

edited by Algis Budrys

tomorrow

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ELISABETH VONARBURG • WILLIAM ESRAC • MANY OTHERS



tomorrow

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EDITORIAL



Pretty soon, as things go, it will be January 1, 2001 AD, and we will be living in the Third Millennium. Some people who keep the Christian calendar do not know that. They are aware, for the most part, that another century is aborning—though most of them think it'll be with the advent of the year 2000—but they don't quite realize that it's not just another century. Not just yet, anyhow. By the time it gets here, the media hype will have gotten around to telling them, many times.

Like most media hype, it will not have told the full story, because it thinks that would be too complicated for the average person. For one thing, lots of Christian calendars don't agree with ours; the difference is approximately ten days, and most of Eastern Europe follows that "Julian" one instead of our "Gregorian." For another, the Jewish and Mohammedan calendars—and of course the Chinese and lots of others—are completely different, and have counted over 5000 years, at least.

So our Third Millennium, for many, either will not come at the conventional time or will not come at all. Which of course will make no difference to those who do believe in the Millennium at the "proper" time, and believe that something will happen—a trump will sound, the world will end, or both, or Christ will appear again, or the Antichrist will appear, or both—you name it, somebody believes in it.

My interest is more personal. On January 1, 2001 AD by the Gregorian calendar, I will be sixty-nine years and three hundred fifty-six days old, if I live. When I was born, life expectancy for a white male was seventy.

I have a pretty good chance of making it into the Third Millennium, and I have been aware, all my life since I learned to count, that this was so. That it will also be an anniversary with no special events is doubtful, but I think they will not come from Heaven. I think they will come from the actions of people who believe something about it, absolutely. I think we have a measurable chance, for instance—measurable, not big—that some clown with access will set off a nuclear device. Maybe more than one.

But I don't really think so. I have seen too much—Hitler, Tojo, Stalin, the Cold War, and what have you—and we have muddled through. I think the Third Millennium will find us getting by, as usual; reeling, of course, from short-term problems we mistakenly take to be long-term trends; still convinced that we are somehow better than the guys in the next valley; absolutely convinced we don't really deserve to live, and absolutely hanging on to life like grim death.

I hope to finally die with a grin on my face. And you?

— Algis Budrys

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tomorrow

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MECHANICAL ASSISTANCE

Carolyn Nicita

Illustrated by Bob Hobbs

They met in the Marriage Press, and lived happily ever after

"I think you should have sex with her first, before you ask her to marry you. I want to see what happens in the bedroom." Pete, one of the guys on my engineering team, had told me that before I left work.

I thought that was disgusting. Completely out of line. Besides, I wasn't going to propose to her; not yet. The diamond I'd ordered hadn't even arrived. It was coming in from another asteroid-turned-colony orbiting the Sun, along with some engineering supplies I needed.

I let go of the elevator tow rope with the robot arm attached to the workstation I wore. Just for fun I executed a slow barrel roll through the microgravity as I hissed down the hall. I checked the new workstation I'd hung on the bracer extension of my workstation. I'd told Deborah I was

just coming to take her on a date, but I was also going to surprise her with this present. The machine was top of the line, not like the obsolete hardware Deborah used. She still typed with a typing stick on her forehead.

I passed a section of recently repaired hallway. A corner of the metal prefab wallcovering was sticking out into the hallway. Somebody could slice himself on it. Being quadriplegic, I might have caught it anywhere I couldn't feel, from the neck down, and bled to death before anyone got to me. If you found something dangerous you were supposed to make sure it got fixed.

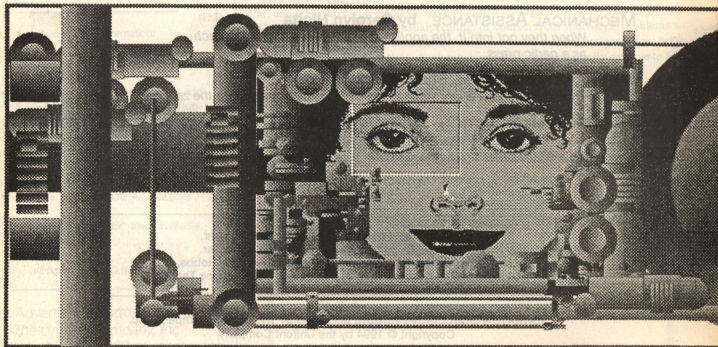
I touched a switch with my tongue. This flipped up the transparent holographic screen. An alphanumeric keyboard appeared on it and I eyewrote commands. I preferred

eyeswitches to voice-activated controls. Pete, for one, liked to sneak up behind me while I did a personally important or potentially embarrassing project using voice control. Then he'd yell "Emergency shutoff!" I tried to avoid that.

The robot arm, tucked in front of my workstation like a clawed bird wing, extended itself. The tip of the bracer extension caught the metal's edge, allowing the arm to bend it and tuck it under the adjoining metal.

That ought to be safer for now, I thought. I sent a message to the maintenance crew as I continued floating to Deborah's.

Deborah would love this, I knew. I'd fitted seven people with new workstations, even though I'd only lived in the DuPont Colony for the Handicapped for six months.



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About half were the standard units for the pharmaceuticals people. The others were custom jobs like this.

I thought about Pete again. I was going to get married the right way. I would propose, then if she said yes, we would worry about sex. I hadn't the faintest idea how, but we were going to do it right or not at all. None of his perverted sexual schemes. Not for Deborah.

The tube opened into a cul-de-sac. Everything looks like a womb in this place. Attached to the walls were two apartment complexes, looking like fraternal twins. The one below reminded me of the jungle gym made out of tires that I used to play in on Earth, before my motorcycle accident. Deborah lived in the more austere complex above.

I pushed the baseball-shaped doorbell with my shoulder. I was trying to get out of the habit of hitting things with my head. I waited uncomfortably while the camera scanned me. Was I ready? Waste bags emptied; medication taken; and yes, I had shaven. After a moment, the door opened.

You could tell Deborah had lived here a while. Her furniture was arranged spatially. Newer people feel more comfortable with light at one end and furniture at the other.

Deborah was snapped into the couch harness. Anna, the resident assistant, was braiding her hair, fluffing out the sides. Deborah's legs probably didn't look that great. I didn't know; she always kept them covered. But she had great hair. And eyes. I loved to watch those eyes.

I glided over to a place where Deborah could see me more comfortably from the harness, and floated face-up relative to them. Floating upside down is considered rude. Anna lets me know things like that. Although Anna had several problems and varicose veins, she could maneuver freely in microgravity. But she hadn't moved here until after her husband had died. Now she insisted on being everyone's grandma.

"What's that?" Anna asked.

"This is for you, Deborah. I made it."

"Me?" I think Deborah said, and widened her eyes.

Anna butted in. "She can't take that, Kevin. It's too expensive."

I felt like a door-to-door salesman. "It has an eyewriter, a visual control where you look at the letter on the screen you want to type and it will type it for you. And I remembered to put the Greek character set in, so you can still write to your family. What do you think?"

