."

"How so?"

"The blade was expertly placed and delivered. I've seen better work but only during surgery."

"What about the assailant?"

"What about him?" Meijers said. "The upper cranium was destroyed by officer Stowiski's shot—that big draft horse is a hunk, by the way—and you stitched the slasher's chest. Cause of death is obvious. What's wrong, Muri? You look like a set of used scrubs."

"I'll be all right," Inouye said. "Look, Rae, could I talk you into an autopsy for Stossen?"

"Why?"

"Humor me."

"Think I'm not busy enough?" Meijers said. "That's stretching both friendship and sisterhood a tad. I'm afraid I'll need an official request."

"You'll get one. I promise. By the way, I think I'll send over a couple of guards to keep an eye on Dorothy. Don't ask me why. It just feels right."

"Sounds serious. Okay. I like men but I've never been fond of gorillas getting underfoot. Make sure they know their business and can keep out of our way."

"You have my word."

"One other thing," Dr. Rachel Meijers said.

"Yeah?"

"If they're good-looking, it wouldn't hurt."

"Right," Muri Inouye winked.

12

"...For a revolution to take place, it is usually insufficient for 'the lower classes not to want' to live in the old way; it is also necessary that 'the upper classes should be unable' to live in the old way...."

—V.I. Lenin

*They truly don't make them like this anymore.*

Arthur Twilling mused, gently placing a dusty bottle down on the cluttered surface of his desk. The judge eased himself into his chair and struggled to prop up his feet. His paunch kept getting in the way. But he finally accomplished it. Stealing a glance at his chrono-

graph, he allowed himself a chubby smile.

Locating a corkscrew amid the rubble of papers, tapes, and elderly discs, he opened the bottle of *Chateau Lafite-Rothschild* he had been saving for the last 15 years. Moist cork squeaked, twisted, gave, and popped delightfully; the bouquet tickled his olfactory as he passed it repeatedly beneath his nose. The movement was showboating, of course, but what was vanity for?

*Must let it breathe.*

Cracking one of the lower desk drawers, he retrieved a wrapped crystal goblet. The exterior facets gleamed and bounced light like a huge hollow diamond, as Twilling peeled the layers of cloth away, then carefully wiped it of any stray particles, dust or otherwise, that may have been so impudent as to shelter themselves within the family heirloom. Once satisfied with his efforts, Arthur put the crystal to his ear and flicked the rim with his fingernail. The resulting belltone brought another grin to his jowls and he positioned the goblet beside the wine bottle. The judge then leaned back in his chair, as far as his rotund girth would allow and still keep his feet on the desk, and spread stubby fingers through his curling gray hair.

An old argon-tubed Cuban cigar?

*No, not quite in character.*

He would indulge himself a bit later, perhaps, at the end. Yes, that would be a deft touch. One had to keep up appearances.

It was unfortunate about Dorothy Smith, of course. A few years earlier, when they both had been younger and time not so pressing, they'd passed many a pleasant evening together. *LIBERTAS* did his advantages. Now, she was—how does one say it?—obsolete.

It was really too bad.

*Why did they send an ass like Stossen? Doesn't anyone train for competence anymore? Whatever happened to quality control?*

Things were, of course, different in his time, Twilling was convinced. None of this aberrant nonsense was

tolerated, at least not officially. A character like Carl ought to have dinosaured out along with old "Carlos," he of the "Jackal" fame. Idiots. All of them.

Still, they had their uses.

The others, Connelly in Maintenance and Rasheed in B-section, were more reliable operatives. They would be more than able to circumvent Stossen's loss. Not that it truly mattered. Anyway, that was what they were for. Arthur's sponsorship had "greased the skids" for their admission to the colony. It had been part of what he had placed here to accomplish, and eventually—he had always known—there would be something like this.

He poured the wine lovingly into the crystal goblet. Its color danced deep and clung, like its tannin, to the interior of the glass. Such beauty almost let him believe in God.

*Almost.*

"Ah," Twilling sighed at the taste, "they truly don't make them like this, anymore."

### 13

"I heartily accept the (Thomas Jefferson) motto,—'That government is best which governs least'; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out it finally amounts to this, which I also believe,—'That government is best which governs not at all,' and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government they will have."

—Henry David Thoreau

YOU'VE MADE MONEY THROUGH THE OLD E. F. HUTTON, PROFITED BY THE NEW MERRILL-LYNCH, AND STILL EARNING IT THE HARD WAY OUT OF SMITH-BARNEY. BUT FRIENDS, YOUR ASSETS AREN'T PRODUCING FOR YOU UNLESS YOU'RE DOING BUSINESS WITH *AMS, INC.* NOBODY TRIES HARDER, NOBODY WORKS LONGER, NOBODY CARES MORE. SO THE NEXT TIME SOMEONE ASKS YOU ABOUT YOUR BROKER, WHEN THEY WONDER: "WHO IS WORKING FOR YOU?" TELL THEM: *VERY, MUTHAS, SONAVUS—AND SMILE....*

"Remind me to call my financial service, will you?" I said to Jennifer Lanne, as she flipped off the halo above the Friedman Lounge

"Sure, Al," she said. "What'll you have?"

I told her.

I'd stayed here after Muri left because things were slow, I still wasn't sure how to take Inouye's revelation, and at a time like this any adult male worthy of the appellation would choose to do what I was doing: having a beer and irritating his favorite bartender.

"I've always wondered why bars are illuminated like caves," I said.

"Atmosphere," Lanne replied, placing a Foster's in front of me.

"Don't folks like to see to whom they're talking?"

"They already know that," she said, motioning me to raise my elbows so she could wipe the bar in spite of me, then doing just that, "or maybe to whom they'd like to be talking. And they don't necessarily want to be seen with whom they're doing whatever. Just because they're all free individuals doesn't mean they don't care what other people think. That not only could be physically dangerous, it can be financially hazardous as well."

"Yeah?"

"Look at the way the stock market works."

"Ever thought of charging for all this data?"

"What do you think the price of your drink covers?" Jennifer said. "The alcohol?"

She went back to her monthly inventory and I moved my beer to a corner table.

I was intrigued by the data Muri comm'd me concerning a judge and a prostitute. Agreeing with her assessment, I'd issued the official autopsy request as part of an ongoing investigation. Inouye's word was good enough for me. And I'd O.K.'d the guards, too, although she needn't have checked with me about that. It was well within her authority in the company. She was just being conscientious about her job. I'd grown to expect nothing less.



Muri was holding on well and I was proud of her.

That an Arbitration Court judge had a working relationship with one of the colony's professional companions didn't bother me. That was their business. No pun intended. But the Stossen thing was a different vector.

The population of LIBERTAS was small by reasonable standards. Less than 10,000, actually. Eventually everybody had a good idea who was whom. I'd been here all my life and in my present position with Pro-Tech 8 years. And I still didn't know *everyone's* strings. Yet you got to know those who were worth trusting and those you'd think twice about arguing with, or allowing to date your daughter. Not that it meant anything, but my instincts were still tingling after I'd told Inouye to check with the office and find out if Stossen had an on-board sponsor.

You never know.

"Al, this is Raoul Alvarez."

"Yes?"

"I've got a bogey on the screen. Ben Avimba thinks it's a warhead. Tech analysis tentatively confirms it."

My anus puckered.

Dr. Rachel Meijers spoke into the recorder.

"Subject: Stossen, Carl, W."

*Naked on a stainless steel table they all take on the aura of lab specimens, rather than human beings, she thought.*

Reality could be a pain, at times. But we shouldn't lose sight of it. She brushed back the errant strand of her hair and adjusted the glasses resting on the bridge of her nose.

*Best to get on with it.*

"In keeping with an official request via the concerned investigative personnel, the examination is resumed. The upper anterior cranial

The Melbourne accent of Blair Keitle, Ph.D., drifted like salty spray over the room.

"What I don't understand," he said, "is why *one* warhead and not a whole flight?"

"They didn't want to attract undue attention from the Big Boys?" I offered.

"Probably—"

One of the best astroengineers in our contingent, Blair Keitle had been a consultant to ProTech, Inc., for years. If it had anything to do with celestial mechanics, space manufacturing and construction, vacuum processing, or minor things like physical trajectories, he was your man. Which no doubt accounted for the fact that he was as crack a shot the Walther Quadramatic on his cross-draw belt as he was with that pool cue in his hand the last time he lightened my wallet for me. Tri-D billiards is an intricate game and Keitle was a master craftsman.



Dorothy Smith was right about one thing: no *friend* would send a slime like Stossen around and take the chance he'd...not if he knew.

But if he didn't know, why wouldn't Twilling—

My beeper sounded off like an intrusive old maid aunt.

"Clarke, here," I said, tapping into the comm-link.

surfaces bear unmistakable evidence of massive tissue destruction. I'd be tempted to use the term 'hamburger,' were it not for the inherent scientific ambiguity. I am examining the oral cavity, now. There are a full complement of teeth, well cared for, and few caries. It appears that—

"Well, kiss my gluteus! Would you look at that!"

He had seen the blip on the phosphor and was studying the printouts.

"—The velocity and trajectory of this thing," Blair went on, "are such that it's impossible *not* to be able to stop it. Which means: whoever sent us these flowers doesn't care if we knock it out—in which case, why bother to launch in the first place?—or, this data is woefully incomplete.

The former doesn't make any sense, so the later is a damn good bet."

"But who's behind it?" I wondered aloud.

"How the bloody hell should I know?" Keitle said. "Let's ask why it's hanging around our perimeter like a fart in a phone box? What's it suppose to accomplish? It's just this side of impossible to approach LIBER-TAS undetected."

"So they didn't try," I said, believing the obvious.

"Right. Our multi-sphere defenses are no secret. That's part of their effectiveness. And the outer sphere picked the bandit out of the black right on specifications. Our biggest lasers started tracking it automatically. At the edge of our medial sphere, it's well within effective range of our anti-missile batteries and particle beams. Any closer and the designated Vulcan VII's, or Phalanx IX plasma cannon will nail it."

"Tell me something I don't know," I groused at him. "I'm well aware it can't get through."

"That's what bothers me," the Australian said.

"Huh?"

"Somebody thinks it can."

#### 14

It cannot be called virtue to kill one's fellow-citizens, betray one's friends, be without faith, without pity, and without religion; by these methods one may indeed gain power, but not glory.

—Niccolò Machiavelli

Amal Rasheed glanced up from his work and saw Liam Connelly appear in the aisle of the B-section Control Module. He read his chronograph and looked back to Connelly, who nodded in response. Liam pulled the carry-all from his shoulder, sat it down on the deck, broke it open, and calmly began to assemble a Czech Scorpion VIII 9mm submachine gun. Amal reached under his bench, withdrew his own bag, and proceeded to mirror his colleague's actions, falling behind only when threading the sonic suppressor over and around the muzzle break of his own weapon. That

completed, and a full magazine inserted into the receiver, Rasheed extracted a block of plastique from his bag and started setting the timer.

"Hi, fellas," Alexei Volkhov said, walking up to them. "Anything wrong?"

Connelly turned as Rasheed continued his assignment.

"What the—?"

Liam squeezed the trigger and the B-section supervisor arched backward into the aisle, trailing an incandescence spray which momentarily hung in the air like a crimson mist, then thudded onto a plot of the deck already stained by a splattering of Volkhov's blood. Connelly's face bore absolutely no expression as he returned his attention to Amal.

Rasheed got up and, stepping over Alexei's body, walked to the master panel. Connelly joined him and watched as Amal affixed the bomb to the main feed. As luck had it, no one else came into the immediate area. He finished in moments.

"It's done," Rasheed said.

They hefted the body between them, lugging the limp husk a few meters to the aft hatch. After a brief jiggling journey, the corpse sprawled unevenly on the deck as the two men stepped back through the hatchway, pulled the hatch to, and dogged the manual overrides in place. Rasheed disabled the portal's electronics with a short burst from his Scorpion. They went quickly to the fore hatch and served it similarly.

Then Liam helped Amal pile chairs, spare equipment, anything that moved, into the aisles against both hatches.

Taking refuge behind Amal's bench, they began the 15 minute wait for the plastique to blow. Afterwards, they'd keep repair crews and anyone else away from the problem. That was their job.

The rest would take care of itself.

Paul Stowiski finished checking out the Vulcan Railgun, running massive gloved hands lightly and lovingly over the control panel.

*This is not a drill*, he thought.

Soon as word came down from Ivory Tower, he would train this baby on any target he was assigned. And he and baby didn't miss.

*It's not bragging if you can back it up.*

The colony had no fighter craft, to speak of, so those big lasers and particle beamers were the glory boys. A bandit probably couldn't make it this far in. But, what the hell? Maybe the thing was manned and the pilot was a real napalm pisser. You could always hope. Still, some things never change.

It was always hurry up and wait.

"**W**hat's so important you called me down here?"

Rae Meijer's office in the Infirmary of Caduceus is nice, yet hospitals always give me the shakes. Besides, I had the warhead to occupy me. Sure, the lasers had it pinned but nobody, particularly the boss, likes to think they're in the way.

"Show him, Rae," Muri Inouye said.

Meijers produced a specimen container labeled: *Stossen, Carl W.* She popped it wide-open, revealing what appeared to be a tooth, of all things, and stuck it under my nose.

Maybe I can do the same for you, sometime, I thought.

"What do you think, Al," Rae said.

"It looks like one hell of a cavity to me," I said. "What am I suppose to think?"

Both women looked at each other. *Men.*

"It's a hollow tooth, dodo," Inouye said, fuming.

"I've never seen anything like it," Meijers jabbered excitedly, "outside one or two obscure dental journals and a few cheap spy novels."

"Come again?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Rachel preened. "Seriously, it's so old-fashioned it had to work. Clichés like this don't happen other than in old holos, do they?"

*She's asking me?*

"I found this inside it," Dr. Meijers said, taking an odd gelatin cap-

sule out of one of the voluminous pockets of her lab coat.

"All right," I cooperated, "what is it?"

"It's not cyanide but it'll do in a pinch."

**B**enjamin Avimba sat in the Fun Hut.

On the screen of a phosphor monitor, he stared incredulously at the questionable blip separated into multiple segments.

*Sweet mercy, the Zulu thought. It's MIRVed.*

He was instantly on the comm, as three smaller blips continued on course.

15

"...Are fleets and armies necessary to a work of love and reconciliation? Have we shown ourselves so unwilling to be reconciled, that force must be called in to win back our love? Let us not deceive ourselves, sir. These are the implements of war and subjugation—the last arguments to which kings resort. I ask gentlemen, sir, what means this martial array, if its purpose be not to force us into submission?..."

—Patrick Henry

*So much for that, Arthur Twilling thought.*

Pity it was the last bottle. The last of everything else here, as well. A twinge of regret tweaked him. It had been a pleasant assignment, by and large.

*Better than most.*

But it wouldn't do to be unrealistic about it. Only the Universe is forever. And, if the cosmologists were to be believed, not even that may actually be true.

The antediluvian Makarov nestled comfortably in the desk drawer he had left open.

*The final solace of the Pyrrhic victor? A 9mm escape, eh?*

Odd this divergence of attitude regarding personal firearms, as well as everything else. Or perhaps not. No rational government wanted or, given any choice, would tolerate an armed populace. The reasons were manifest: 1) though born from ideas,

a rebellion cannot be accomplished by philosophy alone. Success also requires sufficient physical means; 2) deny those means, and you reduce effective revolution to stagnation and eventual defeat, if not abort it almost from conception; therefore, 3) *control*—not only of weapons, but of economics and much else—is essential. An aroused citizenry thwarts that most worthy impulse of any self-respecting "elite": *to rule*, unencumbered by a potentially rebellious, if disaffected, Great Unwashed.

*Realpolitik 101.*

The general run of colonist here was as averse to potential rulers as they were to taxes and other civilized regulations, which they viewed of a piece with what they'd come here to avoid. For these, and other equally compelling anti-capitalist reasons, this place had been targeted decades ago. No type of style of "anarchy"—which LIBERTAS wasn't, actually, but why quibble?—particularly if it *seems* "civilized," can be allowed to truly succeed, much less phenomenally prosper. Living examples provided too many embarrassing and, at least honestly, unanswerable questions. For those who would rule, or continue to rule, it's bad for business.

And business had been going from bad to worse for a long time.

Hence he was recruited for this mission. Requirements(?): a combination of "mole" and "sleeper." And if he did say so himself, an excellent choice had been made in Arthur Twilling. In addition to his other fine qualifications, there was of course that—how does one say it?—*panache*, which cannot be taught. One either possessed it or one did not. It was often the key between success and failure.

Arthur had succeeded for nearly 20 years.

What would his recruiter say, now? Was the old pervert still alive? Would he look at his best Philby and say: "Well done, good and faithful servant"? Or would he merely bemoan the loss of another "useful fool"?

*My, aren't we cynical in our old age?*

The visitor signal flashed.

"Yes?" he called.

"ProTech," came a crisp reply from the speaker's grill.

So soon? He wouldn't have thought—never mind. What did the Bard say? "If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all; since no man has ought of what he leaves, what is 't to leave betimes?" Twilling rose, swaying slightly, and activated ENTER.

Muri Inouye and Raoul Alvarez came in and stood before his desk.

*All professionalism.*

"Ms. Inouye," Muri said, nodding in greeting, "and Mr. Alvarez. What can I do for you?"

"You might answer some questions, Judge Twilling," Muri said.

"Oh? About what?"

"Dorothy Smith and Carl Stossen," Raoul said.

Twilling sighed, reaching into the open desk drawer at his right hand, and came out with the Makarov.

"I'd rather not," he said, taking expert aim at the officers.

A dull thud reverberated through the length of the colony's hull.

The obtuse expressions on the faces of his guests proved proverbially priceless to Arthur, as he listened to the fading echoes of the B-section blast and smiled benignly when the lights skipped, flickered, and winked out.

16

"...Gentlemen may cry, peace, peace—but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gate that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?..."

—Patrick Henry

Kick my bollocks and call me slow.

I was digesting Ben Avimba's latest communication, and talking

over alternatives with Blair Keitle, when the power failed. Nobody needed to tell me that without electrical energy we were reduced to thumbing our noses at the warheads. Particle beams, lasers, antimissiles, the plasma cannon and railguns: *everything* was out. About the only thing unaffected was the colony's axial rotation, and a piss-tube full of good *that* was against what had to be a concerted attack.

Thank God, our comm-links were self-contained.

I conferred a set of general instructions to our personnel, as well as specific orders for Paul Stowiski and Ben Avimba to drop what they were doing and trek to *Big Time Trouble* teams to B-section and find out what happened to our power supply. I wanted it fixed yesterday. I told Blair Keitle to stick with the Fun Hut and try to activate an auxiliary source, maybe a direct patch to the solar array, because we *had* to track those bandits. The Beamers, the Phalanx boys, our Vulcan guns, and everybody else were to stay put, wait for power, then carry on. That was the hardest order of all to follow, I knew.

"Have fun, Blair," I said, before I signed off.

"It's been a fair dinkum holiday, so far," said Keitle. "What are *you* going to do?"

"I'm going for a walk."

Raoul mused fleetingly: where did he dig up that museum piece?

Then Alvarez flung himself flat on the deck, splitting his lip on a chair leg he couldn't see in the mirk. Tasting salt and moisture between his teeth, he heard Inouye launch herself through the darkness—had to be one of her patented flying side kicks—then connect with something that whooooooshed on impact.

Groping for his flashlight, Raoul crawled towards sounds of fierce struggle behind the shadowy desk. He thumbed the switch and, in the unsteady beam, witnessed Muri blocking Twilling's surprisingly proficient handstrikes, made the more remarkable by the sooty dark in which they were executed.

*Judge is fast for a fat fellow. Deadly, too.*

Raoul had his Ruger out by reflex, just as Twilling twisted in the light like a skewered animal. The .50 caliber softpoint entered the judge's chest near the base of the sternum, shattering the heart. He went down like a dropped diaphragm, hooking his chin on the desk, and hung there, a grotesque Buddha peering sightless over his own desktop.

*Like to have that as a paper-weight?* Raoul wondered.

*Nah. It'd spoil the decor.*

I went hand-over-hand along the rungs heading to an airlock at Omega Hub. The lights on my headgear threw out twin Halogen III beams and I found the hatch I was looking for. Cycling manually, I floated toward the line of storage receptacles and located mine. But without power there was nothing to do but bring out *Madeleine* and open it the hard way.

*Oh, joy.*

The flechettes peeled back the lid like an old-time can opener. But I knew—in no uncertain terms—that Rachel Meijers was going to have a good time picking titanium pins out of me. They made their locations unequivocally known as I removed my jumpsuit, and again as I donned my EVA gear.

Richochets are a mother, especially in a confined area.

I wrestled my Manned Maneuvering Unit free of its restraints, checked the nitrogen supplies, stepped into the sucker, sealed up, and activated. Exchanging the lampgear for my helmet, I tongued the chin switch. Oxygen flowed, all tell-tales glowing green. I hit the purge and the airlock hissed to vacuum. Manually cycling the outer hatch proved troublesome. Each second felt like hours wasted. But it finally broke open. I barely touched my thrusters so I'd remain close enough to "close the door" behind me. Call me predictable but you just can't beat a *good* habit.

Switching on my heads-up display, I could "see" the bogies on the interior of my faceplate.

I adjusted for frame-of-reference and hit my thrusters a good one.

The body of Alexei Volkhov was caught in the beam of an auxiliary flood-light. Stowiski swore. Activating his comm-link, he said: "Ben, this is Paul."

"I read you," Alvarez acknowledged.

"There's a body in the corridor. It's the B-section supervisor. He's been murdered. And the hatch of B-control does not respond to manual. How's it look on your side?"

"Our hatch does not respond, either."

"We've got to get in there," Paul said. "Let's blow 'em."

"Affirmative," said Ben. "Coordinate ignition?"

"You bet."

Their respective explosives experts planted the C7g charges by the light of their headgear. Everyone cut the beams then, and switched to infrared on their goggles. Retreating a standard distance with his team, Stowiski comm'd Avimba: "Ready?"

"Ready," Avimba said.

The BTT teams shielded their goggles from the coming blasts.

"On three."

"On three."

"Counting."

3...2...1—

Rubble imploded into the B-section control module.

Amal Rasheed found himself struggling under the literal dead weight of Liam Connelly, a steel shard protruding raggedly from the right temple of Liam's head.

Extracting himself quickly, Amal heard the scrambling of others into the room, the shouts of hard-breathing voices, and discovered that his infrared goggles had been rendered useless by the dual flash of the explosives. His ears rang with the detonation(s), as well, as he tore off his goggles and trained his Scorpion on the first sounds and movement he could differentiate from the dust and darkness.

Rasheed neither saw nor heard the three-round burst from Benjamin Avimba's Ingram M23, which

punched its venerable .45 caliber slugs into the back of Amal's neck, severing the spinal cord and exiting through the throat. His body collapsed where it had stood, the head dangling listlessly to the side, attached to the torso by a thin thread of tissue.

"Bring in the floods," Stowiski comm'd.

The lights wound their way into the room on staggering beams, followed by repair crews. Paul removed his infrareds. He walked up to his friend, Ben, grinning in the shadows.

Goggles atop his brow, Avimba stole a look at his chronograph and smiled back at Paul. From the time the hatches had been blown, and the two terrorists neutralized, 17 seconds had elapsed.

"What kept you?" Benjamin Avimba said.

**T**hruster fuel was getting low but I couldn't concern myself about it. The warheads loomed larger in my field of vision and I would be shortly within range. That was all that mattered.

I reached for the PFH.

The heads-up showed full telemetry and the nicest set of crosshairs you'd ever want to see. I thumbed to burst-fire to conserve ammunition and brought the weapon up to match the ALSM with the faceplate display. Red on Green.

Beautiful.

I touched off four quick bursts and the left warhead of the trioka disintegrated roughly, pieces tearing away into lovely useless scrap. That's the nice thing about warheads: they've got to be intact to function. They're heavily shielded not only due to radiation but precisely because they're so damned delicate. Pierce that protection and they're expensive flotsam. But then, that's *always* the trick, isn't it?

The first hit was luck at that range and I knew it.

I ripped through the rest of the magazine taking out the second warhead. I thumbed the release, and the spring-loaded plunger kicked the empty mag out of the receiver.

Knocking it gently away, I replaced it with a full clip. The third warhead—and myself, by the way—closing our approach with each evanescent tick. As I touched off another series of pulses, the bogie blew silently apart.

I knew I was too close.

The soundlessly expanding sphere of the explosion hurled two shuttle-sized (or so it seemed to me) pieces in my general direction and before I could maneuver they double-teamed me. I went ass-over-hotdogcart. A crack appeared in the visor of my helmet, removing the heads-up display as well as my suit integrity. I lost the PFH—which was a damned shame, I remember thinking—and I thought I heard a sickening hiss of escaping oxygen. But your senses play tricks on you, sometimes, so what can I say?

You might not believe this, but that wasn't what really worried me. The last time I'd been in a similar situation I'd just attempted a back-flip with a full twist from a diving board. Only this time, the somersault didn't stop and neither did the twisting. I tried desperately to correct the complicated motions with the gas-passer. While I was fooling myself into thinking I was obtaining positive results, life-support became genuinely questionable. The tell-tales at my chin shifted slowly red and my disorientation grew severe. Thankfully, there was nothing in my stomach so, on top of everything else, at least I didn't have to worry about drowning in a helmet filled with my own vomit.

I hoped.

The nitrogen in my thrusters expired.

Old Man Morpheus nudged me in the ribs, damn him, saying: "Have you heard the one about—?"

The arrogant bugger hadn't changed a bit.

## **E**piogue

The world which is arising is still half-buried in the ruins of the world falling into decay, and in the vast confusion of all human affairs at present, no one can know which of the old institutions and former mores will continue to hold

up their heads, and which will in the end go under.

—Alexis De Tocqueville

"—Well, boys, they killed me," I think I heard.