She looked away and said no.

"Look. It's just like mine. Only mine has different features, ones that I use for engineering. This one's better for your proofreading stuff. It will help you and also our office. You can move your eyes well, so it should work." I flipped up the holographic screen on her workstation and demonstrated. "See? If you look at a letter for more than x amount of time, which you can adjust, then the letter is entered. And later I can get you a robot arm to attach to the workstation."

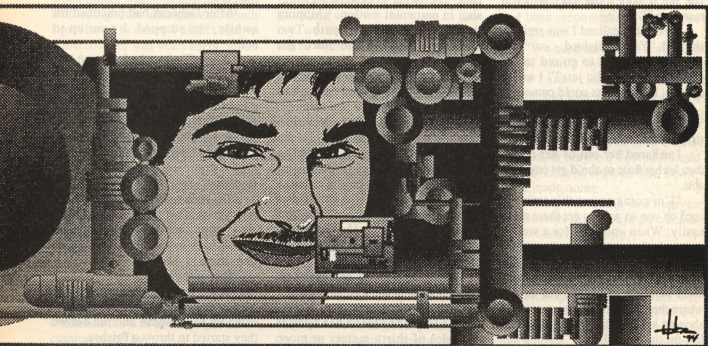
She watched it, glancing away, then back, like a diabetic watching a taffy-pulling machine.

"You'd also have a voice synthesizer..." I typed in the words and "...like this," came out in a glassy alto, "so that you could type out what you want to say, and the speech synthesizer will say it for you. You'll be able to talk more easily to people."

She tried to speak, then, in protest.

Anna butted in again. "Nobody's complained before."

"I'm not complaining now. You do an excellent job, even with this old equipment. But you must have to stay up all night, researching for us and correcting those kids' papers.



This will save you hours of work." This was not how I'd wanted it to go. I wanted to give it to her, and watch her smile.

"The colony can't afford it," Anna said. "Your department has a reputation for going over budget."

Who did Anna think she was, trying to shelter Deborah? I'd been trying to become independent ever since my motorcycle accident on Earth. In fact, I became a mechanical engineer partly to better my chances to come up here.

"I bought it. And I custom designed it for you, and everything."

"You could afford that? With all the toys you and Pete buy?" Anna said.

"I had some money left over." I felt insulted.

"No," Deborah repeated.

I couldn't stand it anymore. "Take it. It's an engagement present." "It is?"

I nodded. I'd just blown the proposal to pieces. Anna was there and everything.

Deborah looked confused. She said something I finally understood as "You want me to marry you?"

"Yes." I wanted to take it all back, to do it like you're supposed to do it. But she looked so happy.

"We'll put it in our family budget. We'll work it out. Ok? Will you marry me?"

When she realized I was serious, she said, "Yes," delighted.

"Do you want to go out to the park and try out the jets?" I asked quickly, before Anna could comment.

Deborah gave an angular nod. With Anna's help, I got the jets strapped on Deborah.

I ushered her out of her room, then let her float so she'd get comfortable.

"I'm going to put this training cord on you so we can get there more easily. When you head for a wall, I can apply force in the opposite direction."

I maneuvered out of her apartment building, out to the cul-de-sac where there was a little more space. I showed her how to use her chin and lips for the controls.

At the end of the hall we reached the intersection with an elevator and the usual irritating camera. A sign read, *FORWARD: HAL'S DINER, ATRIUM, ROOSEVELT PARK, REST STOP, CHIMERA APARTMENTS, MAIN TRUNK. REVERSE: LIBRARY, BERNIECE'S PRESCHOOL, RED STAR APARTMENTS, VIEWPORT SIX.* A call button was under the sign, in case the ones we wore on our bodies had broken.

The elevator cable was slow, like a ski tow rope on a bunny hill. Everything went slow here. People took their time, and most needed to. During the busier times, and nearer the main trunk, you had to wait for passengers to pass until there was a spare hook. Here all the hooks were empty.

The park was one of two in this quadrant of the colony. It was used by picnickers and an occasional model-airplane test pilot, but it wasn't too crowded at this time of day.

We entered the circular portal to the park. It looked like another womb. The walls were covered with foliage. Vines and fruit trees grew there, hydroponically planted in fiberglass containers.

Three kids, waiting out their rheumatoid arthritis, were on a bungee swing near the surface of the park. The swing worked like a slingshot in perpetual motion, whipping the rider in a long oval path. Two kids were helping the third get velocity.

Four men were lounging in the park, Pakistani pilots who had crashed or been caught and tortured. They came occasionally to watch Pete and me fly our planes.

First we practiced switching from forward to reverse thrust. After a few more lessons on direction, I maneuvered back. "Go ahead and practice now," I let her off the cord so she'd free-float, and gave her verbal directions from a comfortable distance.

She looked at me, and then settled her chin in the cup and made a few halting practice moves.

At first she closed her eyes at altitudes of thirty meters or more

from the ground. Once she closed her eyes at five meters and snagged herself in a tree before I could get to her. But she got used to it. She experimented, and I watched. Her hands in her sleeves moved like two fish peeking out of sea grass whenever she changed direction. I wondered what her hair would do if Anna hadn't braided it. I had to look away for a moment. I was very hot. I looked back just in time to tow her away from one of the eight globes that sent diffused daylight into the park.

The Pakistanis came over and started calling out directions in Urdu.

An older lady had entered the park to give her parakeet some exercise. This wasn't quite legal, due to the litter problem, but Deborah enjoyed watching it zoom back and forth. After about twenty minutes, the older lady took out her net, and I and one of the pilots grabbed its ends and helped her catch the parakeet.

Other people came into the park, kids trying out their model airplanes, lovers taking a stroll, one man showing another the stump of his arm—I caught fragments of conversation about land mines in Mali. The life-guard robot was now kept busy, towing people out of the center space in the park.

After Deborah had practiced for awhile, she stopped. I went up to her.

"Water?" she asked.

"The drinking fountain?"

She nodded.

I towed her to the one near the park's exit. I hated drinking from public fountains. You drink from a nipple, then when you're done, the nipple contracts and is rinsed and sterilized.

She took a drink, then looked at me. She started typing something. "I—" then changed her mind and headed back toward the park to practice more.

Two people I recognized from the jungle gym apartments, a pharmaceutical worker and her father, came up to Deborah and me before they started to throw a Frisbee.

"Hey, congratulations," the father said.

Goody, I thought. Now everybody knows.

I brought up the time on my screen. We had been practicing for two hours. Now the day shift had let out. The park was getting crowded, so we left. I took her back to her apartment.

When I got her inside, she looked at me again. Maybe she was waiting for me to kiss her, something engaged people were supposed to do.

I looked at her smooth, round cheek framed with hair, one earlobe peeking out, but didn't feel it was right to touch her. "Call me if you need help with the eyewriter."

She grinned—I don't know why.

"Hey, you were really good up there. You were fun to watch—I mean...."