But I was worse off than that old punchline so I wasn't paying much attention. And anyway, prior to losing consciousness I'd found myself wondering who'd get my stock options and my DebitCard balance. I prayed it wouldn't be that spendthrift cousin of mine, Ernie, in D.C. I'd had no use for him since he'd opted to become some senator's doxy. It just shows that no good results from being a congressional page.

I was also curious as to which of the fellows would commandeer *Madeleine*. Laugh if you want to, but I wasn't particularly fond of the idea of another man holding her. Yet I hoped he'd treat her with the respect she deserved. What obscure relative would abscond with my furniture? And not that I had any residual guilt about the subject, but would anyone think to donate my antique gold coin collection to my mother's nursing home?

I knew Muri Inouye would look after Colonel John Singleton Mosby, (Ret.). In fact, I could picture him stropping himself on her legs. He's a good cat when he's asleep.

You know, important stuff.

So, when I woke up in the Infirmary of Caduceus with tubes running in and out of embarrassing locations along my person, it took a few moments to realize I was still alive, still CEO of ProTech, Inc., that all my parts appeared to be connected, and that power had been returned to LIB-ERTAS. It was difficult to care about much else with a drum solo throb between your ears.

I tried to speak. That was a mistake. Then I attempted to move.

That was a bigger mistake.

"Here," a mellow voice said, "sip this."

The transparent tip of a clear curved straw nearly took out my right eye. But I negotiated it into my mouth and drew for all I was worth. I gulped. I choked. I gasped.

"That's tequila!"

"You were expecting, maybe, Perrier?" Dr. Rachel Meijers said.

"But it's—"

"What are you squawking about? There's *ice* in it."

"Blasphemy," I said.

"This is a hospital," she said, "not *Acapulco Joe's*. By the way, how did you manage to shoot yourself in the—?"

"Privileged information, Rae," I told her. "Did you get them all?"

"Yes," she grinned, dangling a small plastic bag filled along the bottom with tiny titanium needles, "and no more showed up on the X-rays. I thought you might want these for souvenirs."

"Thanks," I said, taking the bag and hiding it under my pillow. It was a little easier to move. Perhaps the good doctor's "juice" was kicking in.

"I know you feel like a pair of stewed gym shoes," Meijers went on, "but you'll be all right. There's nothing wrong with you that my skill won't cure."

"Maybe your bill will cause a relapse?"

"I win either way," she shrugged.

"You've got some visitors, AI. I'll send them in, limited to groups of 100."

"You're all heart, Rae."

"I'd like to stay, too, but I've got bumps & bruises *ad infinitum* out there. Not to mention preparing for next month's run of pregnancy tests."

"Pregnancy tests?"

"There was a blackout on LIB-ERTAS. Remember?"

"I'll try," I said to her retreating back. Then Muri, Blair, and Raoul waltzed in and flanked my bed. They looked as though they didn't quite know what to say to me.

*It must be contagious*, I thought.

"How ya feelin', sport?" Blair said.

"I've been happier," I said. "But maybe I was overdue for this saline infusion. Anybody know how I got here?"

"I tracked you," he said, "on the phosphor. I *did* manage to patch us into the grid. It wasn't too touch and go. The power returned—"

"Thanks to Ben and Paul," Raoul said.

"—and we got a picture of you and second bird. The visuals picked up the pulses beautifully, like a running string of expanding glass beads."

"The last explosion looked like it was right on top of you," Muri said, shifting her stance. "It bounced you away like a billiard ball."

"So *that's* what it felt like," I said.

"I plotted your trajectory and comm'd the coordinates to Muri and Raoul," Blair said.

"We commandeered a shuttle—" Alvarez began.

"—My private buggy—" Keitle said.

"—and went after you at 3 gees."

"How close was it?" I said.

"Don't ask," said a quiet Muri Inouye.

I shut up for a while. So did they.

"Thanks," I managed to tell them.

"Paul and Ben are supervising clean-up in B-section," Raoul said.

"You'll have reports from all of us tomorrow."

"Good," I nodded.

It's amazing how fast you run out of small talk.

Blair broke the silence: "Raoul and I have things to discuss."

"We do?" Alvarez said, then glanced at Keitle. "Oh, yeah. We do." And they left, mixing smiles with mumbled inanities. Muri then pulled a chair up to the edge of my bed and sat down.

Her face was unreadable.

"Are you all right?" she said.

"So I'm told. Thanks for coming after me, Muri."

"You're welcome."

"I owe you."

"We're even."

Silence.

"When do you get out of this place?" Muri said.

"When Rachel says so, I suppose," I said.

"Yeah, well, I'll talk to her about that."

"Huh?"

"Never mind," Inouye said. "Look, get well quick or I'll take your job."

"That sounds like a threat. How would you do it?"

"By kicking you upstairs to a seat on the Board."

"Then what would you do?"

"Take your Board seat by making you Chairman."

"Then?"

"I might let you marry me," Muri said, leaning over me smugly.

"Is that a fact?"

"Somebody's got to make an honest man out of you, AI. And believe me, I'm just the woman who could do it."

I reached up, grabbed her shoulders, and pulled her down to me with one quick, continuous motion. A little gasp escaped her. I saw the startled look in her eyes and felt the slow rise and fall of her breathing against me.

"I'll just bet you could," I whispered.

There's something to be said for tradition. ■



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# WRITING, PART 7

## Algis Budrys

### Agents and "Agents"

There is nothing to equal the amount of hushed attention an instructor gets from a roomful of would-be writers when he or she mentions agents. Agents, he—it's me—suddenly discovers, are the single most important thing in a would-be writer's life. And if it's me, he really has to stop everything and concentrate, trying to reason out how this could be, for agents in truth are not that important at this stage. Once you start selling books, you ought to get one. Whether he or she gets ten percent or fifteen, it is more profitable to have an agent than to go it alone. A good agent will do a good job of representing you. But not when you're talking about selling your first few short stories.

But most beginning writers have an *idea* of an agent in their heads that has little to do with reality. And practically every Yellow Pages printed anywhere in this country has a listing for Agents; Literary, most of which "agents" will do a great deal to encourage those errors.

In truth, I do not know exactly what beginning writers expect of an agent. But it

wouldn't surprise me if a certain percentage really did believe that you cannot sell a manuscript anywhere without the intervention of an agent, it wouldn't surprise me if a certain larger percentage believed that an agent's job includes rewriting the manuscripts, and a certain percentage believe that an agent works for them. And, as I said, the Yellow Pages are full of people who masquerade as agents, so the chances are decent that you have had an "agent" tell you these things are true. They aren't.

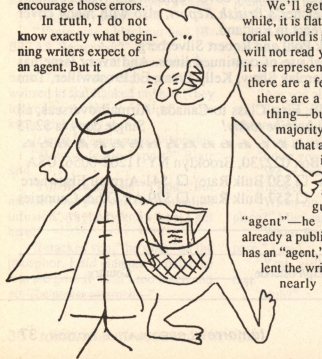
First of all, no one licenses literary agents; no one examines their credentials, no one can get you redressed against a bad agent until he or she breaks a criminal law—which only the stupidest ones have to do in order to rip you off. Most bad agents, consciously or unconsciously bad, have found ways to do it to you while staying well within, or at least within, the law. Second, any agent you can get at this early stage of your career is an "agent" not worth having.

We'll get back to that. Meanwhile, it is flatly not true that the editorial world is made up of people who will not read your manuscript unless it is represented by an agent. Oh, there are a few editors like that—there are a few editors like anything—but the overwhelming majority of editors understand that a major part of their job is discovering new writers. If a writer has an agent—as distinguished from an "agent"—he or she is ipso facto already a published writer. If a writer has an "agent," the chances are excellent the writer has a completely or nearly completely undevel-

oped talent. If an undeveloped writer has an "agent" who will rewrite the manuscript, for money or for free, the chances are excellent the "agent" is incompetent in that area, particularly if he or she does it for free. Stop and think—if the "agent" knew that much about writing, he'd quit the agency business and go into writing, wouldn't she? If the "agent" does it for money, the chances are excellent he has someone in the house who has been handed a few simple guidelines—that is, a near-novice writer who is scraping out a few bucks until he or she finishes the novel that will get them away from the "agency." He or she may help you with a few simple guidelines. But if you have been reading this series, you already have those, and a few besides that the reading-fee person never thought of.

An agent agents. That's all an agent does. The agent knows, because he or she keeps very current, who's buying and who's not, and how far up the agent can drive the advance against royalties. He judges if it's wise to get a high advance. He or she knows what parts of the standard contract can be struck out or modified, and he or she knows what the good royalty rates are. And that's about all. It's a lot. A good agent rides the profile of these various things at various publishers at the right time, as near as humanly possible for that agent, and he or she thrills at night to battles won, and cringes at battles lost. She or he does not work for you; he or she *represents* you; a good agent works for him or her self.

Stop and think. An agent has lots of clients. Rarely in the course of a luncheon does only one writer get mentioned between agent and editor.





More: An agent will, if nothing else will do, settle at a lower than optimum rate for you, in order to also sell somebody else. An agent will see that same editor many times, representing many properties, while you are turning out only one. Or do you expect the agent to starve, collecting only a small percentage of your gross and yours alone?

Now. An agent who does the above may not strike you as representing your best interests. And in truth, he or she may not be, in the short run. But he or she is still doing better for you than you could by yourself, in almost all cases, even in the short run. And in the long run, you shouldn't agent yourself; you should write, and any rewriting is between you and your editor. In the long run, if you do your job, and the editor does his or her job, and the agent does his or her job, you will synergize and do far better than any of you could have done individually.

That is, when you are ready to start producing books in volume. Until then, an agent can do very little for you. Stop and think: Selling a short story takes almost as much time as selling a novel. What's 15% of the take on a short story? Really, can you expect him or her to work very hard for it?

That is, until you are Stephen King, or someone close to him in sales. Then all bets are off. But not until then.

Picking an agent is an art. The agent who does very well for Writer A may stink for Writer B, and vice versa. The best you can do is look at the work of writers you admire, whoever they are, and, when you meet those writers, ask them who their agent is. (You will meet other writers, almost certainly, just as soon as you deserve to—that is, as soon as you've sold some stories. Trust me.)

Once you have the names of some possible agents, write them a letter. Don't call, don't drop by. Write them a letter, say who's recommending you if someone is, tell them why you ought to be considered. *Don't* tell them if they'll take you on, you'll be forever grateful, will give them half

of everything you ever make, etc. You are just as much an equal party to any possible arrangement as the agent. What you are doing is exploring the possibility that you'll be compatible. And if you're not, on further inspection, then politely beg off and go on your way. An unsuitable agent is as bad as an unsuitable spouse. And that's what the relationship will be, ideally—a species of marriage, with spats and reconciliations, but an enduring relationship nevertheless, with either side giving in occasionally. And as I said, with the agent sticking to agenting and you sticking to writing.

So let's assume that you and the agent have provisionally found each other. Try not to sign a contract. Try to get him or her to take 10% instead of 15%. Try. And if you do sign a contract, first take it to a lawyer with some knowledge of the milieu of literary property, and get him or her to look at it. Pay the \$2.00 to the attorney. This is a business arrangement, no matter how the agent may try to cast it; in fact, the less like a business arrangement the agent tries to make it sound, the less likely are you to be happy in the long run.

Another thing: If you want to break into book publishing, the agent has to be in the New York metropolitan area; if you want screenwriting, the agent has to be in Greater Los Angeles. With essentially no exceptions, no other agent is worth having. And if you are a beginning writer, which I assume you are, no agent you can get at this stage of your career is worth having. Not that you need one, just yet.

Clear? Well, perhaps. Agents are a difficult subject. But if you remember that you do the writing, and the agent does the agenting only, and the editor and only the editor tells you what rewrite he or she wants, you'll be pretty OK. Remember that an agent will not let you use his phone, lend you money, or put you up for the night until you essentially don't need those things; remember that an agent is not your Mommy. For which, if you are smart, you'll be very grateful. ■

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# DANCE TO THE SUN

William Esrac

Illustrated by Kelly Faltermayer

*He was a superman, and all his friends took advantage of him*

Part One of Four Parts

*For Claire.*

## ONE

The sky was pale blue, very bright and unmarked by cloud. The landscape, diseased and tortured, was ochre and yellow, brown and black. The road curved over the plain, broken in parts by the huge cracks and craters which showed over the entire landscape. Parts of the landscape were overgrown with the dry, yellow weed which had survived and spread after the normal balance of nature had been destroyed.

Insects seemed to dance and sing everywhere, the heat rousing them to a pitch of activity in the noon brightness. The light glanced from millions of tiny wings and pale bodies until it was sometimes difficult to tell where weed ended and insect life began

above the immediate surface of that distorted land.

Here and there, the decayed remains of trees thrust spikily upward and, far less frequently, the remains of old buildings leaned crazily, burned by the heat of the holocaust which had come years before.

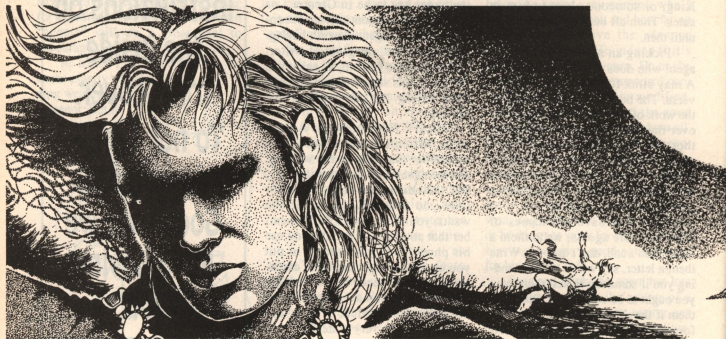
A man shambled drunkenly along the road, his feet disturbing the weed and insects. He leaned forward, his head lowered and his knees bent, as though he had reached the last stages of exhaustion. But he moved at a fairly regular speed, skirting the cracks and craters to follow the road with stubborn, painful tenacity.

He was filthy with dust and pollen from the weed, his clothes sweat-stained and torn. He had lost one sandal and blood had caked over

one swollen foot. As he shambled along, he hummed tunelessly. It was a sound of pain, misery and despair, an expression of hopelessness beyond weeping.

Behind him the mountains were very distant and, before him, the broken plains stretched to the horizon. The heat of the day was at its most fierce when he was discovered by the air-car as it sped over the ruined land.

The men in the air-car monitored him for a few moments and then carefully shot him with a sedative dart. The dart caught him on one shoulder and, within seconds, he began to stagger. He fell heavily to the weed-thick road. He was barely breathing and his heartrate was alarmingly slow when they lifted him into the air-car and sped northward.



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## Most Secret.

Security S2-14

To: Colin Helm, Director, Security Central.

From: Louise Vestos, Study Center.

Colin, I am enclosing physical data on the patient known as "Saulus," an edited manuscript of the data compiled from 32 recorded capsules and the said 32 recorded capsules marked in order.

Saulus was discovered on the Plains of the Warlords in one of the Contaminated Areas of Anatolia. This was following the raid staged by Central Security on the stronghold of the Jonaas Clan. He was completely amnesiac except that he remembered a name—that of Callios LeMaitre.

Since LeMaitre is an experienced Analyst and Alpha Calculator, I felt justified in bringing him into the case although he does not belong to Grenoble Psi-Org. He is very experienced with high Security-status cases and there was no difficulty in having him cleared for this one.

LeMaitre did remarkably well, managing to direct Saulus into catharsis-mode and so producing these recordings. His patience and intelligence about the matter have been very impressive. Despite the patient having remembered his name, LeMaitre cannot recall having any

previous contact with him.

Since Saulus is technically an Outlaw and obviously a Super, his Termination would be automatic under normal circumstances. However, while his telepathic ability is unusually powerful, it is his allied kinetic ability which is so unique and of undoubted value.

The decisions regarding his future must be made by Council. I am hoping for a speedy decision on the case so that all concerned in the Security Quarantine may be released to pursue normal duties once more.

—L.V.

## Most Secret

Security S2-14

From: Joseph Thorenson.  
Semantics Division.

I have reduced the original manuscript by almost two thirds, editing out much of the extraneous comment and lengthy dissertations which have little point in the narrative. I have given dates where they could be positively established.

Since the tapes cover almost two years, with some gaps, much of what Saulus thought, felt or did is often of little interest to anyone but himself. I have, therefore, taken some liberties in the compilation and editing of this second manuscript and I have also included some information to point

out important occurrences beyond the narrative. This may clarify certain areas where Saulus is vague or uninformed.

The manuscript is, wherever possible, given as Saulus spoke it. He was speaking to Callios LeMaitre in part but, at other times, was speaking aloud to himself and becoming introspective, sometimes entering a trancelike state as he spoke.

"Auria" or "The Lady" is, obviously, Auria Shasti who seems to have had a profound effect on him. Shasti, for those who are not familiar with the background of the case, is the agent who managed to get herself involved with the Jonaas Clan and, eventually, revealed its stronghold to Central Security. She is a Beta 'path with an unusual Lure Specialty, a remarkable young woman in many ways.

In the early stages, Saulus speaks in a very poor form of the old French language and colloquial slang. In translating this, I have removed some grammatical errors and distortions for the sake of clarity and easier reading. It is not until the third tape that Saulus begins speaking in highly educated Universal. What is remarkable is his ability to comprehend and apply the education that, as becomes clear, he was given so rapidly.

—J.T.



I wake up and it is a good day. My life-pulses are full again and I feel delight in being. I go out and do my dance to Sun-over-the-mountains. Yo-Yo laughs and tries to dance, too, but falls down and cries.

My hands are complete again so I am able to feed Yo-Yo and myself on the fruit stored away behind the ferns. He is greedy and forgets that he hurt himself. I go down to the pool and wash myself carefully as the Lady says is necessary. She is slightly wrong about the need for much washing, but I do it for her. The water is cold, but I feel good afterwards.

I do a think-change so that I will not smell bad and the Lady will not be displeased. I comb my hair and put on my wraparound, then I sweep out my cave and tidy it so that she will think it pleasant. The old vine is not a good curtain, but the new one is growing well and my cave will be secret again soon. I like that word "secret." Secret—

I go out and make sure that all the pretty blue flowers are open because she likes them so much. The carpet of grasses is so beautiful and the scents on the air so delightful that my excitement shivers in my senses. The whole world is beautiful on this day.

She comes early today and smiles so pleasantly. She says, "Hello, Saulus, I see that your hands are better." I am glad they are better, too. She think-teaches me a pleasant lesson today. It is about words and why not words and I speak better in the Universal speaking.

I like the way of her thinking. She is strange and different to others I am friends with. She does not spill her thoughts carelessly as do my friends. But she is sad, I think. Hubertus is not the correct mate for her, perhaps. He is my good friend, but I see that he might not be right for the Lady.

Or is she sad because of the directive Hubertus has put in her brain so that she cannot run away from him and the valley? Noni says she tried to do this after the bad mistake she did with the Outside work for the Clan. Hubertus would not like

her to run away. Hubertus is my good friend, but I see that he is foolish in some ways.

She brings me a new tunic so that I may hide my bare skin. She says my wraparound is dis-gus-tingly dirty and that I should wash it. When I take it off to put on the new tunic she says it is not polite to show some male parts even when they are nice. Only sometimes, she says, but does not say when. I pretend I do not understand, but I know. Sometimes it is wise to seem foolish before her.

When she goes I feel sad. She is so pretty and so nice. And what Hubertus calls intelligent. It is strange that she can be intelligent and yet make such mistakes in the Clan-Work Outside. Noni says she will not be allowed Outside again because Jonaas is angry about the mistakes. But I think Jonaas wishes to take her from Hubertus to be his woman and this is a way to keep her close.

Carolus comes for a think-change of his face and fingertip patterns. He does not like to come to me for this, but comes because Jonaas says he must. Carolus is afraid of me like some others are afraid, but he is more afraid of Jonaas. I fix a wrong place inside Carolus's heart, but I do not tell him because he would become more frightened of me if I did. He is very foolish.

When he goes, I play with the little snake and feed her while I think on how Carolus smells like the way the Lady says is bad. Then I take Yo-Yo down to the pool and wash him while he yells and cries. He goes to sulk among the big ferns on the little terrace while I wash his tunic and my wraparound and spread them to dry on the rocks.

A think-call comes from Noni, so I go quickly to the South Wing where the wall pictures are so pretty. Noni wants a change to breasts and face again, but I tell her no more until new balances establish. She is very cross, but does not argue. She is my good friend, but I see that she can be foolish about some things.

She puts on lots of smell from a bottle and I feel like giving her a good wash like I did with Yo-Yo.

She says Jonaas will be sending more people for facechange and fingertip-pattern-change later. She says the Clan has big work coming.

She says Hubertus does not like the Lady coming to my cave so much and she wants to know why the Lady comes. I explain about the lessons, but she says Hubertus wonders because he is jealous in the mating-way. I think Hubertus has asked Noni to question me about this so I pretend not to understand.

She says that Jonaas is still angry because I will not make his body-changes. This makes me angry and afraid and spoils my pleasure in the day.

I go quickly to the West Terrace where no one else goes so that I can look at Red Tree and forget my fear of Jonaas. I know he will hurt me badly again if I do not give him the bodychanges soon. But I am more angry than afraid of him.

Red Tree is growing big and pretty since I changed his food needs. It is a pity I did not discover the right way of his food-needs when he was younger. The hot-sickness in the ground is now no problem to him. His leaves are now bigger and he whispers to me with his life-pulse. He sucks a little of my blood, but only for an identification and not a hungeriness. He ate many birds yesterday, the nasty brown killer-birds that try to eat his fruit.

I ask him for fruit and he gives me plenty until I cannot eat any more. He is very full of life-pulse now, but next year he may begin to fail. I must make his seeds fertile next year so that there will be more Red Trees. It will be easy to train them about ignoring the hot-sickness in the ground now that I know the way.

All the little mosses and the tiny purple flowers on the West Terrace now grow thickly and smell pretty. All whisper to me with their life-pulse and eat many bad insects. But not bees. The bees are changing again because of the hot-sickness, so I must make corrections soon. I must also look at the stinging-moths again soon because they breed too readily and have too many legs.

I go up to High-on-the-Mountain-Spur and look into Deep Crack. Big Crawly-Thing is frightened and waves wiggly legs at me. I make a pleasure-think to him and he stops his chittering noises. I like him because he makes the soft bed stuff for YoYo and me to rest on, and he does not hurt anything but the sharpteeth and stinging-moths which come to the West Terrace. He has so many eyes and legs that I want to laugh. He is all wrong, but funny.

The big vines on Fallen-Down Rocks are covered with flowers now—

*(A lengthy dissertation on the rights and wrongs of plant-growth follows. The terminology and theories are garbled, however, and are impossible to understand.*

—J.T. Semantics Division)

A think-call comes from Noni so I run down to my cave. There are five men and two women waiting with Noni. Some of them are very frightened of me and roll their eyes or make fear-smiles. Noni manages them well and I get busy.

It takes a long time because they wish to look good and their ideas of this are sometimes strange. They look in Noni's mirror again and again and make frightened, wondering sounds. They go away with Noni, leaving meat and cheese and bread for payment and it is already mid-afternoon.

Yo-Yo comes for his tunic so I dress him, give him cuddles and feed him. I tell him there will be washings every day from now on and he squeals. I wish he could think better. He plays games very well and is happier since the last time I fixed his back and legs. I would make him grow bigger, but Jonaas might notice him more so it is better to leave him small. When he is finished eating we play Bob-Up Bob-Down in the long grass until he is tired. Then I sing songs for him until it gets dark.

I feed him the milk which Noni brought and put him to bed, then I go to High-on-the-mountain again and work at the steel door that is hidden there. This must be the fourth year-cycle of working at it. Soon the stone

which holds it will be chipped away enough to open it. What is inside? I am always excited to think on it, especially as it is my secret.

Secret—

I go down to the pools and swim for a long time. Water is so wonderful—

*(At this point, Saulus goes into lengthy ponderings concerning water, body functions pertaining to the elimination of body wastes and then to very basic sexual matters. The ideas are concise and well-ordered, but seemed to me unnecessary to the narrative.*

—J.T. Semantics Division)



I go to the cave and light the candle that Noni left me, then I read the book that the Lady brought me. Many of the Universal-words are strange to me. None of the other Clan ever had such a book. Tomorrow I must ask many questions. I am tired. I must sleep. I call Yo-Yo, tuck him into the soft bed and snuggle down beside him.

*(Saulus himself makes the following jump in time. Days or possibly weeks have passed. He speaks in excellent Universal from here.*

—J.T. Semantics Division)

I awake, full of energy and life-pulse and dance to the sunrise. It's very good and I feel wonderful after. I lift Yo-Yo from his warm bed and take him down to the pools, ignoring

his squealing and kicking. I wash him and myself, then dry us with the towel that I swapped for Red Tree's fruit with Mario. I tickle Yo-Yo until he laughs again. He's getting very fat and pot-bellied so I do some little changes to his insides and adjust his hunger-need. "Adjust" is an uncomfortable word. I adjust my ideas, but not so easily as I adjust Yo-Yo's insides.

I wash our tunics and we run up to the cave to spread them on the rocks. Then I go to Red Tree and to the vegetable garden on Low Terrace for our breakfast. I collect milk from the kitchen before Mario awakes and Yo-Yo and I eat very well. I think I'll steal some bread and cheese later.

I clean my cave very carefully and throw out the CrawlyThing bedding to make rope from later. My new bed, brought here by Noni and the Lady, is very fine and Hubertus has promised me blankets. Yo-Yo and I will sleep very well.

It is a long time since we had a proper bed with blankets. Not that I have missed them so much. But I have accepted the bed and blankets because Hubertus feels so guilty that he did not think about them before this. Why should he think of them? He has never come to my cave before. The Lady has caused him to think about me. He has always presumed things before. Hubertus is clever, but he presumes wrongly sometimes.

It's a hot day so our tunics dry very quickly. I dress us, put Yo-Yo on my shoulders and go quickly up to High-on-the-mountain. Such a wonderful secret to have! The door is almost hidden by the new vines now. I put Yo-Yo down to open the door and we creep into the darkness.