Her grin broadened. I could feel my face get hot, so I said goodbye and left. Should I cancel our engagement? I wondered. How would we ever go through with this?

I lived in a quadrant of the colony near the industrial parks where I worked. While riding on the cable elevator, I called Danny, the resident assistant at my apartment, to see when dinner was. Our apartment had a boardinghouse arrangement, which I preferred because I didn't like to cook. Dinner had been early, since half the apartment was Jewish and it was Friday. That meant they'd have it for me in a box.

After getting dinner, I glided toward my apartment. I switched on the apartment lights from my workstation, so they would be on when I got inside.

I fed the fish in their spherical tank. The aquarium's light was mounted against the wall, so the fish looked as if they were standing on their noses.

I turned to face the TV wall, and switched it on with my workstation. Since we have a forum democracy, open forums take place every night. I watched the text of this night's discussion scroll by.

—What if he poisons himself?

—But he's deaf!

—What does that have to do with anything?

I opened my dinner box and looked inside. Danny had packed bagels and some fishy things. I considered turning away so my fish wouldn't see what I was eating, but knew that was silly.

What was the topic? I wondered. I cross-referenced it. Ito Mura, a chemist, had submitted a proposal for a patent. He had his own project going for some kind of horticultural chemical.

—This colony is taking this free enterprise stuff a little too far.

—Yes. Capitalism will make us a weak colony.

"Yeah, but if he's doing his job, what's wrong with it?" I said aloud. I thought that was a valid comment. I decided to add it to the conversation.

—Is he doing his job at the lab? I typed.

—Yes, I am.

—Then it looks like those who object are just trying to get to the idea first and steal the patent. I returned.

Several angry replies scrolled down the screen.

I switched it off with glee.

After I ate, I went into the bathroom and used my robot arm to take my workstation off. I felt more naked without that than without my clothes. Using my mouth, I put the workstation on a hook near the toilet and the bathroom's control panel. I removed the waste bag, flushed the waste, then took a shower, adjusting the water temperature by looking at my workstation on the wall. I soaked. What a useless body. I wondered how many years it would take before doctors could perfect nerve regeneration. The technique probably wouldn't work on me anyway—with my luck I'd probably be allergic to the neuro-growth hormone they were using.

I got myself back together and turned to the TV on the wall for entertainment, to get my mind off the day. A locally made series,

Together for Life, was on. I was familiar with the characters, but only watch it occasionally. I brought up the catalog of movies on my desktop—physical-therapy sessions, college courses, science fiction, mysteries, both local and Earth-made—and found an action-adventure movie I hadn't seen. It must have been transmitted recently from Earth.

I watched the movie. I looked at the guy playing the hero, his pumped-iron body in a bathing suit, driving a hydrofoil in pursuit of smugglers, and I felt utterly incompetent.

Next day my department, Environmental Engineering, had a staff meeting.

"Passageway fourteen off the Perlman hallway has a turn that's too sharp." Wayne was distributing projects. "Some people are crashing into the wall. Others can't maneuver at all, and during rush hour, traffic gets backed up there. Kim needs to work out an alternate design for that corner."

Yeah, I thought, definitely a job for the Ergoman. Kim was the ergonomics engineer, our specialist on the mechanics of the body and how it interacted with machines. He'd designed parts of his own body. Since he has no hands, his feet had been reconstructed with opposable thumbs.

"We need a stronger air filter in 11-B. That's by the new fiberfill plant. I know, installing is Maintenance. But they don't have any filters that strong, so they want us to design one."

"They're going to need a series of them, or maybe a Venturi," I said.

"Good, you work on that, Kevin."

I made notes.

"Next: Mr. Kreig can't operate his toothbrush. He says the vacuum keeps blistering his lip."

"Tell him to turn down the suction," Pete said. "What is he, retarded? Send him back to Earth." Pete was an amputee from guerrilla warfare in Georgia. His partial lack of legs and scarred face make him look like a pirate. Some girls like pirates.

As the conversation between Wayne and Cecily at the other side of the room went toward toothbrushes, Pete took the opportunity to ask, "How are you doing with your sex life, Marchaud?"

Marchaud got a bit embarrassed, but said "Pretty good. No baby yet. But we've got genetic clearance to have one." Marchaud was the junior member of the team. Both he and his wife had spina bifida, lower extremities paralyzed. Marchaud looked my way. He carefully, tactfully explained that he had a good sex life; they had problems sometimes, but nothing they couldn't adjust to.

I found this discourse interesting until I realized Marchaud kept looking at me. Pete obviously put him up to this. I got angry. "Are we done, Wayne?" I asked. "Is there anything else on the agenda? I want to get to this project."

Wayne adjourned, and I went to my office to look at filter configurations.

Later, Pete entered the office. "How did you and Deborah make out on your date?"

I could feel myself getting flushed. I tried to concentrate on the filters.

"Thanks," he continued, "now that you bought Deborah her presents, our funds are used up and we can't soup up our ultralight. There go the races."

"What do you mean?" I said. "You have money. Why don't we use your money for once?"

"Good. Now that you're talking to me again," he grinned, "what did you think about Marchaud? Didn't think he had it in him, did you? You know, a lot of people do it here. You really should have taken at least one of the sex education courses offered during orientation. What are you going to do when we have to customize somebody's bedroom?"

"I'll leave it up to you and your vast knowledge in that area."

"Come on. You can do it. Your autonomic nervous system will take over for you. Doesn't it, sometimes?"

He was right. It, the erection, was small but there.

"And you can always do it other ways—oral sex, electromagnets. I could lend you a few of my toys."

I thought of Deborah looking at the exhibits in the art gallery, then I imagined her Velcroed to the wall with frightened eyes while I worked her over with my tongue, and I felt nauseous. "I can't do that kinky stuff, Pete. I couldn't do that to her."

"You could have a prosthetic erection. Or how about wiring your body to a microchip and getting the computer people to write macros for the different movements needed. It would take practice, but—"

"Oh, yeah!" I yelled. "Why don't we just forget it and program a robot instead? Then I can watch. It would be the same thing!"

"Kevin, you are the biggest tight-ass I have ever seen."

Pete can be a good friend occasionally, I had to remind myself, then tried to remember when. "Okay, look. If the occasion ever comes up, I'm going to have sex normally or not at all, because that's the only way I feel good about it."

"Aha. You admitted it."

"Pete!" I yelled.

"Look, I'm only doing this for your own good."

"For the sake of argument, suppose we did want to do it?"

Pete listened seriously. "I suppose we could work up a squeeze cage apparatus. Something connected by universal joints, to swivel for several angles."

"But I don't know what she likes to do. I don't even know if she wants to make love."

"Ask her."

"She won't tell me." Actually, I didn't know if she would or not. But you're not supposed to ask the girl, you're supposed to know what she wants.

"So, why don't you ask that nosy RA about it?"

To get rid of him, I said I would. When Pete still wouldn't get out of my office, I told him to turn off the lights when he was done, and I left.