I find the candles stolen from Carolus's supply-box, light them and close the door carefully. Yo-Yo likes the little gold box with the pretty jewels in it so I leave him to play with them while I look in the big, wooden chests again. They are full of wonderful things. "Treasures" is the word, I think. So many beautiful clothes! They are made of beautiful

synthetic fabrics and are not damaged at all!

Now I have beautiful new clothes which are strange and good. I had to look at them carefully before I realized what they were. They are what Mahmud calls "kaftans" of the old style, used when the Warlord was here. Perhaps they belonged to him. They are beautifully embroidered and made in wonderful colors. I like to feel the smoothness and see the shine of them. They are big and loose, so I like them better than tunics.

Poor Warlord. I wonder if he was one of those who made the terrible war in the name of religion and helped to destroy all the fertility beyond the valley? The Lady says that the religion was only part of the excuse for so much destruction, but I don't understand some of what she tried to explain. Religion seems to be an excuse for many bad things.

I look at the large, soft couches with the beautiful cushions, at the carved benches and the hangings on the walls. There is a box with a necklace of heavy gold pieces in it and I put that on because it pleases me. I put on a kaftan of green and gold and decide to wear it today. I find a beautiful piece of fabric which I wrap about Yo-Yo and pin with a gold butterfly so that he's pleased, too. He likes pretty things. So do I.

We put the rest of the things away carefully, blow out the candles and go outside again. I close the door tight and then look about at the little courtyard. There were once gardens here, I think. This would be a pleasant place to live in. I must consider that. It would be pleasant to have a garden here again.

I take Yo-Yo back to the cave and find the Lady there. She has brought me more books. She is very beautiful to me and excitement quivers in my senses. I send Yo-Yo to play in the meadow.

She think-talks to me, "You look very handsome, like one of the old Warlords."

I tell her what Noni keeps saying about her visiting and that Hubertus grows angry about it. But she shrugs, as though not caring.

She quickens my life-pulse powerfully today because she is so pretty and golden and has such a scent of woman. I let her see that I am desirous.

She tells me, "No, I belong with Hubertus," but her body is interested and I persuade it unfairly with my special-think despite her wish not to be persuaded. It is a wonderful mating. She is beautiful and I am beautiful and we stay touching and looking for a long time.

She asks, "How old are you, Saulus?"

I am not truly certain, but I tell her I remember seventeen years and am probably twenty years old.

I ask her a little about where she came from on the Outside, but she does not answer very much. Noni says she was a petty thief found by Hubertus in Rome. I wonder why? She is surely intelligent enough to have found easier ways to live. She never talks of her Outside life. She is a woman of secrets. Perhaps her secrets concern crimes which no one knows of. Perhaps there were crimes of which she is ashamed. She is sensitive and refined, unlike most of the Clan.

She gives me a very long and very good think-lesson about many things I wished to know and then says she must go. I give her the necklace of gold pieces and she thinks it is very fine. When she asks where it came from, I tell her it is payment from the Clan for what I do and she believes me.

I ask, "Why do you make your hair this wrong color?"

She tells me, "Hubertus likes it and it helps to make me look younger."

I tell her, "I'll make the color real if you wish it. And thirty years isn't old."

She says, "I'm twenty-five."

I say, "I know you are thirty years. Your body tells me so."

She does not like it that I can tell about these things.

She says to me, "Hubertus likes to be with a younger woman. You must keep my secret. For how long have you lived in this cave?"

I tell her, "When I was unripe I lived with Mario. He took care of me because Jonaas said he must. But Mario is a bully and he dislikes Yo-Yo being about him. So, when I was older, I brought us to this cave and we're happier. Yo-Yo likes it that nobody yells at him, no one is afraid of me while I'm here and I feel safer away from Jonaas."

I am looking at her insides and outsides with my specialthink and see how she can be made more youthful without pain because it is important to her. She is healthy, but too fat a little. I make adjustments for slow changes.

She says, "All are afraid of Jonaas. Why does he hate you so?"

I show her with my mind and she says, "Jealousy? Of his own son?"

I say, "I'm not his son. Yo-Yo is his son. Our mother was the same woman."

I show her the place where our mother is buried behind the rocks in the cave. I say, "She died when Yo-Yo was born, eleven years ago, but she didn't die of Yo-Yo as Jonaas says. She died because of the hot-sickness in the ground. I tried to help her, but I was too young to understand and my specialthink was not strong then. She coached me in mindspeaking. But my special-think was something I learned the beginnings about from one who died in work for the Clan. He was a Healer. And the enlarging and refining of those things I learned for myself."

She says, "Do you know what a Super-Talent is?"

I say, "Yes. Noni is a Super, not with mindspeaking but because she has such a great ability for lifting things. Noni helped me to cover the hot-sickness of the north side by pulling down parts of the mountains. And Hubertus is a Super, a Calculator who thinks of how and why better than others and because he's so powerful as a mindspeaker. And Jonaas is a Super, a Charismatic and a Firethrower."

She asks, "And what are you, Saulus?"

I say, "You know. I'm a Super with a big ability to mindspeak and

special-think which is to do with the telekinetic."

She says, "And you are more intelligent than most people here. You are stronger than Jonaas in your own way. Why don't you fight him when he hurts you?"

I say, "I don't like the hurt he gives, but he's the Big Boss. He keeps us all organized, united and safe from the Outside. There must be a Big Boss or the Clan would run about like ants without a nest. He's hurt me only twice. My hands were the worst—but they took little time to heal."

She says, "Jonaas becomes increasingly unstable. Someday he will have to be fought and you could do it."

I say nothing. I've never considered such an idea before.

She says, "You learn very quickly. Who taught you things before me?"

I say, "Many people. My mother, Hubertus, Torros and Mario were some. But you teach me things that are interesting and make other thinking clearer. Hubertus teaches me much since you began teaching me, but I enjoy the learning with you more. You are so beautiful and have the manner of secrets which I like."

She says, "What secrets?" and becomes full of fear inside.

I say, "I don't know your secrets. It is your manner which is secret and I like it. Meriem calls it enigmatic. That is a good word, I think. You sometimes give a feeling of sadness in your thinking, so I wonder if this is because of what you hide from others."

She says, "We all have our secrets. Like you and me being with each other today. It mustn't happen again or I won't give you more lessons. And Hubertus must not know."

I allow her to think I agree about no more mating, but I don't promise. I should feel shame at my unfair persuasion, though. It was not a fair thing. I must not do it again. Maybe.

When she goes I'm so hungry that I call Yo-Yo from the little meadow and take him hunting for the sharp teeth in the valley. They are

such nasty, destructive creatures with too many teeth and voracious—that's a lovely word—appetites. But they are delicious—another lovely word—to eat.

The air in the valley is good and the grass is green, green, green because there is no hot-sickness in the ground. There are pretty flowers all over the valley. It is such a beautiful place.

We find a little herd of sharp-teeth near the white rocks. I tuck up my kaftan. Yo-Yo makes loud noises, so I leave him and run and run until I catch a fat male and kill him with my special-think. I pick Yo-Yo up and run back to the cave, peel the sharp teeth of his dirty skin with my knife and then we eat him. The meat is delicious, not spoiled by cooking and putting things on it to change the taste.

I bury the fur and bones, wash us both, then I take Yo-Yo up to High-on-the-mountain again.

We play with the treasures again and then I begin a deciding. We will live here. There are two good rooms and plenty of space. Outside, the court is in good condition and there is soil for a garden. Noni might repair the bowl where water was once piped from the pure stream and, perhaps, Angelo may know where to find a pump.

There's no hot-sickness up here and it feels secret and calm. I'll start a garden with ferns, blue flowers, some purple moss and vines. And some feathery little trees such as I've seen down in the valley. I like it.

Mario sends a think-call, so I pick Yo-Yo up, close the door, and go down to the kitchen of the Red Palace very fast.

Mario says, "Jonaas wants you in the Big Room."

I smooth my kaftan and my hair and wish I had my shoes on. I leave Yo-Yo playing with some bread-dough and go quickly to the Big Room. Some others of the Clan are there. Meriem, Carolus, Noni, Hubertus, the Twins, Angelo, Fatimah and some new people.

And Jonaas. His radiance-of-facination is strong today, but I'm not

influenced by it any more. Not since he burned my hands so badly.

He looks at me and says, "Chaos! You look almost respectable for once! Such pretty clothes! Where did you find them, imbecile?"

He says it loud and growling, with his black brows pinching his nose and his brown eyes glaring. He is thinner and sicker than when I last saw him.

I say, "In a hole," then I hold up my hands and say, "I made new flesh and bone," so that he knows I'm not crushed down by him any longer. But I'm afraid. He looks at me with anger and pretends not to recognize that I'm no longer crushed down.

He says, "These people are new to the Clan. Examine them," and I notice that his teeth are decaying again.

The new people don't know me, so are not afraid. But they are puzzled. One man has a chest-sickness, two women have sickness caused by drugs, one woman has a growing-wrong in her womb and the last two men are healthy in the usual half-possible way of some people. I mind-speak this to Jonaas.

His mindspeak is not strong but he tells me, "Hubertus will bring the sick ones to you for treatment."

I tell him, "Find a treating-place here. I don't want people at my cave."

Jonaas smiles his nasty, how-you-disgust-me smile and mind-speaks, "Is your cave too exclusive for the Clan, then? Anything you have here is because I say you may have it, imbecile. Get out of my sight."

I tell him, "Don't call me 'imbecile.' I will not have them in my cave."

I mind-speak with Hubertus about not treating people at my cave and he nods. I like Hubertus very much, even when he has his I-am-very-important-and-you-are-nothing-to-me manner.

I go back to the kitchen where Yo-Yo is eating bread-dough and making himself sick. I'm about to pick him up when Jonaas mind-speaks at the full extent of his capacity.

"When do you intend giving me the attention I need? I am ill! Must I punish you again, imbecile?" he demands.

I tell him, "I want no people at my cave and don't call me 'imbecile.'"

He tells me, "You dare to bargain with me? You are as imbecilic as your brother!"

I tell him, "He's only half my brother. I ask nothing of you but respect as a Clan-member."

I feel his anger flare and shove Yo-Yo away from me.

I feel the pain coming and I fall down, rolling wildly and screaming. Aah! Aah! The pain! My hair is afire, my skin burns and blisters in agony! My face, my neck, my scalp! Aah! Aah! The heat and flame! Aah! From some small reasoning-place in my mind I think of the Lady's words, "Why don't you fight him when he hurts you?" I open my mind-power big, bigger, bigger again and turn it on Jonaas, sweeping him away like a stick in the flood! Then all is pain and I feel myself fall into the blackness.

I awake. Oh, the pain is bad, bad! I cry out until I can block off the little paths which send feel-messages to my brain. The Lady's voice is saying something and I hear Hubertus and Noni, too. Yo-Yo is crying somewhere.

I force my eyelids open against the swollen, half-dead flesh and see them. Hubertus is holding Yo-Yo and patting him, the Lady is so pretty even when she weeps and Noni is scowling so very angrily. And there is the woman who hasn't been at the Palace for very long—What's her name? Jazalu.

I use my special-think to look. My hair is gone and my scalp, face and neck are red-black-wet and bubbling. One ear is cooked and must be entirely replaced. My mouth is all blubber so I mindspeak to them, "Go away and I'll remake myself."

The Lady mindspeaks, "Oh, Saulus, I'm so sorry!"

Hubertus says, "Come away. Best not to interfere with him. Saulus knows best."

It is Noni who picks me up with her mind and carries me. I am so grateful for her help. I close my eyes and become busy with the remaking, excluding all other awareness.

When I open my eyes again I find I'm in the cave. The woman, Jazalu, is close. She is big and heavy-boned and strong, but shaped very well. She has orange-red hair which is not true and she wears much cosmetics on her face. She has no mind-speaking ability—it is something kinetic.

I manage to croak, "Get me water."

She says, "Very well, wonderman."

She has a voice like crunching rocks.

I have drawn energy and fuel from areas of my body where it is not needed immediately, but I need water badly. When she returns, she holds my newly healed head so that I'm able to drink. She is very careful.

She says, "I didn't believe what they told me about you until now. It's horrible but wonderful. Do you hurt now?"

I say, "Not now. Will you get me some food, please? Need materials from eggs, cheese, fruit and bread."

She leaves me and I finish rebuilding my eyelids so that they open properly. All my skin is restored and the ear replaced.

I am suddenly angry. I don't get angry often. I think on how Jonaas could have damaged my brain with his fire. He has never attacked me so seriously before. This time it is more than just because he is angry that I don't bow down to him.

I also think on how I swept him away. This is an interesting thing to think on. Very interesting.

I sit up and Yo-Yo comes, making squeaking noises to tell me he's frightened. I give him cuddles and tuck him down beside me so that he feels safe.





When Jazalu returns I eat greedily for the materials I need. She squats down and is intent on my scalp hair as it grows.

She says, "Don't grow hair on your face. You're too handsome to hide it."

She touches my eyelashes and brows delicately.

I say, "Are you afraid of me?"

She says, "Should I be?"

"No," I say, "but some people are."

I get up slowly, take the dead tissue to bury beneath the vines and then I go down to the pools to wash. The kaftan is burned and ruined, but clings to me still. Jazalu comes with me, helps me to remove the kaftan and wash, then follows me back to the cave. I put my tunic on and she takes her comb and tidies my curly hair kindly.

I say, "Do I look pleasing?"

She stares in a strange way and says, "Very pleasing. When I went to fetch the food for you, Meriem told me that you did something to Jonaas. Every path felt it. He screamed for some time before he passed out. You must be a Super."

"Yes," I say. "Did I hurt any other among the mindspeakers?"

"No," she says. "Only Jonaas. I must say you're taking what happened very calmly. Does it happen regularly or only once or twice in a month?"

I think this is a kind of joke so I smile. I like her a lot. She is afraid of me, but bold enough to be interested beyond fear.

I say, "I'm not calm in what I think about what Jonaas did. My body is calm because I make it so."

She says, "Do you really live in this awful cave? And who's the ugly dwarf?"

"He's called Yo-Yo," I say and tell her about Yo-Yo and me and Jonaas and my mother. Yo-Yo finds the snake in the bed and picks it up. Jazalu squeals at it and Yo-Yo begins to cry.

I say, "Yo-Yo is frightened of you. Give him pats and hugs and he won't be afraid. He is what the Clan call imbecile, but I love him and he

needs me. The snake won't hurt you."

She pats Yo-Yo carefully and says soothing things to him so that he smiles and offers her the snake. I take it and put it outside.

Jonaas's weak mindspeaks come to me. I let him know that I'll do what I did to him again if he tries to hurt me. He is afraid, but tries to hide it from me.

He tells me, "I could have killed you, but I didn't."

I tell him, "Keep people away from my cave. I'll do a body-changing for you tomorrow. And if you ever try to hurt me again I'll hurt you far more."

He tells me that I may use the Long Room to treat people in, calls me "imbecile" and is gone from my mind quickly.

I shake with fear and anger and must calm my body again.

Water is on my face and runs down my ribs.

Jazalu comes and takes my arm. "What is it?" she asks. "You look ill."

"I need sleep," I say. "I'll be better then."

She helps me to stretch out on the bed, although I need no help. I drift into sleep quickly.

When I wake she is gone. Yo-Yo sleeps against me and the snake is curled against my neck. I think on Jazalu and her kindness for a while. She will lose her fear of me quickly, I hope. She is a strong person in her emotions.

I close my eyes and go back to sleep.

## TWO

*(There is a lengthy, rambling and rather incomprehensible talk on the seasons following this. Autumn worries him for some unspecified reason. It also becomes obvious that there is another time-gap in the narrative. A mention is made of a "bodychange" for Jonaas. He ponders, at length, on the problems concerning Jonaas physically and wonders about his mental stability.)*

*One also gathers that a rather casual but intimate relationship has been established with Jazalu.*

—J.T. Semantics Division)

I wake and dance to the sunrise. Its light is soon hidden by the heavy clouds which come from the south and a cold wind sweeps the valley. Driving rain comes so I take Yo-Yo out in it and wash us while he squeals loudly.

We are having breakfast of fruit and bread when Jazalu comes. She's very wet and her hair hangs in orange strings. She has brought vegetables, bread, cheese and meat which she drops on the bed.

She growls, "Why haven't you got a fire? It's freezing in here!"

"I don't need a fire," I tell her. "I make Yo-Yo and myself warm from the inside. Shall I do it for you?"

"You leave me alone," she says. "This is ridiculous! You live like a savage! There are dozens of empty rooms in that warren of a Palace! There are apartments with good furniture and handsome rooms and fine carpets on the floors. You could be very comfortable there."

"I'm comfortable here," I say.

"Well, I'm not!" she shouts. "I won't put up with it! And put some clothes on! I don't like it when you loll about naked for everyone to see!"

"Who sees me but you and Yo-Yo?" I ask.

She's very angry and leaves me to run back to the Red Palace. I'm sorry I've made her angry. She becomes angry very easily. She doesn't reason well and becomes frustrated when she cannot make things as she wishes them to be. Perhaps I should conform to her wishes more since she has been so kind in her way. Perhaps the time to move to High-on-the-mountain has come.

I leave Yo-Yo playing with his collection of stones and go up past Red Tree to the dimness and grey webbing of the Crack. The rain pours down but Crawly-Thing comes running up at me when I touch his ropes. I send him pleasure-feelings and he stops chittering, but doesn't go away.

The yellow weed which attracts the birds to the Crack is dying off so

he's probably not so well-fed as he was. His eyes watch me as I climb down his main ropes, avoiding the sticky ones. There are skeletons of birds and even a few sharp teeth caught in those ropes. I keep sending him pleasure-feelings, but he continues to watch me until I reach the ledges which lead to the secret rooms.

I adjust my sight as I go because I know that Crawly Thing now has a mate. I can see her in a crevice with her eggs, guarding them with ferocious chitterings at me. She settles when I send her pleasure-feelings. She has many eggs, but only a few are fertile.

I climb around the sacks of chemicals and powdered metals and find the old rooms where the maps and machines cover the walls. This is the Warlord's Computer and it still lives a little bit. This is where the power-generator still works and provides electricity for the Red Palace below, thanks to Torros being so clever with electronics.

"Lights," I say and adjust my sight as the lights come on. Everything is just as Torros and I left it on our last visit two years ago, although I notice that water is staining one wall where a new crack has appeared. I take two powerpaks and four of the permalamps and one of the cleaner-bugs. I tie them to my body with the rope made from Crawly-Thing's old web and they are quite heavy.

"Lights off," I say and adjust my sight again as they fade. The load is so heavy that some of Crawly-Thing's ropes stretch alarmingly as I climb up them. He and his mate make little runs at me, chittering noisily, until I send pleasure feelings so strongly that they curl up their legs in ecstasy. It is still raining when I climb out of the Crack, but my body is already dripping wet with sweat.

I go up to High-on-the-mountain. The garden in the court is pretty now and the feathery trees have established themselves with a little help from me and the rains. All the work of removing the concrete covers from the windows set into the

mountain side was worth it because, when I open the door, it's all beautiful to see.

I never thought that Noni and Angelo would keep my secret but they have. And I'd never have done it without their help. The rich carpet, the big couches and the carved chests, the embroidered hangings, the big tables and chairs secreted up here from the Red Palace and all the facilities bargained for with the Clan should make this attractive enough to Jazalu. Even the water basin works again and the pump is an automatic one.

The second room is dark but, when I put up the two permalamps and switch them on, it is as light as day. The big bed and mattress, the blankets and cushions in here all come from the crumbling ruins beyond the Red Palace and the chests look well with them.

I'm quite pleased with the shower-cubicle and body-waste stool built into what must have been a closet of some kind. Both Noni and Angelo are to be thanked for their help and Angelo for his knowledge of plumbing. I put up the remaining permalamps and then attach the powerpaks to the hot water tank and the stove as Angelo instructed. The benches and basins that he put in look very fine.

I've kept the further door concealed with a heavy hanging. Someday I'll get through that, too.

At the moment, all I need is a refrigeration-unit. Perhaps I can negotiate with Mario for the small one, which he never uses, in the Red Palace kitchen. I wonder what he would like me to do to his body?

The rain is easing off as I go back down to the cave. I dress in my red kaftan and then take Yo-Yo with me to my lesson with Auria and Hubertus. We eat lunch after and then I go looking for Jazalu.

She has a burn-mark on her arm.

"Why did Jonaas do that?" I ask.

She looks close to tears so I hold her. Jonaas and I haven't set eyes on each other since I made the last corrections to his body. I don't interfere in Red Palace business and he sends people to me through Hubertus.

"It's my own fault," she says. "I argued about the Rome operation."

I stimulate the healing processes as I hold her.

"I have a surprise," I tell her.

We go up to High-on-the-mountain.

*(There are lengthy descriptions of Jazalu's reactions to the newly prepared dwelling, some of this being sexual in nature.)*

—J.T. Semantics Division)

We use the shower together and then wash Yo-Yo, too, because he wants to be with us.

"We can try it for a while," she says, "but I'm not sure about any long-term living together, Saulus. You're too peculiar for comfort at times."

She looks at her unmarked arm where the burn was and says, "You're useful sometimes, though. But I won't have Yo-Yo in our bed, you hear me?"

So I shall have to make a little bed for Yo-Yo and thinktalk him to sleep. He is so used to sleeping against me for warmth and comfort.

"What kind of work will you be doing in this Rome operation?" I ask.

"Deactivating alarm units so that a certain storage center may be broken into, for one thing, and tampering with recording apparatus so that identities won't be caught by cameras," she says. "Quite easy for me. I can delineate small objects and handle them with a skill that makes Noni seem like an elephant crocheting fine lace."

Jazalu is jealous of Noni's value to the Clan and often boasts of her own skill.

"What is an elephant?" I ask. "And crocheting?"

"Sometimes you're very stupid, Saulus," she says, but she's being patronizing, not nasty. There is a difference sometimes.

It takes time to move her belongings to High-on-the-mountain. Jazalu calls it the Blue Place. I suppose that's as good a name for it as any, although only the walls are blue.

She cooks a dinner which is horrible, the meat spoiled with other flavorings and the vegetables all soft

and with half their nourishment cooked out. But she's happy, so I pretend to enjoy it. Yo-Yo will eat anything he's given, but I adjust his digestion to cope with the food.

He cries when I make him a bed on a couch, so I tell Jazalu that I'll sleep with him because he needs me and she doesn't. This makes her very cross and she calls me "imbecile," knowing how I hate that.

*(Here Saulus skips days or perhaps weeks in the narrative. When he resumes, it is interesting to note that he now speaks Universal with Auria Shasti's impeccable Central Euroasian accent. We must presume that he has an excellent and analytic ear for subtleties of sound.*

—J.T. Semantics Division)

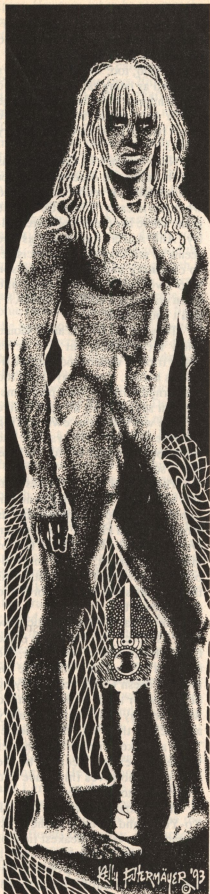
I awake and Jazalu is warm against my front while Yo-Yo is snug against my back. I ease myself from between them and go out to do my dance to the rising sun. Despite the coldness of the season, the garden is full of strong life-pulses. I run across to the West Terrace, skirting the Crack, and go to Red Tree. He has no fruit at this time of year and his life-pulse is slow, but he acknowledges me by brushing my shoulder.

When I go back, Jazalu has bathed and put on a blue gown which is very pretty. I'm glad she's back from Rome.

"Are you still running about without clothes?" she says in a mock-scolding voice and I hug her hard. I take Yo-Yo into the shower and bathe us both, dry us and dress him in his new tunic. He looks better with the new haircut which Noni gave him. It makes his head appear less large. He has such beautiful, trusting eyes.

I feed Yo-Yo and myself on raw eggs and Mario's lovely, rough bread. Jazalu makes a face when I offer her the same and goes to cook meat. She also scorches Mario's bread slightly and puts sugar on it, which is such a pity.

I go to dress in my red kaftan and sandals. The red shows off my experiment with darker-blond hair and warmer-colored skin which Jazalu finds pleasing.



While I dress she comes in and sits before the mirror to use her cosmetics. She is about to cover her skin with a powdery stuff when she sees, touches her face and then looks angry.

"What have you done?" she says fiercely.

"I made you healthy," I tell her.

She screams, "You've been tampering, changing me!"

I say, "Yes, but not as you think. This is what you should look like when you're perfectly healthy. Look at your skin. Beautiful, clear, smooth. Look at your eyes. Sparkling and not reddened in the lids. Look at your breasts. Firm and full. Look at your belly. Flat and taut. I merely made your body-systems more efficient and tightened muscles which need exercise."

She screams, runs at me and strikes me about the head in a frenzy until I grip her hard and hold her tightly.

"I've made things as they should be, not created anything new," I tell her. "This is the body you should have when it isn't abused with drugs, alcohol and poor food. I did nothing that was a wrong thing. You worry about age and decay and yet you do such terrible things to yourself in the name of pleasure, things which make age and decay come sooner than they should. Now you are as you should be, full of energy and youth. No saggings, no puffiness, no sallow color which needs to be hidden. Look at yourself carefully and then tell me if I did a wrong thing."

I release her and she runs to the long mirror, pulling off her pretty dress. She is truly red-haired now. She stares at her reflection and then screams, "You tampered with me! You made me different!"

I go out quickly and Yo-Yo runs to me in fear.

"We will go down and look at the valley," I tell him and pick him up. I'm not in the mood to endure her lack of reason.

So we go and look at the winter daisies and the rock pools and the red mosses. We play Bob-Up-Bob-Down in the long grasses and run and jump

and play in the cold day until I feel less upset about Jazalu's reaction to something which I intended as a pleasing gift. Then I pick Yo-Yo up and go to have my lesson.