Anna wasn't the type who would respond to a direct question. I

didn't know exactly how a bribe works, but assumed that if I was nice to Anna, Anna would be nice to me. I came bearing gifts. And my tool kit.

"I'd like to apologize for being so pushy last week," I told her in a voice imitating Pete on the make. "Maybe I can help you fix something?"

"My centrifuge is busted. You know, the Cuisinart? Nice of you to come over."

"How's Deborah?" I asked. That sounded stupid.

"Since yesterday? She's fine. Deborah talks about you all the time."

I started on the Cuisinart, but did not get a lot of information from Anna. At the moment, the conversation just wasn't right. By the time I'd gotten the food processor running, word got around the complex that I was there to repair. And I had to fix things for five other apartments—toilets, ripped wallcovering, clogged air vacuums, and earrings that the owner couldn't reach. That night I got home late.

"Tightass," I told myself.

When the diamond came I tried to call Deborah, but she didn't answer. So I wrote her a letter and sent it. Five minutes later she called me via the phone on my workstation.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"With the workstation, I mean."

"Very well," she said. "Thank you very very much. It's wonderful. I can't get the phone to work right, sorry. Can I type well enough with the eyewriter now, or do you think I need more practice on speed? How do I sound at that end?"

"Really good. Excellent." That's the most I'd ever heard her say at one time, and though she still went twice as slowly as speech, she only halted in a few places as she searched for the letters and syllables.

"Would you like to go out and do something formal?" I asked. I hated formal occasions, but women liked being officially proposed to at a fancy dinner with candlelight. Since I'd already proposed, at least I could give her the diamond ring.

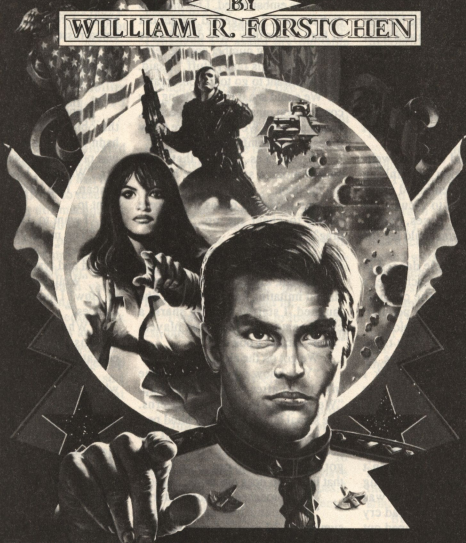
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She said she'd like to go, and next day, after shift, we went out.

The restaurant had been decorated Earth-style, the way fancy American restaurants still try to go Continental. The dining room was cubical, the chandeliers cemented to hang downward. The red velvet wallpaper made the white lace slipcovers on the table stand out.

Waiters guided us to our tables and helped us get strapped in, asking if we were comfortable. One brought Deborah a feeder and adjusted it for her. I told him I'd use my workstation. I had thought we'd be alone a little more.

She was wearing the watch I'd given her last month. Did she really like it? She was so nice, I couldn't tell.

We ordered, and while we waited they brought wine in drinking bulbs, the kind that reminded me of those bulbs they used to vacuum the phlegm out of kids' noses, except these were clear so you could see the liquid.

A paraplegic couple danced in the corner, twisting over each other's heads. Deborah noted the clothes. Judges' robes were getting popular; warm brown was a typical color.

"That guy dancing over there shot himself so he could live up here," I told her. I don't think I would have done it. When I was twelve I had taken my older brother's motorcycle out without anyone's permission or knowledge. No helmet. Of course I'd wiped out, flipped the bike into a ravine. They didn't find me for eight hours. Not being able to get up and limp home was almost as bad as seeing my dad cry at the hospital. If I hadn't wiped out like that, I think I would have been satisfied with Earth. Of course, I'd never been in a war.

I usually love braised rabbit, but couldn't enjoy it very much because Deborah was having trouble eating her asparagus.

Then, from across the room, this kid catapulted a blob of creamed corn with his fork. It slowly glided across the room towards us. Because the decor is so gravitationally orient-

ed, I kept expecting it to travel downward in an arc to land on the floor, and spread out in squashy ooze. But it kept sailing straight for Deborah.

"Duck!" I yelled.

But she couldn't. She was attached to the table. The creamed corn hit her in the neck and shoulder.

Two waiters rushed to Deborah with hand vacuums and profuse apologies.

I was embarrassed. I bet *she* was embarrassed. I suggested we get out of here. After they were done I gave them my billing number and we left.

"Forget this fancy stuff," I said. "Do you want to go to the observatory? We could see if they're doing any construction outside, look at the stars, or something." We'd been there a few times; it was comfortable.

"Good. Yes. I'd like that," her speech module said, and we headed out the door.

She looked at me as if she were trying to cheer me up. "Want to drag?" she asked.

To try to take the pressure off the moment, I gunned it. When we got into the hall, I let her catch up. Then I started imitating her maneuvers. She laughed. I started playing shark, a chase game we sometimes played. "Shark attack! Look out!"

We got on the elevator.

"You know what job just came in?" I said after we got hooked up. "We're going to do sound patterns. The signal buzzers that this blind person uses are driving the rest of the people in the complex crazy. So we got Estelle to help out. You know, that lady who does electronic music."

We approached the observatory.

"It'll sound like an electronic symphony," I said. I didn't know if the residents would like it or not.

"Can you do smells?" Deborah asked. "A blind person might like new smells."

I'd never thought of that. I decided to ask one of the DuPont chemists.

I wished we could see a big Moon out of the observatory window. You could see the bright dot of the closest asteroid-colony, just to the left of where the solar collector ended. But all the stars looked great.

Well, this is the moment, I thought. I had my nerve, so let's do it.

I showed her the ring, and without saying anything, maneuvered to put it on her finger.

She smiled. "It's beautiful."

I love her smile. I went to kiss her. I spurted my jets, moving towards her. She craned her neck above the workstation. My kiss landed on her forehead, slid down her face, and ended on her Adam's apple. I rolled and backed away, embarrassed.

She came after me, and we started playing shark again.

I slowed down and looked at her.

I thought about Pete's comment, the obnoxious one about sex. We hadn't really talked about that. This was probably a good time to reassure her. "We don't have to do anything, I mean, like have sex, if you don't want to."

"I want to. Don't you?"

"You mean you *want* to?"

"Yes." Then she looked concerned and typed, "Don't you?"

"Well, yes, but...then you want to. How? I mean, what are your preferences?"

"What did you think of the options they presented in the sex education course?"

The one I should have taken when I first got here. The one I didn't. But from Pete's talk, that must be perverted stuff. How did she know about this? For the first time the thought occurred to me, maybe she's done this before. But no, I know she would have told me a long time ago. She had said that her brothers and sisters would always tell her about their problems with their dates. Maybe she'd just gotten ideas secondhand, and I was still safe.