My lesson has grown from receiving information from Auria and Hubertus. Now Angelo, Noni, Carolus, Mahmud, Meriem and even Gino come along when they aren't out of the valley because they enjoy to socialize. So it's not really a lesson at all. It's more like a regular social occasion, with my learning as the excuse. I wonder why they think they need such an excuse? They talk of a great many things concerning the Outside. Some of it is very interesting, but some of what they say is very puzzling. I don't query things too much because I feel foolish when I'm always asking questions which make some laugh at my ignorance.

It's strange how my view of these people, some of whom I've known all my life, has changed since Auria came. Jonaas was so very angry when Hubertus found this stranger to the Clan and brought her back to join those who hide in the Valley. He said that Hubertus wasn't discreet in accepting her so swiftly. Yet now he, too, finds her of great interest. She has her own charismatic influence, although it is not the same as his. She is like an exotic bird among the sparrows. Why would such a woman choose to come amongst us? But how glad I am that she did!

She has changed my perceptions of things and stimulated me to observe in a way that I wasn't capable of before. She has made sense of many puzzles. She has made me aware of things which I'd forgotten or, perhaps, ignored. Or perhaps I isolated myself too much from the Clan and simply lost contact with them as people. Or could it be that she has alerted them to the fact that I'm just another person and not a valuable kind of monster to have about?

I no longer see Hubertus as pompous and self-important. He is a grave man who is anxious to preserve his dignity and standing as second-in-command to Jonaas. He fears

being laughed at since he has no ability to laugh at himself. He has self-doubts which make him anxious to conceal his gentler nature.

Angelo, too, whom I've always accepted as being rather callous and self-indulgent, hides behind an image which he's made so that people won't realize he's not clever or very brave.

Noni, whom I've categorized as selfish, sulky and obsessed with her own sexuality, is really insecure and what Auria calls "romantic" to the point where her dreams obscure reality. And Auria, too, much as she seems so self-confident and decisive, so charming and calm, is a person who lives with strange fears and often conceals a cold anger which I don't understand.

They are my friends and I should know them better, but I've never really tried to understand their difficulties before. I've always been too concerned with my own problems. Meriem says that we all tend to live in little worlds of our own making because we can't always face the truth about the real world. Perhaps this is so.

They talk of their activities Outside so casually, pretending cynicism to hide fear. They make it sound as though life is a kind of war between Outside and the Clan. They talk of money and drugs, frauds and robberies, murders and manipulations as though that's the normal world and the other isn't.

Torros had a more realistic view of it, I suspect. He said that it is the Clan who are the scum of life, the enemies of a better world. Life for the Clan doesn't seem very satisfying or happy for them if one listens to what they say. They hate the valley as much as they hate the Outside. They are like prisoners no matter where they exist. I seem to be the only one who loves this place and really wants to stay here.

It's almost midday when I pick Yo-Yo up and go back to the West Terrace. This is the bleakest time of the year in the valley but, standing there and looking out over it all, it seems a very beautiful place to me.

The mountains which rise all about don't seem imprisoning as much as protective to me. I wonder if it was so much more beautiful when the Warlord was here, before the insane war which put an end to his world? I can't conceive of it being so.

Far below, the Red Palace stretches along the Low Terrace, all softly rosy and imposing. Beyond it, the old ruins of buildings and fountains, pillars and unkempt gardens are mysterious and lovely. And down in the basin of the valley the little lakes and the river shine as they nestle among the pretty forests and rocky outcrops, the lush meadows and the expanses of alpine daisies. It is beautiful.

The buildings which rose up the mountainside to the West Terrace are gone into rubble, but I can still see places where the old gardens were. All the West Terrace was a garden once. Now it's covered in wild grasses and only Red Tree survives. It's only on and about the West Terrace that the hot-sickness still exists. Down in the valley and on the mountains the water is pure and the soil is fertile. We could make gardens and farms here and be content if the Clan could only see it.

Below the West Terrace are the hidden places where the Computer and the machineries, the chemicals and some of the weaponry still exist. Is it more weaponry and such things that are hidden beyond the Blue Place further up the mountain? I must investigate that door further when next Jazalu goes Outside—

Yo-Yo is hungry, so we go up to the Blue Place. Jazalu has been playing with the new clothes and adornments which she brought back from Rome and they are spread everywhere. She has calmed down and thought about what I did, it seems, because she comes to embrace and kiss me.

"I'm sorry I was cross," she says, "but, in future, you must tell me if you intend such things. And I think my eyelashes could be darker. Could you do that?"

"Yes," I say, wondering if that will be the end of it. I don't like the

thought that she might become like Noni, always asking for changes and what she imagines are improvements to her looks.

She shows me all her pretty things and then we eat. Jazalu is anxious that she hasn't upset me with her anger earlier. We send Yo-Yo off to play in the meadow and it's all lovely between us until Yo-Yo returns with the snake. Jazalu still dislikes the snake but accepts it because it eats the "field-mice" when they invade the terrace. I daren't tell her that the "field-mice" are baby sharp-teeth which grow so large and savage but which taste so good to eat.

Jazalu goes down to the Red Palace to show off some of her clothes to Noni and Meriem and I work at the door for a while. Then Yo-Yo wants to sit on my lap while I read aloud from a book which Auria has given me. It's a book about travels in the Outside and very interesting. Yo-Yo doesn't understand a word, of course, but he likes to hear my voice and see the pages turned and becomes excited if there are pictures to look at.

Late in the afternoon, Jazalu returns with Noni who has carried up the refrigeration unit that I bartered for with Mario. He has new teeth and we can now keep our food preserved for longer.

Both Noni and Jazalu return to Rome soon and are full of plans that don't interest me. It's a strange thing that, although they dislike each other, they are drawn together because of their work within the Clan and their "kinetic abilities. They argue rather than talk.

They cook a huge meal which I pretend to enjoy and we all talk until very late.

I've set up the necessary balances to make Jazalu's eyelashes grow black as she wanted, but I think they'll look strange. And I notice that she's covered the clear skin of her face with that powdery stuff again. Habits govern us all, I suppose.

*(Here there is another unexplained gap in the narrative, possibly of months, since Saulus talks of new growth and the return of leaves to the*

*trees. However, when he resumes the narrative, he is very conscious of dates and times.*

—*J.T. Semantics Division*)

I awake and the calendar which Pearlman gave me says 20th Day of 4th Month of the Year 2280 A.D. I must ask Auria what A.D. means. The sun has not yet risen over the mountains so I move carefully from Jazalu and Yo-Yo and go out into the garden. There is a chill in the air against my body, but I think today will become warm.

The scents of the garden fill my nostrils. Fresh, clean, damp with dew. The light fills the East and the garden is stirring. The new growth is beautiful and I watch the mosses unfold and blush deeper purple, the blue flowers open and seek the light, the bamboos rustle their silver-gold leaves expectantly and the rose-bushes move, so slowly, on their dagger-thorned branches.

All the young trees are rich with new leaves and Red Tree's Daughter grows swiftly. She brushes my thigh and takes a token of blood, her fragrance already obvious. That same fragrance attracts the killer-birds and stinging moths to her and I quickly brush away the empty carcasses before Jazalu sees them.

She calls Red Tree and his Daughter monsters although I've tried to explain that all plants move. Red Tree and his Daughter are merely quicker to do so than most because they are carnivores as well as plants, created of hot-sickness and development from many hybrids down in the valley. The vines and the rose bushes move quite quickly, too, but she is not so aware of that movement, never having sat for an hour watching them seek and shift. My garden is full of life-pulse and beauty. I regret that Jazalu doesn't like it.

Yo-Yo comes scampering, not seeing me. He pees on the mosses and I growl so that he gets a fright and runs in again. I repair damage to the mosses and then watch as the light floods the valley. The urge to dance comes, but I repress it since Jazalu says it's primitive and ridiculous and that I must be more

"mature" in my behavior. I go indoors to bathe.

As I dry myself I look at the changes I've made to myself and approve. Having devised the Modes, I'm getting quicker with such changes and expend less energy on them. The heavier musculature of Dark Mode feels good to me. Jazalu doesn't like the night-dark skin and tightly-curling black hair for no very clear reason. Perhaps my Dark Mode features are too heavy for her tastes, but they give me confidence. I must change to Blonde-Gold Mode before I go down to the Red Palace.

I put on the black and gold kafftan and the new sandals which Jazalu bought me in Rome. The sandals are made from plastex and are beautifully fashioned to hug my feet, no matter which Mode I've chosen to assume. I waste some time growing a black moustache to suit my face and realize that I look very like Pearlman. I wonder if he'd mind if he knew I could look very like him?

I go out and begin breakfast. Jazalu comes, yawning and sleepy-eyed, as I lightly scorch bread and make the nasty coffee drink for her. Yo-Yo, poorly dried from his shower, comes to be dressed and demands a morning cuddle on my lap. He's very hungry this morning and eats half my fruit as well as his own.

Jazalu says crossly, "You spoil him."

I say, "It's so easy to make him happy. What else is there for him but his senses and affection and security?"

I send him to play in the meadow.

Jazalu has taken over the organizing of my work from Noni and she does it very well.

She says, "I've set out a schedule for your visit to the Palace today. Radley and Paul need new faces and fingerprints and Gino is complaining of headaches again. They're all involved with the drug-run from Turin tomorrow night, so they come first. Lacy is back from Paris, so you'd better check him for alcohol damage. Do you think you should look at Fatimah's knife wounds again?"

"They'll be healed by now," I say. "Who is the new Lifter she brought in?"

"An Epsilon named Guseppe. You'll have to do something about his drug-problem," she says. "What of Hubertus?"

"I'll finish rebuilding the arm today," I say, remembering the horrible mess I worked on last night. "How did it happen?"

"He and Angelo were on that Allied Chemicals sabotage job and the new explosive went off too soon," she says. "I warned them about that explosive! Did you know that the Clan lost Danielle and Ray to the Law Enforcers? How Hubertus escaped I'll never know. It's a miracle that Pearlman and Gino got him back here before he bled to death!"

She sounds angry and disgusted. I know she wanted to be included in that enterprise, but Jonaas rejected her and I'm very glad he did.

"Oh," she says, "Pearlman's willing to get us a roomheater in exchange for cosmetic services. Cosmetic services! There's no need for his face to be changed that I know of!"

But I know what he wants. Having become involved with the highly-sexed and lively Foster Twins, he has already broached the subject to me.

"Jonaas is having conferences with Auria, Dino and Angelo later this afternoon so keep away from the Long Room," she says. "Something big is in the wind, I think. I know that Jonaas has been away negotiating with the Arabs in Haifa, so it's probably to do with drugs."

I change to Blonde-Gold Mode, which is what everyone recognizes as "me," call Yo-Yo from the meadow and go to visit Paul, Radley and Gino. They take little time. I help Lacy over the aftermath of his alcohol binge. Fatimah is up and about, her wounds healed. She tells me all about the fight between her and the woman she caught with her lover, Guseppe. He's drug-hazed, so I set up the process of clearing his systems of the narcotics and Fatimah promises to keep him away from them.

Hubertus takes longer but soon has a whole arm again. He tries to thank me, but I won't have that. I put him into restful sleep, then go to see Pearlman and re-balance his glandular system to increase his libido and sexual capacity. He promises to bring the room-heater back from Outside.

In the hallway leading to the White Court, I catch sight of Auria as she enters the Long Room. She has on a flowing yellow gown which shows off her lovely body, flowers in her hair and—I stare, disbelieving—her hair is dyed black and shines like a raven's wing! She has gold paint on her long eyelids and her brows are darkened with cosmetics.

This is the first time I have seen her in person since she left Hubertus and became companion to Jonaas. I don't understand her at all. I always thought she hated Jonaas. Poor Hubertus. He is still very hurt about it, but he gives in to Jonaas because Jonaas has been the Big Boss for so long.

I slip away through the colonnades to see Meriem, who is cooking sweetmeats and gives some to Yo-Yo. I make changes to eradicate her arthritis.

As I take Yo-Yo out through the colonnades I pass Angelo. He whispers to me, "I must meet you secretly. Meet me here this evening at 20th hour."

I nod and go on, wondering. It's probably about Torros. I have a conviction that Jonaas won't allow Torros back into the valley after what happened between them last year, although Angelo has been trying to persuade him. I remember how badly Torros was burned and how I had to work on him to preserve his life and restore him.

Angelo is worried about his brother and has been trying to persuade me to intercede with Jonaas on Torros's behalf. I miss Torros. He was my closest friend. But Jonaas hates me and we avoid each other since that awful time when he burned me about the head. I'm not sure that I'm brave enough to face him yet.

We go to visit Red Tree and then wave at Crawly-Thing who lurks at

the top of the Crack. Some of his mate's eggs hatched and there are now several young Crawly-Things in the Crack. Yo-Yo clings to me hard. He's very frightened of this place after his narrow escape last month and that's a very good thing. I show him the skeletons of sharp-teeth and birds on the purple mosses and warn him again. He rolls his eyes and clings even harder. I may have to do something about the tenants of the Crack if they continue to emerge from it.

Back at the Blue Place, I find that Jazalu is out and about on her own visits. I pull the hanging aside and work at the door until I'm tired of scraping stones. I tidy up and then go out to look at the valley. A warm breeze blows but rain will come soon. I work in my garden until late.

Yo-Yo comes squealing for food, so I feed both of us and then begin cooking Jazalu's evening meal. Yo-Yo and I always eat before she does now because she shudders at the sight of us eating raw food.

Outside, the clouds have rolled across the sky and obscured the last of the sunlight. A sad breeze moans about the garden.

Jazalu returns and eats. She's excited about the meeting in the Long Room this afternoon and I only half-listen until she tells me that Jonaas wishes me to do some work Outside.

She says, "When Hubertus is well enough, he and Dino will attend to the organizing and try you out with some carefully selected people. You'll be working as a proper part of the Clan, Saulus! You'll be paid like everyone else instead of having to barter for things! I did the bargaining for you. I'll look after your earnings and see to it that you aren't cheated. Are you pleased?"

I'm afraid. I've never been out of the valley before. But I'm curious, too. I'd like to see what is beyond.

"Yes, I'm pleased," I say, but I don't know if I am or not.

It's dark now and nearing 20th hour. I tell Jazalu that I must look at Hubertus's arm again and leave her with Yo-Yo for company. The rain is

very near and the wind has grown strong. Lightning flashes and thunder rumbles as I hurry past the West Terrace and down to the Red Palace.

The colonnades are in darkness and I adjust my sight before walking the length of them. There's no sign of Angelo, so I find a sheltered recess and wait.

Presently the wind drops slightly and the rain comes down in torrents. The walkway is soon flooded and water runs like a river over the sunken part of the colonnades. Lightning flashes brightly and thunder cracks deafeningly. Despite my protected recess, I'm soon so wet that I decide to go back to the Blue Place. It seems obvious that Angelo isn't coming.

Then, in a flash of lightning, I see Angelo sitting against one of the pillars. I run to him, yelling, "Let's get out of the rain!" And then there's another flash of lightning.

Angelo is dead, his face and scalp half-burned away. From the processes going on in his body I can tell that he's been dead for almost an hour. Jonaas has killed again.

Horror and disgust fill me. Then anger comes. I pick up the wet, lifeless shell that was Angelo and stagger through the colonnades in the pouring fury of the rain. The body is very heavy. When I come to the door of the West Wing I heave it open with my shoulder and walk into the softly lit hallway. Trailing water onto the old mosaics, I move along the corridor until I come to Auria's door. I thump it several times with a foot.

When she opens the door I push past her without words and walk into the richly decorated salon. I place Angelo's body down on a brocaded couch and wipe my face with my hands. She is shocked by what she sees—I can feel her distress emanate but she keeps her calm manner. Even at this time, with my emotions in turmoil, I see how beautiful she is. She drags a richly embroidered cloth from a table and covers Angelo's body with it.

"How horrible," she mindspeaks.

I reply with some violence, "Death isn't the horrible part. It was

the way it came to him! This shell is nothing. It will return to the soil. But Angelo is no more and he was destroyed by Jonaas, the man you choose to partner! Why was it done? How could you let it happen? You have more influence with Jonaas than any of the vermin in this place! How could you let it happen?"

She mindspeaks, "I knew nothing, Saulus. They had an argument this afternoon, but I don't know what it was about. Where did you find him?"

"I was to meet him at the colonnades," I tell her. "He said it was to be secret. I presumed that he had some news of Torros or, perhaps, hoped to persuade me to front up to Jonaas about Torros being allowed to return. And I found him dead."

"But why would Jonaas put him in the colonnades?" she asks.

I think about that, then I go and look at Angelo's body more closely. Seeing his head in the light and examining it in detail, I begin to see how it might have happened as it did.

"Perhaps the burning wasn't intended to kill Angelo," I wonder. "Perhaps Angelo was alive when they parted—Perhaps Angelo managed to drag himself to the colonnades before he died, hoping I would find him—Now that I look more carefully, I realize that it must have been shock that killed him. The skull is intact, but heat could penetrate to the brain—"

"Don't tell me about it," she mindspeaks, shuddering.

"You must have heard something—Screams from Angelo—"

"I heard nothing," she tells me. "Don't blame me for this."

"I don't blame you for Angelo's death," I reply, "but it hurts me that you could tolerate living with such a man as Jonaas. I can't believe that you would allow yourself to be caught up in the web of his charismatic broadcast. Well, it seems I must confront Jonaas myself, after all. I can't simply accept Angelo's death and walk away—"

"No!" she tells me. "You mustn't confront him. Let me handle this. Remember that, although you

may be able to protect yourself from Jonaas, the rest of us aren't so fortunate. And the Clan need to gather about someone. Don't involve yourself, please."

I can't quell my anger. I pick up Angelo's body in its embroidered shroud and carry it out into the hallway, Auria following. I go to the Long Room, sit Angelo in the heavy chair which Jonaas uses at meetings and arrange the shroud so that the burned head is shown in all its ugliness.

"Where is Jonaas?" I ask.

"Saulus," she mindspeaks, "you must not confront him—"

I catch something from her mind, an agony and a terror which threatens to escape her control, but which she fights to conceal. It concerns me in some way—is she really afraid for me?

The high table where discussions are held is slightly dusty. With a wet hand I write "Jonaas, the Killer" across it.

"Open your mind and allow me to put a barrier there," I tell her. "When the gathering is held here tomorrow there'll be too many telepaths to conceal something of your distress from. It should appear that you know nothing. If they think you know something about this they may probe for your secrets." She is suddenly all defense.

"What secrets?" she says, terrified that I may take them.

"I don't know," I tell her. "I wouldn't take them from you."

She hesitates and then opens her mind. I take her gently, filling her with myself as I once filled Torros to keep him alive with my strength. I impose the barrier such as I'd impose on anyone who suffered from extreme shock and add pleasure-pulse so that she becomes faint. I lift her and carry her back to her room, the wetness from my kaftan soaking her thin gown. I put her on the bed and draw the cover over her.

"Sleep," I instruct her and she relaxes.

I run out into the night and into the drenching rain. Angelo was not a close friend as Torros was, but I find

myself weeping for the waste of him as a human being who was never disloyal to the Clan. He didn't deserve to die as he did. What was it they argued about that caused Jonaas to do such a thing? Jonaas isn't always stable emotionally, but he's not a fool. Or is he?

Jazalu and Yo-Yo are asleep when I return to the Blue Place. I strip and go to the shower before I creep into bed with them.

### THREE

I awake and it's the 21st Day of the 4th Month of Year 2280 A.D.

Jazalu is already awake and dressed and preparing breakfast, although the sun has barely risen behind the thick clouds. I kiss her and then prepare Yo-Yo and myself for the day.

The rain still comes in short bursts and the wind sweeps the slopes. My garden seeks the sun in vain.

Breakfast is a concoction of dead cereals, dried fruit and milk substitute. There's little real nourishment in it, but I smile thanks to Jazalu and eat it. Yo-Yo follows my lead, but then, I think he would eat anything that looked like food.

She says, "I go to Paris with the Twins today. I should be back within a week."

"Is it a drug run or the stock forgeries?" I ask.

"Forgeries, of course. What would they want with me for a drug run? I'm the best copyist in the business. A few bonds and signatures and the Clan will have a nice little income for a couple of years. We'll bring in supplies when we return. Is there anything you'd like me to bring you?"

"Could you get another picture-book for Yo-Yo?" I ask. "He's almost worn the other one out."

She shrugs. Yo-Yo is still an irritation to her.

I kiss her goodbye and she leaves. Yo-Yo and I help the cleaner-bug to tidy up and then I put Yo-Yo's waterproof jacket on him and send him out to the meadow to play. I am

working on the secret door when Auria mindspeaks.

"We gathered in the Long Room a few minutes ago," she tells me. "There was no body and the table had been cleaned."

"Jonaas must have removed it," I tell her. "Now he'll be suspicious and insecure with everyone and that'll keep him quiet for a while. I know him very well and now you can learn from me. Do you find him a good lover?"

"Things aren't always what they seem, Saulus," she tells me. "Don't despise me."

"I don't despise you," I tell her. "But I don't understand you either."

She ends the contact, but not before I experience a moment of her unhappiness.

I try to imagine Jonaas's reaction to finding Angelo's body and the writing on the table. How many of the Clan has Jonaas killed over the years? I know of three for certain. And Torros would be dead if I hadn't been about. I wonder how he'll hide the body? Probably it'll be buried among the ruins.

Angelo was popular with the Clan. Knowing that Jonaas killed him would make for hostility. And Auria is right. Jonaas holds the Clan together, keeps things organized and sees that the valley is safe. But, by not opposing him, I place myself in the same debased position as the rest of the Clan. I'm no better than they. I don't know what to do.

I wish I'd been born to be clever like Hubertus is. Clan-members come and go, some die of the drugs which are so profitable, one or two are caught by the Law Enforcers and some—the truly fortunate—find ways of escaping the criminal life. But, when attacks come from inside the Clan itself, it shatters the fragile camaraderie and sense of security on which so many depend.

The Clan stays strong because it has people like Hubertus, Noni, Carolus, Angelo, Jazalu and Pearlman to keep it secure, profitable and organized but Jonaas is the one who leads because he possesses the ideas, the drive, the authority and the attraction

to bind the others to him. If he no longer led the Clan it would split apart and then what would happen to all of them?

No matter how much I hate him I see that he's very necessary. But, oh, the thought of Angelo's death makes me angry still! I wish I knew the reason for it.

I try to read some of the book that Hubertus gave me. It tells of the times before the Warlords, but there are a great many references to things I don't understand and I can't concentrate.

I collect the big chisel and the hammer that I stole from Carolus's workshop and attack the stone surrounds of the secret door with a will. My persistence over the months and my anger today begin to have an effect at last. The place where the big tongue of the lock thrusts into the stone is suddenly freed and the door moves! My heart races! I drop the tools and pull hard at the tongue and the door swings open!

Beyond is darkness. I run to collect one of the permalamps and move into the new place cautiously.

Beyond the door is wonder! I can't help but cry out at the strange beauty of it! The Blue Place is only a tiny part of a complex built inside the solid granite of the mountain in the same way as the Computer and the machineries were built below the West Terrace!

The first room is a vast cavern and the permalamp shines on rich brocades, lovely statues and ornaments. The carpets laid on the tiled floors are so thick that my footsteps are silent. The dryness of the air has preserved everything perfectly. There are strange pictures on the walls, great swags and hangings of wonderful materials and lamps which hang from the high vault above. And then, as I move further into the cavern, the lights come on and strange, lovely music plays softly!

I stand very still for some moments, but nothing moves. Cautiously, I switch the permalamp off and continue exploring. The lights come on wherever I go and the air, which was so dry, begins to move



gently, becoming fresh and faintly scented of the valley.

This is a Palace of many rooms, all of which are beautiful and filled with treasures. Some rooms are for relaxing or eating in, some are sleeping places and some are for utility purposes. There are rooms for cooking in, rooms for bathing and even a room for exercising in. All so beautiful and rich! All so large and graceful!

Perhaps the Red Palace, too, looked as this Palace does when the Warlord lived. There are the same kinds of shapes in doorways and the same kinds of decoration on the tiles. This secret place must have been tenanted by many before the Great Error destroyed the Warlord and his minions.

I start in fright as a voice speaks! It speaks in Universal but with strange inflexions and says, "Intruder, identify yourself!"

I realize that it's a voice like that of the Computer below the West Terrace. I know that if I don't do the correct thing it may try to destroy me, as the other Computer tried to destroy the first of the Clan who discovered it.

"Where is the handplate?" I say, already changing my fingerprints to those which Torros discovered on the handplate in the Crack and which I always use if the power for the Red Palace needs checking.

"By the entry door," says the voice.

I don't know which way to go. There was no handplate on the door by which I entered.

"I am the Master," I say firmly, fear-sweat prickling my skin. "Light my way."

The lights go out everywhere but in a corridor, so I go there. And I see, at the other end, one of those big sphincter-doors which Torros once showed me a picture of. I walk slowly toward it to give me time to change my fingerprints. There is the handplate, shining silver in the light.

The plate is warm as I press my hand and fingertips to it.

"Master, you are recognized," says the voice and I breathe a sigh of relief.

I say, "Open the door."

The sphincter swirls and recedes into the walls. A cloud of dust and chips of muddy soil make a mess since dirt has built up on the other side over the years. Cleaner-bugs, delicate and silver, like huge, strangely made arachnids, run from the rooms and begin tidying the doorway busily.

Beyond is rain and gusty wind and the wonder of the valley. As I step out I see that I'm on the overgrown East Terrace. Below, and far to the left, part of the Red Palace can be seen, a few minutes walk instead of the long way to the Blue Place. I've never been much interested in the East Terrace since it seemed to be a dead end. I see now that the exterior handplate is hidden behind thickly growing yellow-weed and small vines. I step inside again, touch the interior plate and the door closes.

"Master," says the voice, "shall I have the servomechs prepare the Love Palace for you?"

The Love Palace. How wonderful. I like that.

"No," I say, "but continue to maintain it. What of the other entry to the Palace? Why was it locked?"

The voice says, "You locked it, Master. I have discovered damage there. Shall I repair it?"

"Yes," I say, "but make it so that I may enter there. Another handplate will be needed. What name does the Master go by?"

"His Most High Rajawen Ali Hannis Kobeeyah of Serenel," it tells me.

"Serenel?" I say. "What is Serenel?"

"Serenel is the title given to the estate, Master," it says.

Serenel! The valley is named Serenel! A magical name.

I say, "The Master is now Saulus of Serenel and you must call me Saulus."

"Acknowledged, Saulus," it says.

I stay for a long time, exploring and examining. What seems to be the Master's sleeping room has a vast and beautiful bed, its own bodyfresher and closets jammed with clothes

and jewels. The statues are what Hubertus calls very erotic and the ceiling lights up with myriad light-points like stars in a deep-blue firmament. The carvings and metal decorations are wonderful and I deduce that the Warlord used the sun-sign as his own since it's everywhere.

In all the outer rooms there are windows sealed by steel shutters. I remember seeing the inaccessible ledges covered in vines when I explored outside as a child. The Master Rajawen Ali certainly camouflaged his living-place very well.

*(Ali Hannis Kobeeyah was one of the obscure, minor Warlords and is mentioned only briefly in old records. Born in 2112 A.D., he appears to have been a man of considerable wealth. After the Great Mistake of 2162 A.D., no more is heard of him. "Serenel" can be pinpointed in the Pontine Mountains, to the west of the Contaminated Area—M.V. 22.)*

—J.T. Semantics Division)

It's late in the afternoon when I leave the Palace by the sphincter-door and walk the long way around to the Blue Place, arriving very wet because the rain still drives across the valley. The door remains closed when I push it firm against the opening. I clean up the debris and pull the hanging over it again. It will remain my secret, to be hugged to me until I decide otherwise. Secret, lovely secret.

I go out and call Yo-Yo. When he comes running up from the little meadow he's incredibly dirty. We shower and dress and I make us a meal.

We've almost finished eating when Hubertus mindspeaks to me from the Red Palace.

"Arrange for Yo-Yo to be looked after by Meriem," he tells me. "Tonight Pearlman, you and I leave the valley. We must be in Rome by morning. Tomorrow you'll treat a very important man, one of those who are allied with the Clan. Come down now and I'll see if I have clothes to fit you."

I'm very afraid, but excited, too. I pack some clothes in a carryall for

Yo-Yo, close up the Blue Place and take him down to Meriem. I give him a big cuddle and tell him to be good with Meriem, give her his clothes and tell her that he needs plenty of fruit. She loves Yo-Yo and I know he'll be well cared for, but I feel badly when he cries because I'm leaving him.

Then I go to Hubertus. He looks a much grimmer man since Auria left him and went to Jonaas. That must have hurt his pride deeply and I'm very sorry. Hubertus needs his pride to maintain his outer dignity.

His clothes fit Blonde-Gold Mode well enough but, oh, the discomfort of them! Trousers with tight legs, undershirts and a tight jacket and hose and tight shoes! I hate them! He tells me to grow a beard and moustache, ties back my hair with a colored lace and promises me toiletries—whatever they are—when we get to Rome. He then gives me an identidisc and a lot of instruction on how to behave. This last frightens and confuses me, but I don't dare question him because he's in an impatient mood and I don't wish to seem stupid.

"And," he mindspeaks, "no mental linking or using your Secondary unless I say so. It only needs one slip and the PsiOrgs will be among us like a deadly disease. If you must speak, use Universal. And don't gape about like a fool."

We go to the Long Room and find Pearlman, Auria and Jonaas there. I hear Auria murmuring to Jonaas about danger and not liking, it but Jonaas ignores her and gives me his sneering look.

He says to me, "You do exactly as Hubertus says, you understand? And, if Cassim demands two heads, you give him two heads! No arguments or playing about or I'll see to it that the Psi-Orgs pick you up before you can blink twice! Understand?"

I give him my biggest smile and he doesn't know what to make of that.

To Hubertus, he says, "And a bit of hocus might be a good idea. I want Cassim Odemi impressed and very grateful!"

*(Cassim Odemi, reputed to be a major figure in the Afrodet underworld, was reported killed in a warehouse fire on 22-4-80. Law Enforcers were seeking him to arrest him on drug charges at that time. If Saulus is to be believed, Cassim Odemi is still very much alive.*

—J.T. Semantics Division)

Hubertus and Jonaas move away to talk together and Auria gives me a look which speaks of worry for me. This pleases me very much.

Minutes later, Hubertus, Pearlman and I walk through the colonnades, which still show puddles of rain, and across the rocks to the old tunnel.

The sky is already dark and a few stars show between breaks in the clouds. I'm reminded of the ceiling in that lovely sleeping-room in the Love Palace and this refreshes my spirits.

In the tunnel, the air is cool and stale and the monorail car looks more battered and dirtier than I remembered. We climb inside and Pearlman seals the door while Hubertus fiddles with the controls. I sit down on one of the very worn seats as the car jerks and moves off. It gains speed steadily. I don't like the sensation at all. Outside, it's very dark, but I can see the tunnel walls speeding by. I look for a few moments and that's enough. I wedge myself against the car wall and put my head on my knees so that I can't know about the speed.

Pearlman says, "Don't be scared, Saulus. Nothing bad will happen! This car's good for another fifty years at least!"

But I don't move. After a time, I feel Pearlman sit beside me and put a hand on my shoulder. I calm myself and sit up, but I don't look at the speeding walls again. The car goes on and on, the air squealing softly about it and the vibrations running up through my legs. The time seems endless before we slow down. Then we stop and Pearlman unseals the door.

We climb out into a dark, flat place. The air is thick and odorless and horrible. I follow Hubertus and Pearlman in the darkness and almost

fall when we begin to climb some stairs. We go up and up and then we come into another tunnel where the air is fresher. This tunnel is very long but, at last, we come to more stairs, climb up and up again and suddenly come out into the open. I can see the sky and the air is very sweet.

We are now on a mountainside and the vast waters of what Hubertus says is the Aegean Sea are before us. I stare at it in wonder.

To the left, not so very far away, are tiny lights which Hubertus says is the remains of a city called Izmir. But I have no time to look further. Pearlman calls me and, when I go to him, I see another strange vehicle hidden in a place among the rocks.

We climb into it and the door closes so that we are enclosed in a little room full of seats, not unlike the monorail car. But this is all clean and smooth and metallic, with padded seats and big windows which are curved. Hubertus seats himself at the controls, then looks and fiddles with many little dials and levers. Pearlman pulls me onto a seat.

"We're going to fly now, Saulus," he says.

Jazalu has told me about the air-car. I don't care for the idea of flying above the world.

I quickly close off my senses and go into the sleep-state where I won't know about it.

Someone tugs at me and I awake. It's the 22nd Day of the 4th Month of the Year 2280 A.D.

It's almost dawn and the aircar is on a big flat place of rocks with sea to one side. Pearlman is opening the door and Hubertus, looking very tired, mindspeaks to me.

"This is a place called Bari, which is in Italy. We go to Rome from here. Come along, quickly."

I follow him from the aircar, seeing the first paling of the sky in the east. There's another car here, one which has wheels for moving it along the road. There are also people I don't know waiting. We climb into the car and it moves off very silently. My clothes are so uncomfortable that I can't relax—

*(I have deleted part of the narrative here since it concerns a jumble of impressions concerning the landscape, the plant life, the people in the car and, finally, Rome. The entry into Rome confuses him but he takes in most of the landmarks. He also comments, very disapprovingly and at great length, on the strangeness of so many people living in such crowded conditions among buildings which he finds very ugly. He comments on the terrible "abuses" which humans impose on themselves. They are taken to the Imperatrix International and his opinions of the novelties and arrangements in their apartment are very acid.*

—J.T. Semantics Division)

—And sprays me with an awful, cloying perfume which is so disgusting that I have to shower all over again! I don't wait for the air-dryer this time, but get out and use the little tissue towel to dry myself as best I can.

I dress and comb my hair, tie it back and then comb my beard which needs trimming. Then I sit on the sleeping-couch because I don't like those peculiar chairs that shape themselves to support one.

I look at a sort of book called a magfile, but I don't understand a lot of it. There are many pictures of naked women in positions which I think are intended to be erotic. I think Pearlman bought it because of these. Then I go look at the view which is very interesting, but as ugly as ever.

Hubertus gets our breakfasts from a little slot in the wall and he and Pearlman seem to like it. It's like cheese, but sweet and of poor nutritional value. There's stuff like coffex but Hubertus says it's real "coffee." I taste it, but find it very nasty, so I go and drink water and put the rest of my breakfast in the disposal-chute. Then I go to the table-on-wheels and eat some of the tasteless but nourishing concentrates which Hubertus bought for Cassim's bodychange.

Pearlman and I cover the long table with a plastex sheet and put a pillow there while Hubertus goes away to collect the man. When I say

I'll need cloths to clean Cassim with and to soak up the messes, Pearlman sighs irritably, but goes and collects a pile of the tissue-towels. He helped me with a body-change once before and knows what to expect. It's a long wait and I'm tired of looking at the view by the time Hubertus brings the man.

Cassim is a man of fifty years, very overweight and with physical damages in several areas, particularly his heart and kidneys. His skin-color seems almost totally black, even darker than Pearlman's, and he has a balding skull. He's a blustering man, appearing very confident, but really full of fear. I'm so interested in the color of his skin that I forget to speak when Hubertus introduces me as the Solar. Cassim is only mildly Talented with what one could liken to Jonaas's charismatic ability—but to a far lesser degree and not strong enough to be termed Talent.

Hubertus and Pearlman handle him well, asking the questions to find out his wishes, reassuring him and making little suggestions which I agree to with Hubertus in mindspeak. What he wants is simple enough, but it'll take time. They all talk for far too long. I suppose that's part of the hocus.

I finally become impatient and put Cassim into tranecstate, instructing him verbally before Hubertus can stop me. Hubertus is annoyed. I think he was enjoying the hocus.

They help me to strip Cassim and lift him onto the table, then Hubertus gets more pillows to settle the man comfortably, despite me telling him that Cassim won't know the difference. Hubertus is very curious, never having seen me do a body-change before.

I repair the heart and kidneys first so there's very little for Hubertus to see. He's always wondering what I "see" and how I "change" things. I've tried explaining that it's like I become part of the patient's physical self and that I experience the purpose of the patterns and the possible alterations to them. I don't make miracles. The "miracles" are already there, waiting to be activated. But

when I say that it always annoys Hubertus because he has a passion to know how things work in the mechanical sense.

He has more to observe when I begin utilizing some of the fatty tissue for its energy value and removing the excess from Cassim's system. Messes he understands. He looks quite nauseous after a few of these, so I tell him to go away and leave things to me and Pearlman.

In a way I become like two people, the one directing and the other being a more intimate part of the procedure. One of me sees the necessities, the other sees the possibilities and they both manage the completion. From my point of view it's a very practical matter, like Angelo with the plumbing for the Blue Place. One can't create what there isn't material to create with, but one can persuade other materials to unite and become what's needed if one is very careful and has the skill.

That's why it's easier to utilize food and chemical concentrates together rather than using food by itself. Ordinary food has to be digested and broken down into its elements, but the concentrates are already broken down, so it's only a matter of speeding up the patient's metabolism and making the digestive systems work faster for a time. And there's less bodywaste with concentrates. Maybe Hubertus will appreciate that better in the future and not complain so much when I ask for them.

The easiest means of making bodychanges is simply to make adjustments and new balances to the patterns and then allow the patient's own body to do what it must in its own time. That's how I correct Jonaas's problems. But this time it has to be done quickly, so I'm more involved as a stimulator, a manipulator and a persuader. Like I had to be when Hubertus's arm needed to be rebuilt and restored.

I'm never aware of time itself when I need to apply myself fully to a patient. When I relax and look to Pearlman he's looking very grimly at me and Hubertus is gone. I glance at

the chronometer and discover it to be past 14th hour. Almost four hours. Pearlman must be tired.

Pearlman says, "Have you done with him then?"

I look at Cassim, still in his trance-state. I'm quite tired myself, but not unpleasantly so.

"Yes," I say. "Help me to get him into the freshener. He needs bathing."

So we carry him in, give him a thorough wash, dry him carefully, comb his hair and then carry him to one of the chairs.

The plastex sheet and the pillows are in a very messy state and the tissue towels are all used and re-used. We drag the plastex sheet into the freshener and scrub it, push the stained pillows down the laundry-chute, dispose of the tissue towels in the rubbish-disposal unit and then go to bathe. By the time we've dressed again and I've washed the stains from my shirt, the air-conditioning has removed the worst of the odors from the apartment.

As I put the jacket on, minus the wet shirt, I say, "Where's Hubertus?"

"Outside," he says. "In the corridor. He felt a little nauseous."

He goes to collect Hubertus, who avoids my eyes when he comes in.

"Should we dress him?" Pearlman asks, indicating Cassim.

Hubertus stares and is very impressed.

"No," says Hubertus. "Let him see all of the miracle."

I put Cassim into normal sleep and tell Hubertus, "You can finish your hocus now." He laughs at that and gives Cassim's shoulder a light shake.

Cassim awakes, feeling refreshed and well. He blinks up at Hubertus, then at me, then at his hands and body. He sees himself in the mirror and his eyes become wide and wondering and half-afraid.

"Oh," he says, breathing strangely. "Oh—"

I go into the other room and look at that ugly view again. So many huge buildings and no trees or grass anywhere! And so many people! How can they tolerate such a place?

I'm aware of a multitude of life-pulses and it's so unpleasant that I have to exclude them from my sensitivities.

There's a great deal of noise from the other room. Hubertus and Pearlman are talking and Cassim is laughing, exclaiming and shouting with excitement. It continues for some minutes before Hubertus mind-speaks to me.

"Cassim wishes to speak with you before he leaves. He's very pleased and there'll be big benefits

teeth, and his blue eyes are alight with happiness. He looks very handsome with the features which Pearlman calls "patrician." I gave him new fingerprints and retinal patterns and his health should be excellent until he abuses his body once more. He sees me and comes forward, half bowing to me.

"Solar," he says, "I'll be grateful forever! It's a miracle! I'm reborn! My life's renewed and clean! I feel such joy as I've never known before! You are the divine gift to humanity, my saviour!"

I don't know what I could possibly say to that. I nod and allow him to take my hand. He kisses it! I'm embarrassed and go back into the other room to escape his effusion. Hubertus and Pearlman talk to him some more and it's a relief when he finally leaves. I go back and Hubertus gives me a beaming smile.

"Will Jonaas be pleased?" I ask.

Hubertus laughs and says, "Jonaas will be as fond of you as Yo-Yo is when he hears the results! I think we should celebrate."

"I'm truly hungry for some good food," I say.

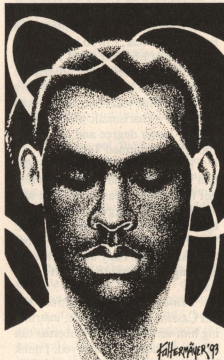
"Saulus," says Pearlman, "we'll take you out, buy you some new clothes and show you a slice of life such as you've never imagined before!"

*(Following this, the narrative becomes somewhat garbled and confused, sometimes disapproving and sometimes outraged. As near as can be deciphered, Hubertus and Pearlman bought him clothes, took him to a restaurant, a sensie-house and a brothel before the night was done. His views of the "civilized" life of Rome are inclined to be puritanical, the sensie-house puzzled him and the brothel was dismissed as being both crude and disappointing.*

*—J.T. Semantics Division)*

I climb into bed after jamming the mechanism which causes the vibrations and I think about Yo-Yo, about Jazalu, about Auria, about Jonaas and about Serenel. I'm very depressed.

*(To be continued...)*



for the Clan, Saulus. He has contacts and knowledge and he's paid a great deal of money for this. You don't need to talk. Just be dignified and blank-faced, as you usually are."

Dignified and blank-faced? Is that how Hubertus thinks about me?

I go into the room again and find that Cassim has dressed. His clothes are now loose on his solid and compact body. The color-scheme of red and yellow, which looked so well against his black skin, seems too bright now that he's pale-skinned like Hubertus and has such a wealth of golden-brown hair. His appearance is that of a man twenty years younger, as it should be. He laughs a lot, showing off his beautiful new

# BAGATAWAY

Mustafa Zahirovic

Illustrated by Margaret Ballif Simon

*The game was life. The game was death.*

This is the hardest time. The quiet time. How often have I broken myself in this time? And woken to find I am stronger and faster. One more time again? Perhaps not even once more.

Perhaps my luck has run out, or my skills have dulled or God has bored of my wandering Faith.

This is the hardest time. The quiet time spent with the team. How

many times have they looked into their captain's eyes for a good word about the next day's game? And how many times have I winked or smiled or patted them on the shoulder, crying inside. Breaking inside. Broken then, and broken now. When I wake tomorrow will I be able to lead my team to victory?

This is the hardest time. The quiet time spent with my team sitting

around the hearth. Listening to the wood crackle and curl into smoke. Can I hear anything over the beat of my heart; pumping heavily in my neck and face and ears.

Broken now but will I rise united? Stronger and faster? Will I take my team to victory?

Tomorrow we play a powerful team. I have no doubt one or more of us will be injured severely. Perhaps



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mortally. Who in my team will die tomorrow? Can I spot them now by the look of their eyes? Who will I bury tomorrow? Shovel heavy earth onto their faces. Mingle my dry, dusty tears of shame. How can I show them the strength they need to see?

This is the hardest time. The long time quiet time. Broken now. Will I rise tomorrow?

Around the fire faces are long with silence. How much longer, and longer? Open eyes and open minds. Waiting. Tunnel waiting, no light ahead. And longer?

Who will break this fast? Nedim or Misho or Asim? No.

One of them shows movement. Samir shuffles his feet, runs his tongue over small, brown teeth. I see he is going to speak.

We wait.

He smiles and lifts his eyes toward us. His voice is a stunning sound, "God is with us." The words rumble out and back and heavily the echo continues. "If nothing else, there is always this. Always. God is with us."

There come smiles and gentle sighs from team members around the fire. These are the strong words they look for and receive from their coach. The old man never disappoints them.

He has taken us all into twenty-one consecutive victories. Today we are the golden Second League team, tomorrow we claim our challenge for entry into the First League. It is impossible to make little of tomorrow's game against the Poles. But Samir, for now, makes all this seem bearable.

The echo resounds, "The Pakistanis thought they could outrun us. The Maoris thought they could scare us and beat us down. Even the Chileans thought that with their clever attacking game they could outplay us. They were all wrong, every single one."

Good words, strong words.

"Twenty-one games undefeated. The longest winning record in the history of the Game. Did you know that only one thing has carried you all this far?"

He looks for approval to continue. Eager eyes and eager minds draw him on quickly.

"It is not that you train every day or study the tactics of the greatest teams. It is not your strength or your speed or your skills."

Everyone edges closer to the old man, drawing strength from his words and his presence. I feel myself straighten with anticipation.

"Imam." Again the echo is broken by thunder. "This is the one thing. Faith in your God. Even if everything else is strong and your Imam is weak, you will surely fail." There are nods and sounds of approval.

"Allah rewards us for our Faith. If He wills it that you should not take another breath, you will stop breathing. This is a fact. How can you doubt that He hasn't the power to grant us all victory tomorrow?"

There are a few anxious, eruptive cheers from the players around the fire. Tension and worry and fear leaving them like exorcised devils. "Bismillah," some intone solemnly. A blessing for the team, and themselves.

"If your Imam is strong you have everything. Tomorrow you will stand on the field with ten other players and even though a million million unforgiving blue eyes watch you, you still carry the Imam. Do not forget who you are and the people for whom you play."

He looks around the fire at all the players, catching their eyes one at a time. Slowly, individually, they obey Samir's silence. Finally he looks at me. I know what he is going to ask, everyone knows. And still everyone wants to hear.

"Faruk," he says, notching the arrow into his bow. "How is your Imam today?"

Poisoned talon-arrow flies straight. The words find their mark. I look for the open wound but only inwardly can I see my thread of pain twist and writhe. And as it coils it begins to swell, bloat and grind larger. Squeezing precious air out of me. I cannot hear my team or the fire or the old man over my pounding heart,

drumming loudly in my neck and face and ears. Long time quiet time. My team crowding closer, fire's warmth blocked out. Alone in the shadow of cold. This is the time. The hardest time. Broken now but....

"Will I rise complete tomorrow?"

Everyone is caught in the half beat. Mid-step, mid-thought. This is the timing of the fast break, of quick goals, the timing of victory.

"When I wake will I still be Faruk Shakich? Ako Bog da—if God allows. This is what I say because I am Muslim. This is the nature of Islam; that all of Creation exists in harmony. Every piece fits perfectly."

The warmth of the fire cuts between bobbing heads and shifting figures. Restless and hungry eyes look on and wait.

"When anyone finds true Imam they know that they fit in perfectly. They know they will wake tomorrow, whole and complete. They do this asking for God's blessing. Ako Bog da."

These eyes that look on are beginning to look sated. The words carry food.

"It's true. We could not even breathe if not for God's blessing. This much, thankfully, we all have. Now how can we deny Him our true Imam? Fatimah? Reshad? No. None of us can deny Him this." Now the fire glows at me strongly.

"This is the nature of Imam. We are certain we will rise tomorrow whole and complete and in this same breath, His breath, we are certain we will play tomorrow. And win tomorrow."

Very little after this point cuts with any sort of clarity or sanity. I have the feeling of being passed from team member to member, like a child in arms, like living a hand-to-mouth existence. Songs and words and dance falling through one another like water falling over rocks.

So many faces and images passing over these rocks like the life water. I am dancing the kolo, then lose the timing. I quickly drop out of

the dance. The whole time someone is chanting 'Bosna, Bosna, Bosna.'

I can feel Samir leaning heavily over my shoulder. This cuts with perfect clarity. Life water over rocks. Leaning heavily and whispering in my ear. An image of his small, brown teeth carefully forming haunting words. "Well done, Faruk. Player. Captain. Orator.... Ten thousand souls rest on your play tomorrow. A million million blue eyes will be watching. And you alone, will be the focus of all this. How is your Imam today, boy?"

Everything else is water over rocks. My pounding heart being sped downstream, gasping in the twisting current. In my ears the ring of churning water faceless harmonies.

And my feet finding the ground through darkness, leaving the fire-side. Voices falling into distance. Once again the fire's warmth is lost. Shadow of cold.

And the bed falling toward me. Rough hessian mattress pressing against my face. My head full of empty thoughts. And rising to the surface between them, the images of this night and the Game and my life.

The slap of heavy-handed sleep falling slowfast. My bed. My life. My gasping heart.

My gasping heart drowning in a sea of ten thousand Bosnian souls. My people. The last of the Muslim Bosnians.

Only ten thousand. Not a single one more. Not even one more. There are even more than ten thousand razors along the northern fence around our compound. There are certainly more than ten thousand abortions buried behind our living sheds.

We are like herded creatures. Fenced in, fed, our numbers controlled. All the time a million million blue eyes watch on. Watch our pain and struggle.

And God watches on. Allah watches our progress, watches us break our newborn and bury them in shallow pits. Are we Muslim? Did He send His prophet to show us the Way? Are we blessed in the eyes of God?

Perhaps God also has blue eyes.

A million million blue eyes like to see us struggle. Against the elements, against life. They like to compare us to our fellow strugglers. So they grant us all the Game. Bagataway. Tribal destiny.

And we are among the tribes. Ten thousand tribal heads in every cage, hundreds of tribal colours lined in a row of cages. Every tribe another fallen leaf, twisting in the current. Falling over rocks.

Tribal destiny. Bagataway. The game of tribes. The game of the ancient Indians, played on the plains of America. The Christians call the game Lacrosse. We are not the people of Christ, we call it by the name of the ancient American Indians—Bagataway.

And these blue eyes watch tribes struggle with the Game. Watch sweat run over our faces. Water over rocks. The Game is our struggle. Bagataway. Lost somewhere between a hope and a curse.

They grant us the Game not to ease our struggle, but to create it. Organized despair.

God watches us dielive with His blue eyes. And our holy men ask for Imam. How can I reconcile this? My gasping heart sweeps downstream over rocks. Water over steadfast rocks.

My face pressing into my hessian mattress. Images of this night, the Game, my life. My head full of empty thoughts. Wide, round dreams of blackness and reality. Ten thousand voices begging me to play on. Play harder. On the field, blinding sun in my eyes. The shadow of an opposition stick against glaring light, then the heavy wood coming down over my face. Ten thousand voices, voices like water. My weak Imam broken, like my teeth. And fat drops of slippery, bloody saliva soaking into the Earth as another stick opens up my face. Ten thousand beggars. God's blue eyes and small, brown teeth. How is your Imam today, boy? Bosna. Bosna. Broken teeth, will I rise complete tomorrow? This is the hardest. The long time quiet time. This is the hardest time.

"Good morning, slut." Words falling quickly around me. Hidden in mist.

"Wake up, whore. Last night and last chance are over."

Words pushing through the mist like the sweep of Bagataway racquets. Nets whistling, mixed syllables.

"Last night you screwed with Satan. Today you may, or may not, send all your people to hell."

Hard words with clean edges, like swinging sticks. Sweeping past my face. There are nets hungry to catch the ball. And in the mist nowhere a ball to be caught.

"Kafir. Kafir, wake up."

And my eyes open. The resounding slap of the game ball as it lands squarely in the net. The echo of the sound rings like Kafir. Kafir.

Kafir—the Unbeliever.

Small, brown teeth form the words that lay me to sleep and wake me by morning. Through the clearing mists his unsmiling face. And again. "Good morning, slut."

Consciousness is pounded into me like it were being shaped over an anvil.

"Get dressed, Kafir. The trucks will be here soon."

"Mmm."

"Move. Get dressed."

His words are hammered over metal with sharp and ugly precision. Being alloyed dangerously with my thoughts—while I find myself dressing—and thoughtsound repeating-ing.

"I don't think we should put Fatimah on the wing in the first half." And this is how suddenly everything can change. In a few words the opening. Opening for a fast break, the half-beat winning quick goal. All in a few words, and now I am fully awake.