"Well, Pete—and I do too—have an idea, it's designing this machine, I mean, he says we could do it other ways—"

Two chemists in close-fitting white suits intruded into the privacy. One pointed to the solar collector, and discussed something about sunspots and chemistry.

I tried to keep my voice down. The amphitheater shape of the observatory carried voices very well, though. "What do you feel comfortable with?"

"You," she said.

I decided to pursue it. "Me?"

"You. No, I mean just you. Watching you with your toys. You're nice to be around."

An assortment of people could now hear us. We left the observatory.

"So," I asked, voice low, "what if we decide...."

"Whatever you decide is fine."

Great. I'd thought I was going to get out of it, but the responsibility had been placed on me again. Now I had to make this machine work.

A few evenings later I floated alone in my apartment, watching TV, waiting for eight PM. I had been frustrated in my efforts to research the design specs for this machine, or whatever it was going to be. Deborah usually researches projects for our team, projects like this. But this time, I just couldn't ask her. And I hadn't researched enough yet to know what I was doing. So I'd signed up for an intermediate sex education television class and was waiting for it to come on. I wouldn't receive the class unless I signed up for it, and I was not a hacker, so I couldn't bootleg it. I figured that since I'd had biology in college and read about it, I didn't need to take beginning classes.

At eight, I entered the class code, and the teacher came on.

"Good evening. This session, we'll continue talking about female sexual concerns."

Okay, I thought, this I can handle.

They discussed some technical stuff about the female reproductive system. The fact that spinal cord-injured women could still have normal babies was interesting, but not really useful. That women as well as men utilized testosterone, I'd already learned from my college biology class. Pete had said I could really give a girl a good time with a testosterone injection, except she'd even-

tually grow a beard. But, the information about the drug bisamide, that was new. Deborah took that medication for her athetosis. As a side effect it changed the arousal pattern of the female taking it. I hadn't known that. Unfortunately, the effect varied from person to person. Another unknown I didn't need.

"But what turns women on in the first place?" That's what I really needed to know.

When the teacher looked at me, I realized I'd asked my question aloud, and she'd heard it. "Class, Kevin wants to know what turns women on. Would you like to have a discussion about that?"

"Different things turn different girls on, Kevin, just like guys," a female voice came through.

I wished they'd stop saying my name.

"I like mystery, a guy with mysterious eyes," someone else put in.

"Pirates," one girl said.

"Does he mean physically, or what?" some guy asked, thick-tongued.

"Do you mean physically, Kevin?" the teacher put in.

I waited for them to lose interest, but they were obviously waiting for me.

"Well, yeah."

"What can she feel?"

"Everything."

"Well, then, you have no problem. Just stroke different parts of her body and see if she likes it. Remember that women take longer to become aroused than men. You have to be patient. Be aware of her cues."

"And practice makes perfect." The speaker giggled.

"None of that, Denise," the teacher reproved.

"Sorry for laughing, Kevin." Denise said.

"Does that answer your question, Kevin?" the teacher said.

"Yes, thank you." I bit my lip, trying to refocus my eyes and drop my heart rate.

She said, "You're welcome, Kevin."

After I'd gotten over my embarrassment, I turned on the design

module and started sketching the ideas I'd gotten.

The next few days at work I had to finish the filter project and a few others. During breaks I took all the ideas I was thinking about, and drew different possible designs. I discarded designs two, four and five—the one with a flywheel. I looked at the two remaining, but still wasn't sure. Either one could break down. She could choke, and they both looked uncomfortable. In fact, the press design could break bones if the clamp broke.

I wondered if it'd be worse to ask Pete about this or accidentally grind Deborah into hamburger on her wedding night.

I'd consult Pete. Only Pete, though.

I drifted into Pete's office. As I waited for him to finish dictating his paragraph about personal gyroscopes, I glanced around. The office was decorated in fur. When I first started working here, the decor had been leather, with chains for the harness restraints. Lately, though, he had wanted a softer look.

"I've got a couple of designs I want you to look at. It's confidential." That interested Pete. I knew I should have gone to Wayne.

I sent the design to his screen.

"Nice job. What are they?" he asked.

I told him and he laughed. I expected him to yell out the door, "Hey guys! Kevin's getting married! Look what we're making!" I would then strangle Pete with my robot arm.

But he didn't. He examined the designs. "Not bad."

I told Pete I took the class.

"I know," Pete said.

Doesn't everyone? I thought.

He looked at the first, one that resembled a nutcracker. The couple using it sits halfway between the hinge and the two ends, and the handles move slightly. "This is where Deborah sits? I think the first would be more fun. Yeah. This is pretty cute. Looks like a press. Garlic press for a Greek, right? But make the

seats moveable for different positions. Just in case you change your mind and want to experiment.”

I steamed.

“That one will probably work best. With both of these, though, I see two problems already. First, you will still need help getting into the seats. Getting out, you can probably manage. Second, you may not realize it, but penetration is a tricky business. Now dammit, Kevin, stop turning red and listen! I mean it, this is serious. I don’t see how you’re going to do it.”

“Well, I was thinking about this. Look at this swivel joint—” I highlighted it on the screen, “to move my seat.”

“Not going to work. You can’t feel, remember? What did the Ergoman say?”

Not Kim the Ergoman! That guy was like a bloodhound. He’d make sure the job was done right. He’d go and take measurements of Deborah, and interview at least ten women on their sexual preferences, if he hadn’t done it already, to file the information. Then he’d probably consult a few dozen people in my apartment complex to see if they knew my own preference.

Pete noted my silence. “Have you even consulted Ergoman?”

“I don’t want to. That’s, well, unromantic. An invasion of privacy.”

“Oh, so that’s your problem. That’s what this is about,” he said. “Why don’t you cut the macho act and do it right, go through all the right channels to get this developed? For Deborah.”

“I am doing it for Deborah. I want it to be right for her.”

“Then let’s do it right, okay?”

I had no answer to that.

Pete sent the designs to the Ergoman through his own workstation.

The Ergoman inspected the design and offered suggestions, which were translated from Korean into English by his workstation. He measured her height, mass, the extent of her head movements, and her grip strength, which was marginal. I had

discussed the plan with Deborah, so she knew how to control the seat. She’d asked questions, and I think she was embarrassed at some points. I know I was. I hated myself for making her go through this. I wondered if she was changing her mind now that she found out what she’d have to go through.

Pete consulted other members of the team, to see what they thought of the design. The other team members kept calling me with questions; what’s this knob for, what stress tests I ran in the design simulation, what kind of emergency brakes am I going to use on the motor, and could they use the design for their own clients if it worked out. They added a few things, such as a panic button, but on the whole approved. Still, they couldn’t find any way out of needing a chaperone.

How can they expect me to go through with this now, I wondered. I think they’re missing something. Nobody is taking into account how we’re going to feel.

The Ergoman concluded that a chaperone would be a good idea. Interesting twist on the word chaperone, I thought. Under no circumstances should Pete be one. I didn’t want him near Deborah, even with the lights on. By the time we’d gotten the Garlic Press constructed, time had run out—I had a wedding to prepare for. I had to leave the details to Pete.