"Why not?"

"She will break too easily when she gets hit." The opening gets wider.

"No one can catch her, Samir. She's fast. Like a fish." I pull on my game shirt. "Slippery. Gone."

Samir's expression is unchanging. I can see my chance, and I lean into it.

"Have you seen the defenseman she's playing against? He's got all the stick skills but no feet. He can't run the small circles, only straight lines."

I watch his eyes from my crouch as I lace up my running shoes.

"She won't get hit. Ako Bog da." There is an instant where I can't tell if my shot has scored. But Samir's brow starts to knit and I can hear the ball slam into the back of the net. Fast break quick goal.

He continues, a half beat behind. "We'll play zone defense until we see their attacking game."

"Did it rain last night?"

"No!" He looks surprised. "It hasn't rained for at least two weeks, the ground is hard. Zone is for slow games on wet turf. It's a sign from God. We'll play man-on-man defense. Outrun them early. Make them sweat."

He has to turn away. I can see the muscles around the back of his neck tense. Time for just one more shot at goal.

"We'll start playing that moving-pick attacking run. It didn't work in training but—"

"But God allowing, it will work out today." It comes out like a snarl. Words like spittle. "What part of the hate do you come from?"

"What?"

"On the map of sin, where do you live?"

Samir catches me with a bounce shot, I've never heard him talk like this before.

"You're the steam rising from the blood of our people. You are the sound of machine guns in the morning genocide."

"I'm in this pen just like you. Get off your pedestal, holy man."

"No, not just like me. You're the captain. You're the one."

"The one what?" I asked.

"Our people only look for two things. The Koran and Game players. And you—"

"No, you're the one their eyes should be resting on. You carry our people on your back. Strong man of God." Words of nettle and thorn.

"You're the best thinker and the fastest runner. You have no choice but to lead. It is God's will."

"God doesn't walk in these shoes."

"He is with us. We are His people."

"We are fruit rotting on trees."

"Don't throw your mind away to this sort of...." He is lost, shaking with emotion. "He graces you—"

"Curses me."

"No." Like the sound of a hammer coming down on an anvil.

There is a lofted ball in there somewhere. Who will catch it? Samir or Faruk? Who will open up this game?

"You know, Samir. The last time my wife fell pregnant I could almost read the cry of my child on her sweaty brow."

He is still. Anticipating the worst.

"I broke that child and buried it. It wasn't in our quota that month to bring another Bosnian man-child into the world."

Samir's face contorts into a chiselled twist of flesh and grey, sweaty skin. Beneath the control there is a glint of sharpened steel. His Imam is dangerous.

"We are His people. We are God's blessed. This world here," he says, waving his arm to the corners of the compound, "This world is not—"

"Yes. Yes I know. This world is not for us. More words from our holy man. It's just a test of our Imam." The sound of that word, Imam, is like a wet cure.

"Well this game-test didn't start ten years ago, it started two centuries ago. Even your mother's mother knew the feel of killing her newborn with a shovel."

"When does this Judgment Day come? How much suffering is enough this month or next? We serve our children pain instead of bread. Pour out a cup of my blood. We'll weigh it against yours and drink the heavier."

Samir sits down heavily on the edge of my bed. He could not have fallen any faster if I had

punched him. He bends in the middle, his arms crossed over his chest and stomach like he's supporting a broken rib. And then I really learn how fast everything can change. A life, my life.

In a single, jagged movement Samir lifts his chin, showing a face slapped with pain. He gasps once for breath between rattling, anguished sobs. His cheeks are getting wetter.

And this is how fast things can change. Like eyes opening to see the truth. Suddenly I acknowledge my whole fear. That I am not alone. That I am not an individual specially attended to by reality in the midst of ten thousand sleepwalkers.

And here is Samir. A man who can't stop hearing the sound of breaking foetal bones. Or the pages of the Koran turning. There must be times when these sounds can't be distinguished.

And here is Samir. His feet shuffling and his tongue passing uncertainly over his teeth; rearing himself to speak again. "There were only three, you know. Yes, of course you know."

His voice comes out with some strength.

"There were the Muslims, the Christians and the Jews. Now the Jews are gone. Not a single one left."

He waits, I confuse this at first for needing a prompt to continue, but he is catching his breath quietly. He still holds one arm across his rib cage.

"These people. These blue-eyed demons had so much anger that they did not even leave one scrap of one copy of the Torah. Knowledge and wisdom passed into nothing as if it never were."

I feel I should speak but I am weak. There is a shadow of cold drowning waters gasping. Gasping heart.

"Now here we are after the Cleansing. Here we are playing for a better life. But we play. Not a single Jew ever picked up a loop of netting atop a piece of hickory. Never once tasted victory."

He trails off. Then slowly he straightens and his arm passes away



from his chest. There is hidden strength yet. And today I learn what that strength is, as I hear Samir softly intone, "Bismillah."

Broken now, will I rise complete tomorrow? And here is tomorrow. And quickly changing sequences like games quickly won. Like goal shots that bounce and skim past defense into the goal net. And here I am at tomorrow, complete.

And I am coming home. The shame is heavy in my feet. They walk slowly. There is weight in my chest and head. And my back is made tired in the lifting of the weight.

My thoughts are speaking to my pain at length while my focus dances ahead. I am coming home. And I know somehow that the door is open for me.

"Tell me the story of the electricity, Samir."

This is a question children ask before they go to sleep. And their parents answer, crying quietly and turning their faces away from the fire's light. Now Samir answers also. His tone is genuinely paternal. "In the lower leagues our backs grow hard with the burden of the future. There are days we cannot lift our heads for the weight."

"Why so?" I am drawn into the story, like coming home.

"We struggle now and grow stronger now so our children may live better lives."

"What kind of lives?"

"In the lower leagues we must live in the dark. We are given wood and spark for fire. Fire is our warmth and our only light."

"But in the First League?" I draw him on. His words are like a lullaby.

"But in the First League. Only in the First League is our burden lifted. We are allowed machines to till the soil and grow our food. Instead of eating the food that comes to us in crates. Dumped from the back of trucks."

"Only in the First League are we allowed medicines for our ails, instead of brews we can mix from grasses and plants in the compound."

"But the electricity."

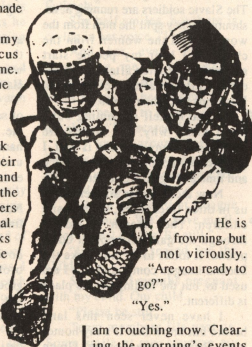
"Of course. The electricity. Light that doesn't falter in the wind. Heat that doesn't need tending or—"

There is a knock at the door. Then a voice from outside. "The trucks are coming." Samir lifts himself and walks around my bed, stretching taller as he goes. I am waiting for the story to continue but know it will not.

"Are you ready to go?" he asks. There is little emotion in his voice.

"I think so."

He turns his head towards me.



He is frowning, but not viciously.

"Are you ready to go?"

"Yes."

I am crouching now. Clearing the morning's events from my mind. Forgetting the passage in the trucks, forgetting theuzzle of machine guns.

I am crouching now, waiting for the whistle. Trying to clear my mind. Clear away the sounds of the opening ceremony, the sounds of the onlookers. Clear away the image of our banner, white crescent-moon and star over green. Our banner surrounded by a sea of faces.

I am crouching now, waiting for the whistle. Waiting for the Game to start. Next to me my Polish counterpart. He looks strong. Well-fed. All around surrounded by a sea of onlookers. Fair skin, fair hair, blue eyes, blood heart. Soon they will be happy. Bones will be broken today.

The whistle sounds. From the sideline the last of Samir's words

sound with it, "Do nothing else but win. Bismillah." And there is action all across the field. Asim successfully sweeps away the ball at the face-off. Meho sprinting, beats his player to the ground ball and scoops it up. In the clear now, he runs down the field to the goal area.

There is a long pass. Omer intercepts it at the left face of the goal net. It is all working out like game plays drawn in the dirt. A fast break from the face off. It's perfect.

I can see Omer's stick arcing and cutting as he dodges his opposition player. Then I see his racquet flick the ball, then all I see is the elbow. Coming down onto my forehead. And my stick falling from my hands. My knees hitting the ground. And dull, dull vision.

But I know, I still know we scored the first goal. And I see my feet walking to my spot for the next face-off. Someone on my team, is it Reshad, saying, "They play hard here in the First League." I feel as if it were directed at me.

The comment strikes me as somehow being funny. This field is a place of little humor; I know I must have been hit hard. I can't raise a smile. My face has gone numb. My Polish counterpart smiles for me as we sink into a crouch ready to sprint into play at the next face off.

The whistle sounds again. There is a clash of sticks at centre field and I fall to the ground with the sound. The crack echoing. I know the game is going on but I can't see it. Now there is a line of people in front of me and I am walking with them. Their faces are unfamiliar but I know they are my people. They are Muslim Bosnians. They are carrying everything they have in their arms; clothes and bags and small children. I am walking alone, I have a bag on my shoulder. I haven't seen the bag or my clothes before. But I know they are mine. And we are all walking, people in front and behind.

Around us are other men with machine guns. Not like those I am used to. These men are darker. They look Slavic. One of them shoots a

few rounds into the air. Everyone in the line walks faster.

"*Faruk...Faruk.*"

The line is gone. Fatimah is looking down at me. She is wiping blood from my forehead with her hand.

"What's the matter? Did you get hit again?"

"I can't remember." My words are faint.

"You must rest. We'll interchange you."

"Please, Fatimah. They are using very common tactics. The captain always gets special treatment."

"I think you should rest." She sounds worried. It's not a good sign. I get up off the ground and look around the field. Everyone is taking up their starting positions. The onlookers are thunderous.

"What just happened?"

"They scored a goal."

"Get back to your spot, Fatimah."

"Please rest for a while."

"Be realistic. The Game just started. I'm not going to interchange. Take up your position."

"Be careful," she adds quickly as she turns in a trot to go back into position. She is gone, disappears in an instant. In her place is an old woman in a head scarf. The old woman isn't walking in the line any more. She stands by the side of the path, screaming insanely for her husband. He is nowhere. Two of the soldiers run to her and push at her with the stocks of their guns. She stops screaming but she doesn't walk on. A third soldier walks up to her, drawing his pistol. Puts it to her face. There is some sort of noise, then she falls to the ground. Her husband is nowhere. I find myself wiping the spray of her brains from my cheek. The line just keeps walking. I can hear the soldiers laughing.

I can hear my Polish counterpart laughing. I cannot understand what he's saying, but he is pointing to the centre of the field. The next face-off is about to begin. The whistle blows and the Pole is running. I am looking to the ground for the old woman. She is nowhere. There is only a Bagat-

away field. A sea of blue eyes. The Poles and the Muslim Bosnians.

**A**t center field there are many stick clashes and body clashes fighting for the ball. Asim falls to the ground, his arm looks to be at a strange angle. Samir is running onto the field toward him.

Downfield Fatimah has the ball, swiftly passing between opposition players. Now only the goal keeper stands between the ball and the goal net. He is running at her, shouting. The Slavic soldiers are running at us, shouting. They split the men from the women. And the women from the children. I hear my people start screaming. Women after their children. Children after their parents. Husbands after their wives.

I find myself screaming but I don't know why. My words are senseless but my emotion is real. I am with my people in another place and time and again we suffer.

Now these Slavic soldiers have us in three lines. Men, women and children. They march us slowly through the gates of another compound. It looks to be much like the Second League compound that I am used to, but the feeling of this place is different.

I have never seen this land before but know that it's my homeland. Bosnia Herzegovina. Green mountains all around.

I have never seen these soldiers before but I know who they are. Smiling sharply and swinging their guns from their hips.

There is a woman in the line next to me looking for her son. Her face is red, around her cheek it looks to be swollen. She's dragging one foot a little. Her eyes tell me the exact feeling of this place. Where we lay down today, we lay down. Soon we are all going to meet our God.

I am suddenly struck with a panic I cannot control. There is tightness around my throat and no air. No air getting in. There is thickness and burning around my throat. Help me Earth please help me. I fall to you. Take me back. I am gasping. Burning. No air. Gasping.

My feet walk in time to the pulse in my throat. There is weakness in my knees. I am on the edge of falling into this panic.

And for all my fear and will to be out of this place, there is something dark and hard in me that firms me to this spot. Screaming at me, 'Stay.' I can't run from this place.

Now the boy is calling out for his mother. He is reaching for her, through the line of men. She is trembling. I take the boy's hand and guide him to his mother. They are both crying together.

One of the Serbian guards runs at them now, puts a few rounds into the boy's back. Then drags the woman away by the hair. She is clawing at the ground.

The guard throws her at a group of soldiers, then turns back towards me. He is holding his rifle in both hands. He is talking to me, words I understand. The only guard I have ever understood in my life.

"Three lines means three lines. Next time you play stupid is the last time."

The butt of his rifle comes down across my jaw. I know he has broken it even before I hit the ground. My tongue is cut and bleeding. Splinters of broken teeth in my mouth.

Like swallowing a knife, like eating hot embers. There is pain enough for all. Softness in my neck, guiding my head down. Now I am tempted to rest. I am for the sleep now. There is pain enough to share. Served with spit and bloody teeth. My double vision slowly clearing. Lay my head down, lay my head down. I am for the sleep now.

And then I hear her cries. The mother of the young boy. The purity of her emotion is startling. Startling so as to deny me any sleep.

She was thrown to the Serbs. Like food to starved animals. She is half-naked now, on the ground. They are raping her. The ones that aren't holding her down are masturbating over her.

Now I am half-lying. The same guard is standing over me, waiting for me to catch up with the line of

men. Her cries are keeping me awake.

I can feel the skin coming off her back as it scrapes rhythmically on the ground. I can feel the fingernails sinking into her wrists and ankles as she is held down. Between thrusts I can hear the Serb guard whispering in her ear, "Smile, bitch, smile. Tell me that you love me."

The guard finishes with a groin. Hammers his fist onto her face and quiets her for a moment. He slowly gets to his feet; steam is rising from his sweaty stomach and legs. He is smiling and panting a little as he stretches upward, easing the tension out of his lower back.

Then he grabs his penis and wrings the remaining semen from it. Now on his hand, he flicks the warm fluid at the grass.

Another guard begins.

She cries out again.

My heart screams.

The sounds of the onlookers easily drown out my frail, weak voice. And over the sound of the blue eyes rejoicing at the Game is the sound of the final whistle. The Game is over. I am watching from the sidelines. I see my team members hugging each other. Poles falling to the ground, faces white with disbelief.

Samir is running onto the field.

"Samir—Samir! What's the score?" My tongue feels numb and doughy.

"Faruk?"

"What's the score?"

"Faruk. Thank God you are with us again. Twenty-five, twenty-three. We won."

"Bismillah."

He smiles but something is wrong. Something is wrong. I stumble onto the field. My team members are smiling but no one is happy. We're finally in the First League but no one is singing. Then I begin to see.

When there should be ten Bosnians coming off the field there are only seven. Mostly they are all limping or carrying themselves awkwardly.

"Faruk!"

I turn around. Fatimah is calling to me from the sidelines. She is lying

on the ground. Her game shoes for a pillow.

There is something about the way she called my name. Like something I have heard before. In another time.

"Fatimah. What happened to you?" I kneel down beside her. Her face is in a sweat.

"They broke my leg, Faruk." Her words are short. She pants them out. "Hold me."

I lay beside her and cradle her head in my elbow, "We won, Fatimah."

She half smiles, but there is crying in her voice, "I know."

And her eyes. Familiar. Reminding me of somewhere close. Her face is red, around her cheek it looks to be swollen.

She begins to shiver, draws me closer, "I'm scared."

My hands around her. Her back is moist. Under her game shirt the skin is missing in patches. Scraped away.

"We're in the First League now, Fatimah. We'll have medicines to heal the leg. Be still."

"Faruk. I'm scared for the child."

She is two months pregnant with my child. Our child.

"Please be still."

Team members file past us. Some smile at me, squeeze my shoulder as they pass. They are all silent. A line of men passing.

"Faruk, I'm bleeding. I'm bleeding. I'm scared I'll lose the child."

She is afraid to cry out. But her inward tears shake her, and me with her.

And the sound of her voice and silent cries like familiar sounds echoing out of a strange place.

Today both these places are the same. Both there and here. Always by their nature they are sung in time with one another. There is nowhere for me to turn. Both these places are the same.

Where we lay down today, we lay down. Soon we are all going to meet our God.



# CAMERA MAN

Felicity Savage

Illustrated by Darla Malone Tagrin

*He took pictures. And something else*

Aidan's audiojournal, 05/03/27:

Had the green dream again—the one where the traffic outside makes me think I'm hearing the sea. It's driving me phobic. I'm having it so often that I'm going to move, if I can scrape up the money. Somewhere quieter.

Could hardly see straight for the green haze in front of my implants, but I dragged myself out of bed and dressed as an up-and-coming ratface: mustard-colored suit in repulsive taste, American-style boots, no cod-piece, et cetera. Put a new filter in my gas mask. Went down Durham Street to the transit. Caught one of the new trains, the ones with tiers of orange foam benches stacked on top of each other and in-carriage vid units. It was packed to bursting, even at seven p.m.: seems like Dubliners just aren't content to stay in one

place longer than an hour at a time. I held onto the greasy, fingerprinted strap and shut my eyes, pretending I was hearing the roar of waves, the train rocking on the sea.

The security buffoon at Hescbe had the wits of a lesser ape. He didn't even *look* at the ID I had forged for the occasion. Shows how pointless this industrial shit is. The reception was held in the rent-a-penthouse at the Ilin. Pink walls, a glass roof, paper-clothed buffet tables, and servos plying the crowd with hors d'oeuvres, treads making *ssh ssh* sounds on the carpet. In the middle stood a silver platform with the Hescbe Body Shield, "the latest in urban self-protection." I got a good long stare at it, then a lanky pink hand came over my shoulder and stuck a glass of fizzy under my nose.

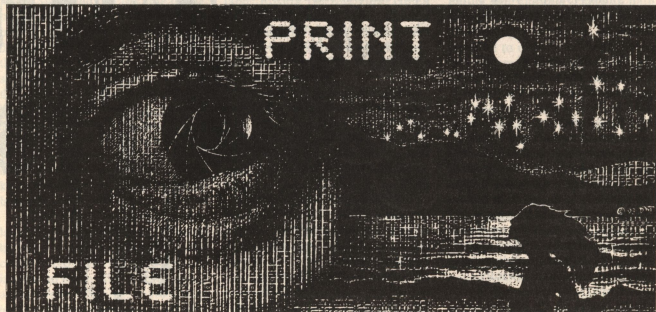
"Boo," said Eileen. "Still on the James Bond wannabe circuit?"

When your ex whom you haven't seen for a year pops out of the crowd of gray-skinned, backstabbing ratfaces at a new-product reception, what *do* you say? I mumbled and took a gulp of champagne.

"Don't you ever get tired of snuffling around the corporations' coattails? A year ago, you were still going to create Art, as far as I remember. What happened to that?"

"Shut your gob," I whispered. "I'm on assignment for Isaki."

"Oooh. Prostituting your talent." But Eileen looked taken aback. I suppose she didn't think I was still farting around on the bottom floor. Not to embroider the truth, she's a corporate climber, and seven years ago she thought it'd be exciting to take up with a starving would-be Camera artist. We split two years after that, when she got her break and moved up to the dim golden heights of Dou-



bleday Eireann. Remember the red mist of jealousy and shattered china.... She has masses of black hair descending on either side of a large oval face, her lips are bright red, her teeth yellow from chewing tobacco product. "You ought to wear a holomask if you don't want people to recognise you."

"What do you want, Eileen?"

"I'm looking for a camera man, actually."

"Is this an offer?" My Minolta implants tingled in their sockets. The green dream made me consider anything.

"I've already asked McGrady, Power, Sullivan, and the rest of the art bunch. You're next on the list."

"An assignment coming straight from the corporate Tir na n'Og, and none of the aboveboarders would take it. Must be fucking tough."

"My boss had a brainstorm. He listened to the world around him, and heard people saying they didn't believe the Gaeltachts existed any more. Surprise. My mum doesn't even believe in the sea. She thinks that when she gets in the plane to visit my brother in London, it takes off, flies over Dun Laoghaire and comes down on the other side of the suburbs." Eileen laughed nervously. "He says that out west in County Galway, cultural preservation has been enforced since the nineteen-nineties. Nothing's been allowed to change, except that they speak English now. He thinks pictures of the Emerald Isle the way it used to be would be a raving success on our next calendar. He'd use them for a photo essay in *Dublin* magazine, too. Maybe even a book. He's got his teeth into the idea, and when that happens, there isn't a soul can drag him off it."

"No way he'd be able to get a permit to go out to a cultural preservation area. He'd have to operate underground."

"Are you trying to tell me what you're doing right now *isn't* underground?"

"You're jumping through the ceiling, Eileen. Relax." The green dream swam in front of my implants,

distracting me. "Do the Gaeltachts exist?"

"I hate it when you try to be ironic, Aidan."

"I'm dead serious. Do they?"

"Course they bloody well do, otherwise Gerald wouldn't have told me to hire a camera man to remember pictures of them!"

"Gerald, is it now," I said, and turned away from her, picking a canape off a passing servomaid.

Then I came home and remembered the CivilShield into my transformer, printed it out on that sheet of blueprint paper that's been kicking around the apartment. Sent it over to Isaki by courier. Sat massaging my implants for a bit. Kev viddied me and said did I want to go to the Strip & Dance, seeing as it's Tuesday night, but I said no. Wish I'd gone. Should've got stimed till I blacked out. Might've knocked the goddamn idea out of my head.

Got hold of Eileen's boss on the vid. Skinny arsehole with a purple beard. Thinks he's It, caresses that misbegotten bush like it was a girl's ass. He took my offer.

#### Image:

Piebald cows gallop heavily to the edges of the field as the helicopter hovers at six feet, flattening the grass with its vortex. The passenger hatch cycles. The young man jumps, hits, rolls onto a cowpat. It splits, spurting shit onto his back. Three leather dufflebags drop. One glances off his head. "Good luck!" yells the seamed brown face in the hatch. "The Connellys live over that way! They're expecting you!" The helicopter rises and clatters into the bright grey.

One at a time, the grass blades stand up straight again. The young man gets up, cursing rhythmically. He is Black Irish: lanky white body with muscles like string, clad in what used to be a smart pullover and hose, midnight brown hair. His Minolta implants are the same clear blue as the eyes he was born with. The only difference is that they do not water in the sharp-edged wind off the sea.

Aidan's audiojournal, 05/29/27:

I never realized the sun was white, not diarrhea-colored. And it shines all fucking day long. Makes the grass look garment-dyed. The sea and the sky are the exact same shade of blue. You don't need a gas mask to go outside. The Connellys think I'm psychoid, 'cause every time it starts raining, I run outside and turn cartwheels in the front yard. You can't enjoy water properly in Dublin. Mary followed once and took off her clothes, like me, before Anne Marie came and dragged her inside. That was when I plummed to the fact that they don't like nudity.

That's not the only reason they think I'm psychoid, though. I spend half the time up in my attic room, remembering images into the transformer and transmitting them back to Dublin. Sometimes I print them out here, in full color. Yeah, real Art at last! But they'd never understand why I get so excited about pictures of them and their animals and the beach. Speaking of which, I don't eat carrageen, or dillisk. These are seaweeds which they dry in horrific great mats on the rocks above Silver Cove. And I won't touch their favorite pudding, a milky jelly made out of calves' feet. I adore the calves. They're so gawky and clean, running after their filthy old mums. Big John and Jason killed two of them last week, and Anne Marie made their stomachs into cheese. I said, "Why don't you kill that fat ugly cow with the shit on her tail instead?"

"The calves are tasty *because* they're so precious, Aidan lad. Sure we love their big brown eyes same as you do." She is a tall woman with copper-red hair and a heavy bosom. She laughed at me and her tits jiggled like water balloons. She, Big John, John's mother (who is older than I thought people ever got), Jason, and Jason's little wife Michelle laugh at everything I do. So do the Conroys and the Woodses who live up the boreen, whenever they see me. Doesn't make me think: "Right-ho, I'll fetch you one later," though, like it would if it was Kev and the lads,

'cause me and the Conneelys are just so different. They wouldn't understand what I was fetching them one for. Think about standing on the beach and yelling at the USA—wouldn't do you shitload of good, would it?

Doubleday pays my keep in city-made goods that the Gardai would never allow into the Gaeltacht, like plastic gadgets and fertilizer and flavor enhancer. As long as the payments keep coming, that's enough for the Conneelys. Mary is the only one who likes me. We spend ages together. Today she was teaching me how to milk the cows: she closed her hands over mine, squeezing, stroking. Incredibly strong fingers—not that I know many other twelve-year-old girls to compare her with—and calluses on the palms. Remember her platinum hair hanging in my face. I have been doing lots of images of her. Purple Beard loves them.

Thinking of that, I couldn't bear how close she was to me. "Okay, I've got the hang of it."

She moved back. I tried, of course I didn't get it, the cow snorted and shuffled away, and that set her off. She sank down against the stall partition and cried with laughter. "Ah, Aidan, where have ye been livin' that ye don't know how to fetch your daily milk?"

"I don't think there's one cow in the entire city of Dublin," I said. "But I know the formula for synthesized milk."

"What is it then?" She had to know. She squatted at my feet and drank up everything I could remember from secondary school biology. Don't think she remembered a word of it, though, because before I finished she was moving to the next cow, calling, "C'mere, I'd better teach ye proper, or how will you live when ye're travellin' back across the country to where you came from?"

I sat down on the milking stool. "You ought to live in Dublin. You could go to school. You're bloody intelligent, and your mind's going to waste out here. The Gaeltacht's beautiful but it's not the real world."

"Ye'll change your mind about that soon enough."

I shot a glance at her. Porcelain teeth hooking lower lip, hair swinging, coarse linen dress hiked up above scabbed knees. She is just hitting puberty, very leggy.

"You an me've got different ideas about real."