We got married. The ceremony was eclectic. They knew I wouldn’t be there mentally, so Anna and the RAs in the marrieds complex where we’d live did the planning and the catering. They even had a spherical wedding cake; moist, so crumbs wouldn’t escape, and cooked with a reverse-molecule sugar so the diabetics could have some. We sent videos of the proceedings to my father and Deborah’s family back on Earth.

I looked at Deborah, talking with friends, occasionally typing in a conversation or two, looking innocently beautiful. She’d wanted to do one Greek line dance. Since I was the new husband, I was supposed to

take the lead. It turned out to be crack-the-whip to Mideastern music. It was fun, once I forgot everyone else was there.

We were finally in our new apartment, waiting for the people my team had arranged to help with the Garlic Press, when I got this feeling. Perhaps in the confusion of getting married, and because I didn’t want to think about it, I had trusted Pete’s judgment too much.

I nudged Deborah across the threshold with my head and left shoulder—careful not to make her bump into the sides. That would be bad luck.

The therapist was going to come soon. I hoped Pete had told him how to operate the machine, at least.

We were alone. I hadn’t thought this far ahead. Deborah was floating toward the center of the living room, taking in the decorating job she had done with Anna and Savi. Savi and Duryod were the wife-husband RAs of this complex. The Garlic Press was in the bedroom. I didn’t want to look at it yet.

I slowly maneuvered so my face was perpendicular to hers, and kissed her. Then I wondered, “Hey, what if we have a kid?”

“You can take him to fly planes in the park,” she said, obviously liking the thought.

“You want a baby?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Well, we could go to a doctor for that. You know, we should have talked about this before. Why didn’t we?”

Deborah smiled.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I asked once more.

She nodded but didn’t key in “yes.” What did that mean? What did she really want?

We hung around, wondering what to do—I wondered if I should undress her, but remembered that the therapist would be coming in. I didn’t want him to see my wife naked. Then I realized he would anyway.

I started taking off the straps to the workstation.

“Any last words?” I asked before I took it off.

"I love you"

I stopped. "You do? I mean...I love you, too."

As gently as I could, I removed the workstation, attached it to the wall, then turned back and scratched her lightly on her shoulders and back where the straps had been. Then I maneuvered in to kiss her again. Then the door opened and in came Pete, Anna, Kim, and RAs Savi and Duryod.

Pete said, "Please continue. Don't mind us."

Of course I didn't continue. Pete should have told them the reception was back in the recreation hall.

Anna looked a little nervous. Kim looked eager, but he always looks eager.

"Why are we bringing the party in here?" I asked. "Where's the therapist?"

"We're the therapists," Pete said.

"What!?"

"Look, Kevin, you can't drag a therapist in here every time you have sex. There aren't enough to go around as it is. One of us will have to be here. We help each other. Remember? Policy of the DuPont Colony. So we all need training. We're going to be your chaperones."

Oh, no. I couldn't go through with this. No way.

Pete was serious. "You need somebody here—somebody you trust, like me."

"You could have told me, at least."

"Oh, yeah? Would you be in this room right now if I had?"

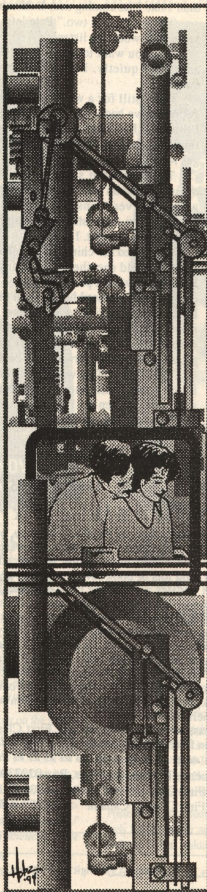
Anna led Deborah through the bedroom into the bathroom area to get ready.

"I can't believe you did this to me, Pete."

Pete snickered as if he'd gotten away with something.

When Deborah came back into the living room, she was arrayed like a princess. She had on an embroidered robe that could open down the front.

"Isn't she a living doll?" Anna said. "Her mother sent it with her when she moved up here. Just in case." Anna arranged the robe, fluffed



out the shoulders. "I think she looks adorable."

I arched my eyebrows. But Pete was watching, too. Why did he need to be here?

Ergoman went about checking things, giving me assurances in Korean, with a supportive pat.

Duryod escorted me into the bedroom. He started to undress me.

"I can do it myself," I said, a little too sharply.

"Okay," he said mildly.

I went to the bathroom. When I left the shower, Duryod asked "Where's your bag, Kevin?"

"I already took it off."

He motioned me back into the bathroom. "I think it would be good if we made sure your bladder is empty," he told me in a confidential voice. He reached between my legs and pressed upward on my bladder.

I thought of that boating movie, thought of running on the beach, of Deborah falling on top of my chest. That's how sex is supposed to be. This was more like a rectal exam. How romantic.

When we re-entered the bedroom, Pete and the women were getting Deborah into her side of the harness. We had practiced sitting while the Ergoman was making adjustments, so at least Deborah knew this part. She didn't look scared; concerned, maybe.

They sat me in the seat. I had them adjust the eyewriting control screen downward. The screen was attached on the seat behind Deborah's right shoulder. They loosened our robes, and positioned our legs.

I wondered how Deborah felt—I tried not to imagine. I tilted my head back to measure how far it would go. I tried out the controls, up, down, wasting time. Everybody was watching, yelling encouragement. Now it felt like group sex.

I made the machine close in, as if we were the nuts and it was cracking us.

"Whoa, too far, Kevin," Pete said. He adjusted it back a little.

I really didn't feel like it, but I hugged her shoulder with my chin. I closed my eyes and tried to pretend we were alone. I thought of the

beach scene—we were in the water, sitting on the sand with water up to our necks, and she was wearing nothing but a beach robe. It was dark, with only the Moon, and—

Pete cheered. "The autonomic nervous system is a wonderful thing, Kevin." I backed away and looked down. I was having an erection.

He and the RAs moved in to strap us together. But that was embarrassing, and by the time Pete got close, I'd lost it. No doubt Deborah was enjoying herself even less. "I can't concentrate with everyone in the room staring," I said.

"What do you mean?" Pete was doing fantastic!" Pete encouraged.

I waited a while, manipulating machinery, trying out the switches, taking my time. I wanted to kiss Deborah, but I couldn't even look at her.

Finally Pete said, "Fine. I'm just going to stuff you in and tie you together, then we're going into your living room. If you need me, call."

I couldn't feel what he was doing. I tried to watch; frankly, I

didn't like Pete coming near Deborah.

"Have fun, you two." Pete left. I knew they would be listening.

"Do you want to keep going?" I asked her quietly. I could feel her nod.

I was still for a while, trying to get my nerve back. This is perverted, I thought. But I knew that if I kept thinking that way things would only get worse.