I took a deep breath. Milking-shed smell of warm milk and cow and straw. Darkness in the corners, big, dusty square of sunlight at one end. Remember.

"Will you show me a picture o' Dublin, Aidan?"

"I'll make one and show it to you after supper."

She hooked back her hair, jerked her head for me to come there. I squatted beside her, and she pressed her lips to my cheek. "You got to now. I'm after kissing you, see. 'Tis a promise."

I had to get away after that. Went up to my room, sorted through my memory banks and picked a picture for her of Kev and Sam and Daz dancing their heads off to Wherenow in my room. Daz's girl'd set up a horrific lightshow: strands of crimson and black and white that wrapped themselves around anything moving. That night the vid unit fell out of the wall 'cause we were stomping so hard, and I had to work my arse off afterwards to pay the reinstatement. The lads sniggered every time I saw them 'cause I was missing all their calls. Me and Eileen were heading for our final crash and burn, so she wasn't there. I fell asleep watching the lads snogging with their girls on the settee.

Remembered it onto a sheet of holoplastic, and spread it on the flags in front of the fire.

This time the Conneelys didn't laugh. "So here's what the cities look like inside," John said.

"One tiny bit of one of them, mister," I said uncomfortably.

Mary asked in her husky nighttime voice, "Are ye after visitin' Galway, Aidan? 'Tis near us."

"Loads of times. All the cities are joined up, anyway. I've a pal works the underground circuit in Galway."

"Me dad's visited it. He went to see it afore we were born."

"Really, mister?"

"Sure ye can stop this mister nonsense, ye've been here three weeks now." John gazed into the rafters, one side of his face scarlet from the heat of the peat fire. He is a big, powerful-looking man, but there's something wrong with his lungs which makes it impossible for him to do heavy work. He has straw-like fair hair, patchy puffy skin, and a tattoo on his left forearm which says Anne Marie. Difficult to tell what he's thinking—difficult to tell when he's thinking! "I took a trip to Galway 'fore I married Annie, to demonstrate my manhood, like."

Anne Marie laughed comfortably and began to patch a pair of Jason's trousers. (All the men wear these—they're a loony baggy sort of hose.)

"Aidan, lad, 'tis like walking into Hell. Ten miles before ye get there, the trees lose their leaves. Seven miles away, the grass turns grey, then black, an' at five miles the earth is bare, just the butt-naked ground with little scraps of stone walls and tarmac everywhere. The sky is yellow. Queer black stuff is fallin' from the air, like God has burnt a sheet o' paper and is crumblin' it between His palms."

"Shush!" said John's mother sharply from her nest of blankets by the grate. "Name o' the Lord in vain!"

"Sorry, Mam. Then—they ye start to see little spikes growin' on the horizon a long way off. Ye're gettin' scared now. Ye think about turnin' back. But then ye think about your Anne-Marie, and her dad that's goin' to give her to the Conroy lad unless ye prove ye're the better man. An ye walk on. It begins to rain. An' by God, the drops that splat on the back of your hand are charcoal-colored, and they leave pink stains that ye can't get off no matter what ye try.

"At last ye get in among the spikes. An they're great tall chimbleys made o' brick and stone, with byres with no windows all around

them. Aeroplanes and helicopters buzzin' overhead like bees. Not a man to be seen anywhere. There are pits in the ground that ye can see, and some ye can't until ye nearly fall into them. And shtuff that smells like sheep-dip bubblin' away in the bottom, full of junk and bones and rags."

Mary shivered comfortably. Chin on hands, clean pink fair-haired child, bet she's heard it a hundred times.

"Come nightfall, you see little lights blinkin' on the walls without onybody to tend them. An the sky ahead o' you is bright pink an' orange. An' the size on the rats and the cats that scamper and hiss! And the ugliness on em!" John leapt half out of his chair, twisting his face into a devil's mask. I nearly fell into the fire. Mary giggled. "An ye turn back, even though the buildings are gettin' thicker, and ye think ye hear human voices at long last. Ye turn back. Ye try all the broken-down cars until ye find one that's got some petrol in the tank. Ye guess and ye meddle, until it shtarts, and ye drive away from that place. When the car gives up the ghost you get out and walk through the fresh green fields and the pink dawn, towards home."

John clapped his hands together, and sagged back into the basket chair. Mary let out a little sigh and got up from the hearth. She glanced around at her family; none of them were looking at her. She sat down on my knee. "So what d'ye think on that, Aidan?"

Recklessly I put my arms around her and my head on her shoulder. "I knew the industries existed. Outside the suburbs. But I didn't know what they looked like. So *that's* how they keep you Gaeltacht people from wandering into the cities...and us from wandering out."

I held her tight, trying to control my shivers, but she was as stiff as a board and it felt like she was shivering too.

**A**udio: Kelly/O'Donnell 01/06/27:

Aidan settles crosslegged on the hooked rug in the middle of his bedroom floor and activates the hand-

held. It has no vid, but does have a high quality speaker. One minute thirty seconds later, dead on time, Eileen's voice fills the room. "How's it going?"

"Swimmingly."

"Good to hear. Is it safe to talk?"

"Everyone's at Mass." He grins and shifts his behind, basking in the shaft of sun that falls from the pocket-size skylight. "Got the house to myself. If you don't count the cats, the mice, the pig, and Princess the collie."

"You sound pleased with yourself."

"You sound suspicious."

"Stop farting around. Gerald made me set up this liaison because he knows how loony the countrysiders are, and he wants to make sure you stay sane. We know you're still *alive* because you're transmitting pictures. Fucking lorry-loads of pictures. You must be working night and day."

"No. They're just coming easily."

"I have something to say on that. But first, tell me what's happened. You sound like you're stimed to the teeth."

"Want to know the truth?" He smiles dreamily into the sun. "I'm walking around in a daze. I haven't had the green dream since I got here."

"I'm sorry, Aidan. I don't know about this dream."

"Oh Jesus. Well, I'm not crazy. It's just a dream. But I used to wake up every morning with dried spit on my cheeks 'cause I'd been grinding my teeth in the night. Used to stand on the transit with my eyes shut, imagining I was on a boat and I was hearing the waves."

"You *are* crazy."

"The bastard's been fucking me over ever since..." Aidan swallows, and forces himself to complete the sentence. "Ever since you and me broke up." A vivid bubble floating behind his implants, remembered not an hour ago: Mary, all prim and ironed in her Sunday dress, head rising like a flower from the square lace collar. A little lace tiara holding

down her hair; bare pink legs sticking out from under the primrose-colored hem. She poses stiffly in front of the byre wall. Aidan has told her he is a painter, and it is partially true: for the most part he has been remembering her in watercolor hues onto thick, dimpled paper.

Eileen says, "You know the series of pictures you've been remembering of that blonde kid? What's her name? Mary?"

"There's nothing wrong with them!" he bursts out. "What are you trying to say? They aren't kinky!"

"Calm down. Jesus, anyone who hadn't screwed you herself would think you'd been molesting the kid." Her voice spills like flurries of crackling dust over the pictures of Mary that clutter the bed, the floor, the dresser. "All I wanted to tell you is they're making you a bomb. Gerald's planning a full-color book of Mary images, maybe with some text: 'This Is Mary's Life' kind of thing. He thinks it may even attract people who stay away from print."

"Great. Great."

"You've got a fucking enormous royalty balance."

"Just keep channeling it into my account at the Irish Permanent." He runs his finger around the collar of his grandfather shirt. He has developed a host of tics to compensate for the absence of the vid screen. The shirt is a cast-off from Jason, growing weak at the seams; its tiny pealescent button flies off and vanishes beneath the skirting board. "Shit."

"What was that?"

"I lost a button."

Crackling laughter.

"I'm serious, Eileen! They're like five-punt tokens around here! Anne Marie will murder me!"

"Buttons! You want me to send some with your next drop of art shit? I could get ones with little holo scenes on them, or vidstars' faces cast in plastic—"

"No! Forget it."

The sun burns through the pane of glass that was manufactured, too thin and fine to last in some twentieth century factory. Aidan drops his forehead onto his hand.

"We may not be bringing the supplies for quite a while, anyway. To be honest, we're thinking three weeks. That'd be the twenty-first. The Gardai have lifted their heads out of the sand—they're wondering where some mid-level corporation operating in central Dublin is coming up with these pictures. Right now, they're monitoring all flights out of the metropolitan area too closely for us to risk it, but if we lie low, they ought to fall asleep again."

"Whenever. Whenever."

"It may be months. Don't you care?"

"No, to tell you the truth. I don't. It doesn't make any difference to me whether the pictures are getting bought or not."

"That's not true."

"How would you know? You're not an artist."

"Neither are you."

"I am, here."

"Something's wrong with you, Aidan."

"I don't miss the lads. I don't miss my social life. Or stim, or nico, or booze, or even music. Jason plays the pipes like an angel, Mammy brews a wicked pot of tea, and I remember pictures. That's enough."

"I know you, Aidan Kelly. You're lying. We slept together, remember? Your dinky little implants are chock-full of pictures of my body."

"Thank you, Eileen. I'm blinking."

The transmitter slips in his sweaty hand; he put it down on the carpet. Naked white toes clench and unclench on the rug. His head jerks.

"I'm blinking a certain sequence. I am paging through the banks from 2018 to 2022. Erasing those images. Thank you for reminding me."

"That's impossible!" She sounds frightened. "You can't erase your own mind!"

"You're a corporate child, Eileen. You don't know anything about being a Camera. Jesus, there's so many pictures in the world, and we record so many of them without even *meaning* to, every so often we

have to wipe the slate clean. Or we'd go lunatic. The ones we remember spontaneously are the ones that mean a lot to us, and in those cases, the pictures replace our natural memories of the events. So when they go, the memories go too." His voice slows down. Each word is a translucent drop. "I am forgetting you, Eileen. All the best nights. All the times that meant something to me. They're gone. Blank."

"Aidan!" Her voice is a cry. "It won't do any good!"

"It's over, Mizz O'Donnell."

"Wait!"

"I'll pick up my supplies on the twenty-second, three weeks from now."

He thumbs off the radio. The smell of his sweat chokes him. On the ridgepole of the byre, a rooster crows. Five minutes' walk away in Silver Cove, the sea chews over the pebbles, going out.

#### Image:

A stony strand, sheltered on the south by a high, brown headland, curving north out of sight. Here and there, sea-smoothed outcrops rear from the shale. A jumble of whitish, rounded boulders, home to seaweed-fringed tidal pools, separate the beach from the grassy slope. Cowpats spatter both grass and stones. The sky is a fleecy ceiling of cumulus; the sea grey-green; in the bay, white horses ride for ten feet and subside. The waves are so gentle that man and child can skip stones on the water. "Sixteen!" Aidan brandishes his fist in the air.

Mary's high, wild laughter is the cry of a curlw. "I only got two."

"You're courting a dip in the sea, young lady."

"Sure, but you'll have to catch me first!"

She takes off along the shore, flying on bare feet, clunky cowhide shoes left at home in the closet. Her hair streams behind her like golden plumage. Unused to running on the pebbles, Aidan falls behind. At last he stops. He rakes his fingers through oak-colored hair; shakes his

head fiercely; massages the hot, dry ache of overload in his implants.

#### Aidan's audiojournal, 21/06/27:

Oh my God. Where can I begin? It's all been brewing since the day I arrived, like a bad keg of booze. Maybe this morning, when I was standing in the low white-framed doorway, watching them climb into the donkey cart to go to church. Today was Corpus Christi. Mary jumped out, ran back and asked me to tie this bit of ribbon round her arm. I unbuttoned her sleeve and fiddled with the knot. Remember the fine, blonde down that sheens her suntanned skin. When my fingers brushed the linen pleats on the side of her body, my heart started going double time.

She told me off for being so clumsy. "Doesn't matter, though, as long as 'tis done." And she darted back to the cart.

What was I supposed to make of that? My brain was whirling, just from having stood so close to her. Went up to my room, plugged into the transformer and remembered. golden hair. Lace streamers. Grey eyes rimmed with clusters of fair lashes. Mushy crap, no single image.

Didn't make the liaison with Eileen. Since I erased her, talking to her has become a drag. She's just a plastic figurine, stuck in my heart as if it was a lump of grease, an unattractive black-haired woman with a vindictive streak. How the hell did she get in there in the first place, I wonder?

Anne Marie, me, Michelle, and Mary worked in the kitchen all afternoon preparing the Corpus Christi feast. The Woodses and the Conroys came over. We ate on trestle tables in the yard while the light was still good. There was a dead calf—yeah, another one—and pots of new potatoes, and fresh-baked bread, and the peas and tomatoes that I picked in the veggie garden. And mugs of potín. I was way gone by ten, which was when Big John and all the other adults were getting started. Jason and Michelle count as adults, obviously,



but the rest of the kids were supposed to wander inside at this point.

Not Mary. She was a live wire all the way through supper. Anne Marie had to tell her off more than once. Now she started bouncing up and down on the bench, counting under her breath. She caught my eye and I laughed out loud. Anne Marie lost her temper. "Get to bed, ye little witch. You're after makin' me drop three plates this evenin', and I've no mind to break a fourth over your head."

"Can Aidan come tuck me in?" I choked on my potin. She went on innocently, "Thomas and Sharon are tellin' ghost stories in the kitchen, and I want to go up to my bed. But I'm scared, Mam."

"I don't mind walking her upstairs," I said. "Really I don't, Annie." Hoped Anne Marie couldn't see me blushing in the twilight. The sun hadn't set, but it'd dipped behind the rise that blocked our view of the sea.

"Lamb, are ye sure?" She sounded bothered without knowing why, and if she hadn't already had more than a few glasses, she might have blown the whistle on us.

"Sure I'm sure." Mary flounced away from the table. "Sure, Mammy...." She hopped, turned a cartwheel, hands smacking the bare ground. "Hey Aid, remember the time we did gymnastics in the rain?" The eyes flicked to her mother. "When we took our—"

"Holy Mary Mother of God, child! Where's your decency? Aidan, love, take her away where the poor neighbors won't have to hear her mouth!"

Mary smirked.

"Come on." My heart pounded. "Bed time."

We circled the ghost story tellers in the red glow of the hearth so quietly that they never knew we were there. Remember the burning pink light that flooded through the narrow windows in the stairwell, making Mary insubstantial, a ghost printed on the wallpaper.

Remember, remember, remember. My head is packed to the fucking limit with images of Mary.

She eased open her bedroom door, grinning at me when it squeaked. "Come on in."

Whatever I'd hoped, I hadn't been prepared for this. Stunned, I rested my forehead on the peeling paint of the lintel, looking down at her. "You don't know what you're saying. You're drunk. You've been sneaking swigs out of your daddy's potin mug."

"Ah come on. You an' me are true lovers. We oughter share a room."

"You shouldn't be saying that. It's wrong." I searched for a word she'd understand. "Dirty."

"What did we ever do that's dairty?" She thrust out her chest, arms akimbo. "Tell me that, mister."

"We...." Milked the cows. Skipped stones on the beach. Picked over the carrageen. Played chase on the hill in the long summer evenings, and maybe I held her down a bit too long.... Where's the harm in that? Where's the harm? She reached out and wrapped strong little fingers around my hand. Blue eyes looked up at me trustingly.

"C'mon. You don't have to be scared, Aidan."

The room was dark. I wished I could see her. The way she looks is what makes me adore her, I thought. Aesthetics. She is my muse.... Then downy bare arms went around my neck, and soft lips crushed mine, and she must have been kneeling on her bed because her bony knees squeezed my thighs together. I grabbed her. I couldn't hold myself back any longer. I just gave myself up. Her heartbeat throbbed fast under the skin of her throat and I licked it. "I love you. I love you. Mary...."

"Sure an' I know," came the amused whisper. "Haven't ye been moonin' around after me like Jason was after Michelle last year? An I've decided I love you too. That's why I handfasted us."

"You what-ed us?"

We were lying on the bed. I held her inside the curve of my body. While she talked she wriggled out of her dress.

"Handfasted to marry. 'Tis like engagement. This ribbon I had ye tie on me means we're handfasted lovers, and we have to marry some day, with me in a white bride's dress an' a rose in your buttonhole. Sharon Woods told me about it. It's true."

"Oh baby girl, I don't think any man could resist you." I circled the bird-boned arm in my fingers, slid upward until I touched the ribbon, fastened tight around her little bicep. "But what is your mam going to say about premarital sex?"

"Pre-what-it-all? What's that? You mean kissin' and huggin'? Sure there's no harm in it! I kiss me mam and dad all the time! An me and Sharon Woods slept in her bed with no clothes on once, just like grown-ups, an her mam never told us off...."

That should have tipped me off. I don't know what the fuck I was thinking. Maybe she was kissing me at the moment, and I couldn't think straight at all. Jesus Christ, I'd never felt so much electricity between me and any grown woman. Does that mean I'm a kink? She's a child with two lumps on her chest! A baby! She didn't cry when I penetrated her, even though she wasn't ready for it, she had been in a sort of terrified trance ever since I ran my fingers between her legs and whispered, "Don't move, baby, this will feel good...."

I tried to be gentle. It wasn't enough.

Afterwards, when I collapsed on top of her, unable to move, the stars shedding phosphorescence on us through the skylight, she began to cry.

Image:

Aidan neglects to turn the audio-journal off as he in his turn begins to weep. He cannot shed tears. Silent sobs rack his body as he perches naked on the foot of the bed, face buried in his hands. His palms still smell of sex; he tears them away from his face in disgust. The little girl sleeps twisted across the bed behind him, a frown on her face.



Aidan's audiojournal, 06/22/27:

Collapsed into sleep before dawn. When I woke up, daylight flooded the room. Blood drops stained the sheet in front of my face. Mary was gone. The house was full of a foreboding silence.

I dragged on the clothes from last night and went down to the kitchen. Every surface was cluttered with debris from the Corpus Christi feast: potato peelings on the table, breadcrumb crumbs on the hearth, a bone in Princess's teeth. The collie growled as she worried it, lying under the table. Big John, Jason, and Michelle stood in a protective group around Anne Marie, who held Mary on her lap. When I came in she turned her pink-stained flower face towards me. My heart clunked like something had dropped inside. "'Twas all my fault, Aidan! Mam won't believe I made ye do it to me, but I did, I handfasted us, an it was my fault I didn't know what it meant!"

I suppose for a minute I'd hoped they would all be too decorous to say anything.

"Ye've ruined my daughter." I couldn't believe that steely voice was coming from Anne Marie's lips. Her hands were locked so tight around Mary's back that one whole finger was white above the wedding band. "We should never have trusted anyone from inside the poisoned lands."

"Ye will leave," Big John said softly. He shifted, and I saw he and Jason were both carrying twentieth century firearms. "Or die."

"And God love your friends, they can take their fertilizers and their plastics and your dead body and shove them up their behinds!"

"Or," Mary said into her mother's chest, "or, Aidan, you an me can marry. I'm of an age to be marryin'—an' I'd be glad if 'twere you..."

"Oh Mary, you don't know what you're saying, baby!" I was shaky on my feet, and the trembly hope in her voice made my legs give way altogether. Luckily a high-backed chair was in the way. I dropped my head back against the carvings. "John. Anne Marie. Jason. I don't blame

you. Anything you want to do to me, I'll take it. I'd want to kill me too, if I was you..." I looked at Jason. He stared back rubbing the stock of his rifle.

"Ye deserve it," he said.

Mary turned her face up to her mother, eyes dripping. "Ye can no kill him. I'm going to marry him! Please, please, please—Jason—"

"Ye've bewitched my children, city dweller," said Anne Marie. "Ye're the divil himself."

"If 'twill make Mary happy, ye may live." John sounded as though he didn't believe I *could* make Mary happy.

"But though ye rest here," said Anne Marie, "an' ye reclaim yerself a hundred times, ye'll never be a son of mine. Never."

"Mister and Mizz Conneely?"

The top half of the door swung inward, letting in the harsh midday sunlight. Eileen's head came through the gap.

"Are you there? Have you seen my... well, well, well. Mister Kelly. Where have you been these past three weeks?"

I sat there blinking. When I decided that she wasn't my imagination, I said, "Piss off, Eileen."

She laughed out loud. "Piss off! Our pilot came to make the supply drop on the twenty-first and you weren't there. You haven't been keeping the liaison schedule, so I had to come, special, 'cause Gerald was afraid you'd gone off the deep end. Piss off! I flew a hundred and forty miles in a copter with no vid unit, endangering my career, just to make sure you were alive..."

"Excuse us, miss." Anne Marie's voice dripped ice. "We would be greatly obliged if you would take your friend away with you."

"No!" Mary wailed. "Mam, we're handfasted to marry, you can't do that! I love him!"

Eileen came in, her back pressed to the wall as if she thought she was in danger. She must've spotted the firearms. "Aidan. What is going on?"

"Mary," I said, "I love you. Remember, whatever happens, I love you like I am never going to love

anybody again. I haven't ever said that out loud before—that's how you can know I mean every word of it."

"The Gardai have plummed to us," Eileen said out of the corner of her mouth, as if she thought the Conneelys wouldn't hear. "To tell you the truth, I couldn't care less whether you're alive or dead. But if the Gardai get hold of you then the whole corporation's in jeopardy. *That's* why I came. Where's your stuff? The copter's waiting on the hill."

"I'm not going." The life rushed through my body. It was like learning how to fly. I stood up. "I'm going to marry young Mizz Conneely instead."

Mary gave a glad shriek, wrrenched herself out of Anne Marie's arms and hugged me around the chest.

"Don't you *understand*? If you don't come back today, that's it. You'll be stuck out here. We'll never be able to get a copter out of Dublin again, not in the next few decades. Contaminating the Gaeltachts is a serious offense—"

I held Mary tight, rocking. "If I come with you, Eileen, that'll be the end of my art. I'm not going back to industrial spywork. Not now that I know the real reason I became a camera man." I kissed Mary's blonde hair. "*This*."

"Don't worry, I'm taking him with me," Eileen said to Anne Marie and John. "Been hitting on your little girl, has he? Doubleday extends its sincerest apologies. Here." She fished in the pocket of her jacket, pulled out a slim white book and handed it to Mary. "With the corporation's compliments."

The gift fascinated Mary into letting go of me. "That's me. My face." She flicked through. Me. Me. Me. What does it say, Aidan?"

I was all set to read her the mushy text, with corrections (they didn't even have the details of farm life down right) when Eileen said tactlessly, "It says, more or less, *Aidan Kelly is a trillionaire*. Isn't that amazing? This book, and a few other things with your face on them, have made him his fortune. He'll never

have to do spywork again. That's the gift you've given him—you can think about that when he's gone, little girl."

"Wait." Anne Marie snatched the book. "He's been makin' his fortune off our Mary? Sittin' under our roof, eatin' our meat, usin' her for his own ends, and now he crumples her up like a rag? Oh very nice. Very lovin'. My little child...." Eileen held out her arms.

Mary paid no attention. Her wet gaze accused me. The possibility, wrong though it was, must never have occurred to her. "Ye—ye only wanted to paint me, Aidan? I thought—I thought—"

"It's not true!" I couldn't deny it fast enough. In my head I was smashing Eileen's face into the stones. "That was just in the beginning! I loved you because I painted you. Now I want to paint you because I love you."

"Ye don't love me! Ye're lyin! Ye made your fortune and now ye're leavin' me!" She was weeping. She pulled away and ran back to her mother, but Anne Marie stood like a piece of furniture, not responding, punishing her for her disloyalty. Mary collapsed on the floor. The rest of her family surrounded her as if she were a comrade fallen in battle. Jason glared at me over their heads, fingering his trigger.

"Mary." I shoved Michelle aside and dropped to my knees. The flagstones were freezing. "We're handfasted, remember? We're going to get married. You in a white dress, me with a rose in my buttonhole—"

"Ye don't love me at all!"

"We'll have our own cottage. I'll paint and you'll model. We'll both tend the garden...."

"Come the fuck away," said Eileen.

Image:

As the copter rises the sea falls to the west, a rumpled glittering, edged with yellow-grey strand. The Gaeltacht unrolls like a patchwork blanket, all shades of green, spiky blots of grey at the intersections for churches.

The two passengers in the cabin are separated by a gulf of congealed exasperation. Eileen slumps down on her neck, boots on the bulkhead, watching a sitcom on her portable vid unit. Aidan stares blindly out of the window. Uncombed, wrinkled from Mary's embraces, limbs askew, he is concentrating intently. His eyelashes flicker at top speed. "Page through memory banks for 05 and 06 of '27," he whispers under his breath. "Erase. Erase. Erase. Erase. Erase."

One by one, the golden-haired children blink into nothingness. Blink. Blink. Blink. Erase. Bony young hands clench on pail handles, legs flash on the beach, hair flies as they leap from boulder to boulder. Erase. Erase. Silent laughter as their feet slip into tidal pools. Erase. Not even a flash of primrose-colored fabric is allowed to remain, and thus vanish the images of Connemara. All of them, until not a breath of green is left, not a whiff of wind, not a whis-per of surf.

He stretches. Smiles a cold vague smile.

Nothing left but a tow-headed figurine cast in plastic, an unpleasant child perverse to the point of being impossible, all the good bits erased, embedded in his heart like a thorn. He cannot imagine how she ever got there. ■



# THE WOMAN WHO BLEW UP THE WORLD

John A. Sentry

Illustrated by Kandis Elliot

*She was very angry. VERY angry.*

It was quiet in the valley, and my aunt and I lived alone in a simple cottage for many years, until I was twelve. We had a vegetable garden, and fields of commercial crops; we had a creek, which chuckled to us in various voices at various times of the year and shade trees, and blue skies much of the time. Birds sang, and all kinds of small animals, and occasionally large, visited. Being vegetarians, these we delighted over, or ignored, or occasionally had to chase away, as circumstances dictated. We were quite happy, I thought.

My aunt taught me out of many forms of computer devices, which were all around us. I saw no reason to leave our cottage; I never even thought of it much. So it goes.