Then Deborah started moving against the hairs on my chest. There were eight very sensitive ones. I'd counted them. Now she was trying to be helpful, I thought. I felt bad.

She rested her chin on my collarbone. I could see she was smiling. What if she wasn't pretending?

I carefully kissed her right on the lips. I kissed her for a long time. I remembered; no rush jobs in this colony. After a moment, I set the press on automatic, forward and back, like breathing. The waves on that beach were gently moving us back and forth.... Then my body started to react. It wanted to go faster. I'd swear

I felt my legs, though I knew that was impossible. I looked up; Deborah was still smiling. I couldn't believe it.

I wondered what our friends were doing in the living room. Pete was right, of course. I couldn't do this without their help. I supposed I would get used to depending on people.

I set the press for faster but tightened it in so there wasn't as much motion. Her moist skin smelled so nice; and I was getting hot. Then the urgency rose like a wave, and I ducked on her neck and hot feeling squeezed me and washed over me; then it faded. My scalp started to throb.

"That was great," I said finally, and stopped the motion. "Did you have fun? I had fun."

She laughed. "Again," she said.

She'd loved it. I couldn't do it again right away, but this worked for us. "Maybe later," I told her, casually.

As Pete and the others came back into the room, Deborah smiled and kissed my cheek. ■

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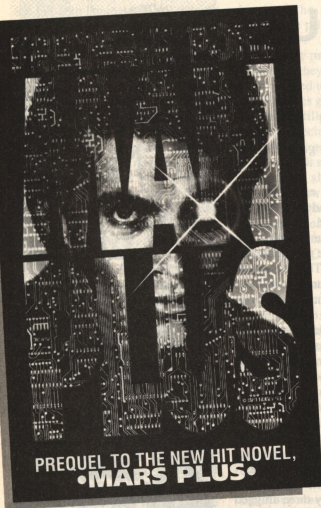
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# NAKED ASYLUM

M. Shayne Bell

Illustrated by Russell Morgan

*There was not even a dishtowel in his zeppelin's galley.  
The gorillas were loose*

When I got out of the shower, all my clothes were gone from the closets, drawers, and hampers, and there were no towels, no sheets or blankets left on the bed, not even a dishtowel or sack in my zeppelin's galley.

The gorillas were loose.

That was all I could think since Sarah, the only other human on board, was not the type to play a practical joke—forty-three intelligent, literate, sign-language-using gorillas were loose on my zeppelin. Gorillas who weren't supposed to wake up till after I'd left them and their Scientist Sarah at the new Center for Anthropoid Studies on São Tomé Island, the kind of muggy, bug-ridden African place gorillas were supposed to love.

I poked my head around the cabin door, looked up the corridor, and saw Sarah poking her head around her cabin door.

"What do you think you're doing?" she shouted at me. "I climb in a shower to get ready to land on São Tomé, and come out to find all my clothes gone. Give them back!"

"Your clothes are gone, too?" I asked. That didn't fit. Why would the gorillas take her clothes? She'd told me they loved her. As one of the few gorilla language specialists in the world, she'd been signing with them for years.

"Don't play innocent with me," she said. "I want my clothes, and I want them now."

"I didn't take them."

"You expect me to believe that?"

No, I didn't. Sarah thought I was a sex-starved lunatic. Maybe it was my eyes—I don't know, but practi-

cally every girl I'd ever met had thought that. It made me angry. "Look, Sarah," I said. "I don't care what you think, but my clothes are gone; your clothes are gone; and neither of us took them. That leaves one possibility. Close your door so I can come out of this room and find out what's going on."

Sarah's eyes widened when she realized I was talking about her gorillas, but then she glared at me. "I'll not only close this door—I'll lock it, too. Don't try anything."

She slammed her door, and I heard the lock turn.

"Easy!" I muttered. That's what Jim, my business manager and supposed friend had called this job: easy. Just the thing for a one-man freight zeppelin. Pick up forty-three drugged gorillas and one scientist, stow the gorillas in the cargo bay, fly them to São Tomé, and head back: light cargo, fast trip to the Gulf of Guinea, big money. "Work I'd give only to good friends," Jim had said. Good friends. He'd ruined me! I could see the headlines in the *L. A. Times* or the *Salt Lake Tribune*: "Simian Pranksters Trash Zeppelin," or "Couple Stripped by Apes." Who'd want to fly with me after that?

I looked up and down the corridor again. Empty. I kept hoping that maybe the gorillas had dropped a pair of pants somewhere, but they hadn't, so there was nothing for it. I opened the door and walked, naked, out into the corridor. "No peeking!" I shouted when I was across from Sarah's door.

"There can't be much to peek at," she shouted back. "But if my gorillas are awake, I'm coming out to sign with them."





Great, I thought. She'd probably use her sign language to tell them to tear me apart, slowly, since she'd never believe I hadn't planned this. There'd be no reasoning with her—and only her story would go to the press. "Gorillas Rescue Scientist from Zeppelin Sex Maniac." "Wary Gorillas Foil Sex Plot." "Gorillas Vivisect Zeppelin Sex Fiend."

Something banged against the side of the Zeppelin, and I felt a draft: the gorillas had a hatch open! I started running but slowed down, fast. I didn't want to come around a corner and surprise a gorilla. I didn't know sign language, and a gorilla was likely to tear off my head before I could find a way to communicate. "Hey, gorillas!" I shouted, just to let them know I was coming. "Give me back my clothes and I won't get mad."

I rounded one corner. No gorillas. No clothes, either. The draft was bad there, and cold—I could see the open hatch by the bridge. It banged back and forth against the hull. Had the gorillas jumped? Suicide? Better dead than São Toméan? I knew the gorillas hadn't wanted to go to São Tomé—they'd wanted to stay in Berkeley where at least they could get a decent hamburger on Saturday nights.

The parachutes kept on either side of the hatch were gone. I watched the open door and hurried down the corridor to the bridge. It was empty. No gorillas. The controls were fine: auto-pilot functioning, flight proceeding normally, on schedule, on course. The gorillas hadn't touched the controls. I switched on a video view of the cargo bay and saw it empty: forty-three deserted beds and no slumbering gorillas. The gorillas hadn't left any sheets or blankets there, either. Through beasts, I thought. Then I realized that that was exactly what they were: thorough. This was planned. They weren't just being mischievous—they realized that naked humans were vulnerable. So they wanted something from Sarah and me. But what?

"Where are my clothes and my gorillas?"

It was Sarah, peeking around the bend of the corridor. I climbed behind the pilot's chair. "I said no peeking!"

"Don't pretend to be modest. Where are they?"

I pointed to the open hatch.

Her eyes got wide again. "If one of those gorillas is hurt, I'll sue you and your precious zeppelin for everything you've got."

"And I'll sue right back for damages to my ship," I said. But bad press, not law suits, would destroy me: "Showering Pilot Lets Unsuspecting Apes Plunge to Watery Death," for instance, or "Pilot Loses Anthropoid Cargo—Zeppelin Line Ruined."