In the fall of the year I was twelve, they came. They came from the city in an aircar, two constables in their bright uniforms and the mayor's deputy in his fine suit. My aunt went out to meet them, with something in her eyes I had never seen before. My aunt was always a grave woman, in the time I knew her, not given to much merriment. But she was not without quiet mirth at times, as when the kettle, forgotten by me, boiled away on the stove, or the dormer window banged in a sudden gust of wind and I jumped. I loved her very much, and she loved me. I had never seen her with the look of mingled sorrow and anger with which she faced the mayor's deputy.

"Amanda," the mayor's deputy said to my aunt, "We have come to take you away and try you."

My aunt sighed. "For what, Mr. Deputy?" I couldn't imagine for what. But my aunt seemed to know; she just wanted it spelled out.

The deputy licked his lips. "For blowing up a world."

"I have been living here for many years."

"The crime—pardon me, the alleged crime—took place many years ago, and far away."

"And what gives you jurisdiction?"

"Somebody's got to take jurisdiction!" The words burst out of the deputy's mouth. "It's been decided. In a City Council meeting. And rati-

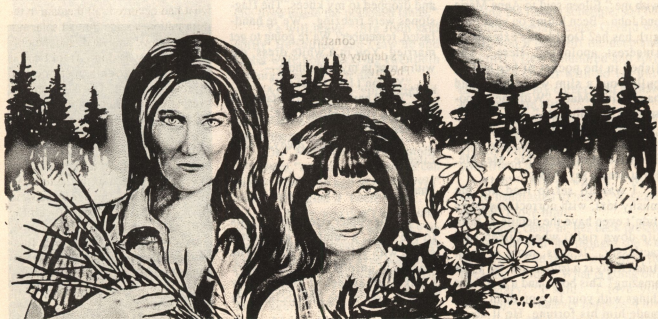


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fied by the Confederation of Human-Settled Planets. You *will* be tried!" The deputy was red in the face.

"I see." My aunt looked thoughtful. "And if I blew up a world," she said ruminatively, "what's to prevent me from blowing up this one?"

The deputy grew white at the corners of his mouth. But he said: "You're on this one. Even assuming you could gather the resources somehow, it would be suicide." He looked at my aunt hard.

My aunt made a short laughing noise. "So you think I did it, but you don't know how. How can you possibly get a conviction?"

"A world, Amanda! A whole world, with people and creatures and continents and seas! A world that now is a lifeless chunk, without an atmosphere, with a huge wound, spiraling away from its sun, perturbing the other planets; perhaps even hitting one of them!"

"Does seem drastic, doesn't it?" my aunt said without much emotion. "But you can't prove anything."

"We'll prove it! Come with us!" the deputy cried, and the constables raised their rifles. They were robots, hard-wired, and nothing could change their programs. "Come with us or die." And my aunt said, "Well, I'm not ready to do that just yet," and waved a hand at me. "You follow us. I want you to see," she said, and I nodded. I was very troubled.

My aunt was a fine-looking woman, and when she was younger she had been magnificent. She was one-fourth Choctaw and I think she had some Negro blood, and part South Carolinian, and she had hair as glossy black as glossy black could be. She was tall, and full-breasted, and in her Service uniform she was absolutely devastating. I loved her beyond all reason, and expected to be just like her when the time came, because she was not really my aunt, she was my mother, and I was not a usual child, but was her clone. She had begun to explain these things to me as I came to an age where it was important. In the early days, I was just a child, and lived in

our world without thinking much about it; I swam in the creek and played in the fields, and simply inhaled all the peace around me.

"I took to calling myself your aunt because it cut off some questions about where was your father, etc. Most important, it wouldn't lead anywhere near as directly to the question of whether you were a clone or not," my aunt said to me over the hearth one night when I was ten. "A clone is much more intimately mine than a child with two parents would be," she said, ruffling my hair, "and that is nobody's business. A clone is the exact duplicate of her parent, with all her hereditary traits, and that is what I want for you, Amanda. Now, let us open the Modern History program and start in on tonight's lesson."

I loved her. Oh, I loved her.

The city was magnificent, curving around a serene bay on the blue sea, the buildings white and broadly spaced, separated by tree-lined avenues and parks. I took it in open-mouthed, never having seen one, and with little to do since my aircar was locked onto the government one. We followed each other down to an avenue, and then to a building which was the municipal building, and parked in the building garage. I walked behind the official party, taking in the white concrete around me, watching my aunt, who walked between the constables, with the mayor's deputy going ahead.

The city was the largest on the planet, holding several hundred thousand although most people stayed at home and did business with each other by comlink. Still and all, there are certain things still done face to face; some only by custom, which is the category the trial fell under. It was held in the municipal building, and took several hours. I sat nearly motionless in the courtroom, one of the few live spectators, though of course the trial was watched by uncountable trillions throughout the Confederation.

The room was quite nice, painted in pleasing colors, with plants and

vines abounding, with a brook, and singing birds.

"Do you deny," the attorney said to my aunt, "that at 1:14 AM on May 11, 3045 A.D., local time, you blew up Earth?"

"I blew up Earth?" My aunt looked at the attorney and shrugged.

"Yes, precisely. You were on a ship in orbit around the planet, and you blew the planet up."

"What leads you to that conclusion?" my aunt said.

"The records indicate that at the time specified, you were in an agitated condition, you were operating a link to Earth, you said, 'Then to hell with all of you,' and the planet blew. To be precise, a hole opened in the mantle, exposing the molten core. An immediate explosion allowed a number of tonnes of mass to reach escape velocity. The atmosphere was also stripped from the planet, and the planet itself lurched in its orbit. Your ship was already in hyperflight, and you consequently escaped, but none of the other citizens of Earth who were on the planet or in its immediate vicinity did. You came here, discarded your ship, assumed an identity as a citizen on this world, and have lived here ever since. Is that not true?"

"That is a ridiculous scenario."

"It was not until the records were reconstructed that it became clear what had occurred; all the data in the information storage for that solar system had to be analyzed, and the only reason that was done, frankly, was Professor Fredrick's post-doctoral research project. Until yesterday, everyone had assumed the Earth disaster was a natural phenomenon."

My aunt looked at the attorney and sighed. "So until yesterday there was no indignation; nothing but sorrow, and not much of that, either. All the survivors of the accident were alive and reasonably well—all the trillions of us in the Confederation, busy with our tasks, some of us finding new planets constantly and setting the terraformers to work, most of us just doing the uncountable numbers of human tasks, the way we always did. The Earth was only one

of scores of human planets, and, frankly—"My aunt raised an eyebrow. "Not many people gave a damn about it anymore. Not all that many ever gave a damn about it, that didn't live on it."

"That is neither here nor there."  
"But it is true."

The attorney thundered: "Do you deny that you somehow did it?"

"Ah. Somehow. How did I do it?"  
"Did you or didn't you?"

"Well now," my aunt said, getting up and facing the wall in which the judge was located, "as to that, I would like to make the following statement."

"Go on," the judge said before the attorney could speak.

"Thank you." My aunt began in a flat voice, but it gathered color and energy as it went on. "I was born on Earth, as you know. When I was six, I punched a boy who was pulling my braids. I knocked him down. The teacher flew into a panic and shook me; she said girls don't punch. She said girls should learn to behave themselves." My aunt took a breath. "When I was ten, my stepfather molested me. When I cried and said I would tell, he hit me; he said a mixed-blood like me should consider herself lucky for the loving attention of a purebred man. When I told my mother, she hit me for lying. She knew I was telling the truth. And she knew I knew she knew the truth. So she hit me again."

"Your Honor," the attorney said in a weary voice, "Do we have to listen—"

"It does no harm," the judge said mildly. "Go on, Amanda."

"When I was seventeen, I joined the Space Service. I worked hard, and I was smart. There were incidents during my cadetship, but I was used to those. Then when I was nineteen I was invited to a convention of junior officers. Then it turned out the convention was intended to provide male junior officers with female diversion. I have lost count of exactly how many of them violated me. When I complained to senior officers, I was advised that I was, after all, a good-

looking female, and what did I expect?"

My aunt looked at the attorney and the judge. "Was I expected to cut off my breasts and scar my body? Was I supposed to walk with a limp and drool? Would that have made me their equal?" Her voice was rising now. "And when I got a ship, finally, and it was a one-person scout, while male officers with half my skill got destroyers or cruisers, what was I supposed to do? Disappear? Take my scout and wing away, lose myself in the depths of space, never to be heard from again, as most scout pilots do? Why? Because I was a woman? Because I was a good-looking woman? Because men are praised for being handsome and soldierly, but beautiful women are somehow suspect in any role that calls for competence?" My aunt was shouting.

"Your Honor—"

"No, no, let her go on."

"I asked them that, calling in from space to Earth. And the voice on the other end asked if I'd gotten my panties in a twist." My aunt was suddenly quite calm. "And, yes, the world blew up."

"Good God!" the attorney said in a hushed voice. "You—you wiped out women and children as well as men. You wiped out people who'd never—"

"Yes. Because they *were* all in it; even the ones who knew nothing about it. Because they supported a system, and the system had as one of its aspects the thing that made me hurt. And it came to me that sweet reason would never work; that sweet reason was a part of the system. It came to me—well, never mind." My aunt went back to her place and sat down. She put her head in her hands. "It didn't really do any good. The system was exported long ago. It is still with us. And yes," she said, "I did it."

"I thought so," said the judge. "But how?"

"How?"

My aunt's voice suddenly sounded in my head. *I do not have long, Amanda. Listen. I am a sport—a mutant. So are you, of course. In a*

*few months, perhaps less, you will begin to bleed. And when you do, certain other changes will take place. You will realize, then, that if you wish you can take hold of things with your mind and move them. For instance, you can find the center of the world and move it. It doesn't take much: a few ripples, back and forth; they build up, become stronger. In a few passes, the weakest part of the mantle goes, and there you have it.*

"How?" she said aloud. "How?" She picked up a flowerstand and threw it at the judge. "How?" she said in a louder voice and kicked at the attorney. "How?" she shouted and struggled in the arms of the constables. She stood motionless and glared about her. "Go fuck yourselves!"

The judge shouted: "We cannot have a virago!" And the gun flashed, and my aunt was dead. Disintegrated.

I have gone back to the valley and the cottage. It is perfectly serene. And I never grow angry. It seems to me that my aunt—my mother—took things too hard. Most certainly she took a step a person in her right mind would never consider. Of course, she was a bit different from the ordinary person.

I wonder what it is like to menstruate. ■



# EARLY FALL LATE FALL

Warren Brown

Illustrated by Susan Van Camp

*The Earth was emptying, and so was he*

Bingham paced the periphery of the fall shaft parking lot, the prominent thought in his mind: how rough were the patches of rust on the once-smooth handrail. It occurred to him how easily this had always happened to him, this placing the most unimportant thoughts in the foreground of his mind, even while desperate matters crushed in on him. There were no particularly desperate matters now. Maybe it was how he kept alive through the years; by removing himself from the proceedings, by letting decisions make themselves. *Make a decision*, Susan used to say to him. Well, he'd made one. He rubbed his hand on the rust.

His attention shifted now from the roughness of the railing to the fluorescent yellow lettering of the sign on the gray-white marble of the building. Letters eight feet high

announced: Fall Shaft 21; and in smaller letters below, instructions on what to do and who to see.

Bingham smiled a little at this. "I am one of the people to see," he said aloud, quietly to himself.

The Spring wind gusted through the mall park then, sending dead leaves from the previous Fall into the air, turning them into miniature cyclone clouds chimneyed up toward the building roofs with their mute antennae and dead aircraft warning lights.

Bingham remembered the park when it had been alive with people: business types from the corporations, a platoon of the homeless seeking warmth in the southwestern sun. There had been law offices, brokerage houses, architectural firms, engineering organizations, machinery of city government, halls of justice, a

library. It had all centered around the mall.

An empty Coke can did a jittering, sun-flashing roll from somewhere, bouncing on the cobblestones so painstakingly laid in imitation of a nonexistent courtyard of a nonexistent European city.

Bingham imagined himself as the publicist for the mall, dishing it out even before the cobblestones were laid, inventing the reason for them to be there: "A Taste of Merry Olde England!" or "In the European Tradition," he might have written. Both phrases equally specious, equally condescending.

In retrospect, a whole lot of civilization seemed pretty silly. But then, a lot of things seem pretty silly when there's a rock half the size of your planet falling towards you faster than the fastest jet plane. It

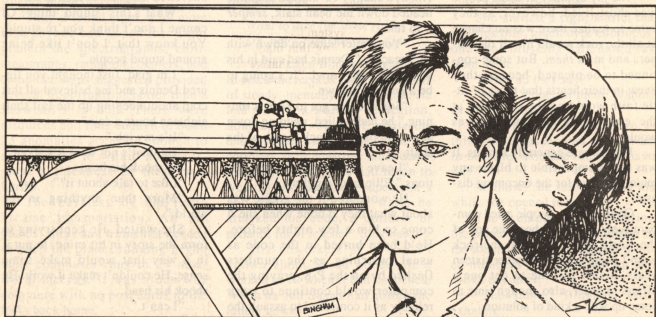


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puts things in another light. At least it did for Bingham.

He started wondering about the rock itself in thought. He imagined if the rock could think, it might be thinking: I am the biggest surprise of all time for eight billion people. In this the rock would have been right. Before it had been picked up by the orbiting observatory, not many on the planet had ruminated that much about a rock that big. Certainly not many had imagined that a rock that big could be hurtling through space on a collision course with Spaceship Earth. (Although astronomers pointed out that it wasn't really a homogeneous "rock," the name stuck and hung with a kind of macabre affection.)

True enough, there had been books about worlds colliding, books about giant meteors smashing into the planet and making mayhem. But it had never been a matter of large concern to large numbers of people. And then, there it was, big as life; surer than taxes. Once discovered, it engendered the usual emotions: doubt, denial, anger, fear, even acceptance. A fair number of people were even pretty pleased, since it confirmed what they had been saying for years, that men and women were up to godless no good and weren't going to be allowed to get away with it forever.

The joy of many of these people was short-lived, however, as they came to realize there was no chance at all the rock would hit all the sinners and miss *them*. But some continued to be pleased, because they knew in their hearts that those of little faith would not be rewarded at the end, while they themselves would.

Bigots were generally furious. It was nearly impossible to blame any minority group for the oncoming disaster.

On the whole, people acted comparatively decently about the end of the world. For one thing, the rock wasn't going to hit for another sixteen years, plenty of time to get one's affairs in order, also enough time to come up with a kind of solution.

Bingham went inside the building that was home to Fall Shaft 21, walked through a wide corridor, his steps clicking on the worn marble. He stopped at the steel door marked Shaft Supervisor and punched his entrance code. It seemed a little silly to keep it locked, but it was his job—and he had nothing better to do. Well, one thing, but that was a matter of steady work and time. It was almost done.

His office was neat and clean, albeit with a certain lived-in look. Since Dennis and Ellie had taken the fall a couple of years ago, he hadn't seen any point in making the daily commute to his apartment building. It was one thing when there was company at the end of the day, but the shaft building's backed-up, perpetual power source made for a lot easier living than the makeshift generator arrangement at the apartment. He wished sometimes he'd gone with them. He'd never told them about Susan. He wondered what they'd think. He wondered what *she'd* think.

He remembered them at the slide, bundled in survival suits, strung everywhere with ration packs, seeds, medicine, optic disk readers stuffed with whole libraries. Ellie had had freckles and red hair, Peter Pan in middle age, off to Never Never Land. Dennis was her Captain Hook, a shaggy ex-marine amputee headed down the bean stalk, *semper fi fo fum*.

"You better slide on down with us, Preacher," Dennis had said in his soft, Arkansas drawl. "It's going to be a lonely old town."

"Somebody's got to keep it running," he had replied, nodding down at the impossibly black mouth of the shaft.

"Leave a note with the instructions," Ellie said, giggling.

He wondered if the giggle was about what they'd done when she'd come to him a few nights before. He'd been buried in the code as usual, watching as the numbers flashed by on the P-8, praying the computer would continue to work reliably as it continued to assault the

encryption algorithms built on its sophisticated brothers and programmed by people whom Bingham feared might just be too smart for him.

She had come up behind him in the dim light of the control room and put her hands on his shoulders. He'd nearly toppled from the chair.

"Kinda jumpy tonight."

She had on denim overalls and a T-shirt, smelled of soap and ginger and herself.

"You scared me. You shouldn't sneak up on people that way."

"Aren't many people to sneak up on." She looked at the numbers flashing down the screen. "You spend a lot of time on that machine, Preacher."

He shrugged. "Got to keep the slides running. Wouldn't want to send you and Dennis in different directions."

"Uh huh."

She sat in the chair next to his, considering him with pale blue eyes.

"Do you think I'm really stupid, Preacher?"

The sound of a big bike erupted from somewhere in the city, roared off, echoing in the canyons between buildings.

"No, what do you mean?"

"That's Dennis. Off to look at some old haunts for the last time."

Bingham blanked the screen and swivelled his chair to look at her.

"What's this 'stupid' thing? Of course I don't think you're stupid. You know that. I don't like being around stupid people."

"I'm glad. Just thought you figured Dennis and me believed all that crap about keeping up the fall shaft eighteen hours a day."

"It's my job."

"But that's not what it's about."

He shook his head.

"Like to talk about it?"

"More than anything in the world."

She waited. He kept trying to form the story in his mind, to put it in a way that would make some sense. He couldn't make it work. He shook his head.

"I can't."



She nodded.

"Dennis couldn't talk about his arm for a long time. Not until he figured out how to ride his bike with that hook." She put her arms around him and kissed him hard on the mouth.

"Could be the last time for a while, Preacher," she'd said. He'd thought about Dennis's skull tattoo, a knife in one eye, "Better dead than led" scrolled on the skin beneath it. But part of him knew it wasn't anything to worry about. Then he'd thought about Susan. It was a funny sort of good-bye.

"Why'd you two wait so long?" he'd asked.

"Hell," Dennis had replied, "had to give 'em time to build a Harley plant. Maybe later, preacher," he'd yelled as they slid, hand in hand, parafoil hunchbacks, their shouts muffled by their now-zipped breath-hood hoods.

It had been a sort of solution. Find some stars like the Sun, find some planets like Earth. Find a way to get there. The first artificial time/space anomaly had already been tested in the year of finding the rock. The scientists had punched a light beam through it and read what came back. With enough sending and receiving, there was a chance they could find planets where people could survive. But not much of a chance.

They'd found eight, a lot more than anyone had hoped for. Eight planets the spectrographs, chromatographs, radiation counters, and computer maps suggested provided several opportunities better than a snowball's in hell. There were resources and time enough to build 23 anomalies accurate enough to drop people to within an atmosphere's thickness of these new Earths.

The business of old Earth became transportation. All the planes, ships and trains not needed to keep the planet running began their commuter runs to 23 new-world meccas. It was a one-way commute with no post cards to the folks back home.

*How do you choose*

*How do you choose*

*When you got the blues...*

The lyrics and voice of Red Dawg and Electric Mississippi sang out of the boom box on Bingham's desk. He watched the CRT intently as his program scanned the records of the recording, statistical multiplexer.

*How, oh how do you choose...*

The answer was, you choose randomly. When you've got eight billion people to send on a one-way ride to one of eight unsure destinations, you randomize. If you're extremely lucky, one-eighth of eight billion will find a new home where they can breathe and eat and reproduce and be safe from rocks in the sky. If some of them are lucky they won't materialize too high or too low in the atmosphere, or too far out in the ocean, or at the bottom of an unclimbable canyon or...

It was never a chance Bingham had liked. Every effort was made to see that families were not split up. Otherwise destinations were secret. Toward the end it got a little crazy.

If your birthday was on the eighth, you wanted destination eight; if you had three children, you wanted destination three. It was a life-and-death numbers racket with no sure winner. But the choice you got at slide time was,

*Want to take the same ride*

*Oh, baby, take the same slide...*

It had taken Bingham eight years to crack the records code, eight years of steady, mentally taxing work. He had made it a work of dedication, done at night, off shift, while the endless lines had marched by in the corridors, their departure order determined by lottery. He had taken to wearing his black jump-supervisor's uniform even off shift while he attacked the code, a uniform of penance for "Preacher" Bingham.

His coworkers at 21 hadn't known about Susan either. He'd worked at 19 when it had happened. When he and Susan had gotten the lottery news.

"It's cold, Bing," Susan said, placing an icy hand on his cheek, snow from a freakishly early storm melting from the cuff of her woolen coat in drops that threatened the papers on his desk.

"Thanks for sharing it with me," he said, taking her hand and rubbing it between his palms.

"The other one's cold too."

"Then I'll rub that one too."

With one thing and another they found themselves in the small bedroom of the apartment.

"You smell like wet wool."

"You're a romantic devil."

"It excites me."

"I can tell. Cover us up. It's cold in here."

They lay together afterwards, the lights of the stadium a block away making prismatic patterns in the window frost. He ducked his head under the blankets to kiss her between her small breasts.

"Your glasses, you goose."

"The better to read the secrets of your mysterious landscape."

"You're not observing Mars."

"The better to read these, then."

He tried to make it sound funny, pulling the pale green envelopes with their hot-orange side stripes from under a magazine on the nightstand.

She stared at him. "Oh. You should have told me."

"You distracted me."

She smiled a tight smile, her full lips thin, green eyes enormous, one hand brushing dark hair away from them.

"What do they say?"

"Haven't opened them. Wanted to wait for you."

"You have to wait for everything. Without me you would wait to breathe. You are lucky to have me."

"I know," he said, opening his while she opened hers.

They compared them, folding the papers and overlapping them so the identical blocky computer printed numbers on each lined up one above the other.

"The same," Bingham said, exhaling.

"Did you think they wouldn't be?" she replied. Relief in her voice too.

"You know how things can get screwed up, new marriage and all."

"My dear, goofy baby. You could have saved worry by opening these when the mail came."

"I know," he said, holding her close. "It's hard for me to make decisions."

The day they were to slide was cold; it was an early fall in Michigan, with the nights already dropping to freezing and several snows having already come and melted. Fall Shaft 19 was in Ann Arbor, installed by the physicists and engineers inside the University of Michigan stadium. He and Susan had held hands at the top of the slide, feeling lost in the thousands of people around them, voices of the sliders echoing as all around they took the fall.

They were waiting to go, watching as some heavy machinery raced down the cargo slides, parafoil coverings striped brightly in the cold sun.

She had pressed the diary into his hand.

"If I don't make it," she said.

The warning horns had sounded then and their slide master had motioned them to get ready. They'd embraced and tried a clumsy kiss through the breathing hoods. Then they'd slid. They'd slid and Bingham had grabbed the safety rail. She had screamed, he remembered. Screamed his name.

He'd wondered a lot over the years what had stopped him. Cowardice? That seemed a reasonable answer. Maybe. He just remembered thinking, "No, I do not want to go." For all of being easy-going, letting others make the choices, he'd made that one. What was the old saying? Act in haste, repent at leisure?

They'd known each other for only a few months, he and Susan. It was only after she had fallen into irrevocable blackness that he'd realized how much he'd loved her, only after reading the diary she'd pressed

into his hands that he'd realized how much she'd loved him.

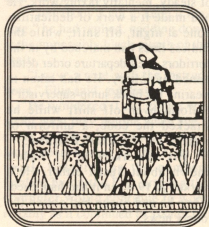
The code on the disks from Fall Shaft 19 was broken at last and Bingham knew which destination the statistical multiplexer had chosen for Susan and the child he had not known she carried.

Now he sat in the vast slide room, once an indoor stadium. The dozens of other slides lay gleaming and empty. He was the only game tonight. An auspicious night, for the sky no longer held two moons. The rock, as mysteriously as it had appeared, had broken apart the night after Dennis and Ellie had slid, its destruction lighting the evening sky. The monitoring instruments could find no piece of it dangerous enough to threaten the planet. There would be a hell of a meteor rain, but no cataclysm.

Earth belonged now to those who had stayed: those Israelites who would not leave Palestine, those Palestinians who would not give it up: the Navajo, who believed their home in the mesas to be the center of creation, and those several thousands around the world who couldn't decide or simply didn't want to go, whatever their reasons.

The L-5 and Moon colonies filled to overflowing would have people glad to return to their Earth homes and help put things back together again. But Bingham would not be there to see them return.

He silently wished them all well, then hollered at the top of his lungs and slid down into the dangerous playground of the stars. ■



The cover on the opposite page was intended to show what Issue Number 8 would look like. Instead, it now shows what Issue Number 9 will look like. Issue Number 8 will now have a cover by **Jacek Yerka**, which inspired "Attack At Dawn," by **Harlan Ellison**. We will also, of course, have "Attack At Dawn." All this happened after we printed our covers, which explains why the confusion, doesn't it?

Actually, this happened when Harlan wrote a series of stories around Yerka paintings, because they struck him as extraordinary. Stories and paintings have been collected into an anthology, about which we will tell you more in Issue Number 8, which will have the **Jacek Yerka** cover, and "Attack At Dawn" by **Harlan Ellison**.

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**William Esrac** continues with *DANCE TO THE SUN*, in which a young superman, inordinately powerful but naive, enters into a new phase in his development at the hands of his less-talented and less goodhearted fellows;

**Paula May** contributes "AFTER THE WHIRLWIND," a tale of Palestine after the assassination of Yassir Arafat, postponed from this issue;

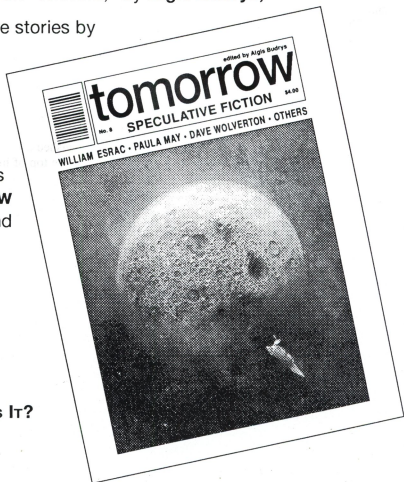
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Coming in the next few issues are stories by

**Ursula K. LeGuin**, **Norman Spinrad** and **Elisabeth Vonarburg**, the French Canadian prize winner, and many others;

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