I felt around under the seat, hoping for somebody's old coat or even a sandy swimsuit stripped off after one of my quick stops on a Barbados beach, but nothing was under the seat, not even dust. I prided myself on keeping a clean, gleaming ship and today was the first day I regretted my Zeppelin's sleek silver metal and tinted windows: I could have used drapes to tear down and wrap around me like an Arab's burnoose.

So I stood up, switched the video to external view, and saw the gorillas. They were swinging on cables outside the ship. One had pulled a shirt of mine over its shoulders and ripped out all the seams, another had tried to pull on a pair of my pants, and six others had their arms full of sheets, mattress covers, and dish rags. They were letting them go in the wind and banging the side of the Zeppelin and signing furiously while they watched every piece of cloth from my ship flutter away to the sea.

I slowed the ship so the wind wouldn't be so bad outside and tried to count gorillas and think about what to do. "Sarah," I shouted. "You'd better get up here, naked or not. I can see your gorillas outside on the cables."

"Do you think I'm stupid enough to walk up there with you? Count the gorillas yourself. How many can you see?"

I could never see more than twenty gorillas at the same time.

They kept climbing around too fast.

"They're playing," Sarah said. "They always play after they wake up. Now get them inside before one falls."

"And how do you propose I do that?" I asked. This was trouble I'd never have believed: Sarah and me naked, all the gorillas loose, and nowhere to land till we got the gorillas inside so they couldn't run amok on the ground—

A gorilla stuck its head down over the windshield and stared at me. I jumped back in the seat, startled, then gorillas were inside and all around me. Easy, I thought. No sudden moves. I tried not to imagine them dragging me to the hatch and shoving me out over the South Atlantic. One female signed at me, fast, but when I didn't respond she signed slower and slower. Finally she stopped and scratched her head and looked at me as if I were stupid.

"I'm sorry I can't sign," I said. "But would all of you just get back in the cargo bay and give me what's left of my clothes, if anything?"

The gorilla sat down and started typing on the computer. More gorillas crowded into the corridor behind her to watch. I heard Sarah pounding on her door and shouting—they'd dragged her back to her room. She evidently didn't agree with what the gorillas wanted to do.

The female grabbed my arm and pulled me over to look at the screen. **Not go Sao Tomé**, she had typed. She'd left off the tilde over the *a* in *São*, but I wasn't in a mood to argue details.

**Give me my clothes**, I typed.

She swatted my hands away and cleared the screen. **Go Fly Switzerland**, she typed. **Gorillas get asylum. You get clothes we get Switzerland**.

Switzerland had just granted asylum to a Tibetan artificial intelligence who had fled to them over the network. The gorillas must have heard or read about it and were hoping for the same treatment.

**Give me my pants, and we'll talk**, I typed, but then I erased the word *talk* and typed the word *type*.

The gorilla cleared the screen and sneezed all over the keyboard. I wanted to type *Close the hatch!* but she had her hands on the keys.

**You make lot money—big friend gorillas—lot people like.**

I thought about that, then thought about that some more. The gorilla was right. Good press would make my business boom, and I'd be a hero! "Gorillas Flee Experiments for Freedom" I could see in the *New York Times*, or "American Pilot Rescues Gorillas from Scientific Hell."

I liked such headlines. I liked what such headlines would do for my business. **Give me my pants, and we'll fly north,** I typed.

But they steadfastly refused to give me any clothes till we were on the ground in Switzerland, and I later found out they'd thrown away everything anyway. So I flew the gorillas north—all forty-three of them. They were all safe. My zeppelin's engines ran on solar power; the bags held plenty of helium; and though we ran short of food, we were soon on the ground in Zurich. Sarah never came out of her room till we'd landed and she'd heard German voices in the corridor for some time; finally one of the Swiss pounded on her door and tried to tell the Fräulein that they had clothes for her, and would she open up so they could hand them through? She thought she'd been hallucinating on some drug I'd given her to make her more "pliable."

The Swiss gave the gorillas asylum and set them up in nice houses along the Zurichsee. I established a corporation in Liechtenstein, learned sign language, and hired the gorillas to work for me—you never know when you'll need a crewmember who can work outside on the cables during flight. Sarah stayed in Switzerland for a time to study the gorillas in their new environment, but I seldom saw her. She continued to think I was an untrustworthy maniac.

But the headlines were great, and business boomed after such gems as: "Courageous Pilot Sees Future—Helps Gorillas Find Freedom" (*London Times*); "Pilot Risks All for Gorillas on Flight to Freedom"

(*Veja*); "Gorillas Find Freedom and Daredevil Jobs" (*Der Stern*). The interviewers always wanted to know what I'd learned from my experience with the gorillas, how it had changed me. I made up long, thoughtful answers, but in truth the most important thing I'd learned was to keep an extra pair of pants hidden under my seat. ■

## OUR AUTHORS

Virginia Baker is director of marketing communications for Folio Corp., a software house in Provo, Utah. She does not write much, but that is the world's loss. She has previously appeared here in Issue Number 1 with "Pictures of Daniel." Before that, she was a first-prize winner in L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future Contest. M. Shayne Bell resides in Salt Lake City. He is an increasingly rising star in the science fiction world. Recently he edited an anthology, *Washed By a Wave of Wind*, which featured stories by Provo and Salt Lake City writers. Bell's story in the anthology was "The Shining Dream Road Out," from these pages. Carolyn Niclta is a Provo, Utah, housewife. She is a friend of Virginia Baker, M. Shayne Bell and Dave Wolverton, among others. Her first story, "Recycling," was publishing here in Issue Number 3. Dave Wolverton is now Coordinating Judge of L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future Contest. He lives in Provo, Utah, with his wife and four children. He has written numerous novels of which *The Golden Queen* will be out shortly. His story in this issue appeared in somewhat different form in *Washed By a Wave of Wind*.

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. G. David Nordley is a retired Air Force officer and physicist, who now makes his home in Silicon Valley. He is published in a growing number of places, most notably *Analog*. His story in this issue was inspired by the cover. Elisabeth Vonarburg is very likely the next big English-language discovery. A Francophone, she has hitherto published very little not in French. She lives in Canada, where she has just won the Grand Prix Logidec, adding that honor to her previous six Aurora Awards. She has had three short-story collections printed in French, has published numerous novels, almost all in French, but has also published *In the Mother's Land* (Bantam, 1992). TOMORROW is proud to be publishing a series of her work. Her story in this issue, "Bande Ohne Ende," was previously published in France in 1984. It is the first with a common setting of the city of Baiblanca, raised on Earth when the old coasts drowned. ■

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having you.

# BANDE OHNE ENDE

Elisabeth Vonarburg

Illustrated by Darla MaloneTagrin

To Claude, and Françoise,  
and Danielle

*He faced his condition with a gun and fifty kilos of plastex.  
She faced...she didn't quite know what...bare-handed*



The building had been surrounded, the block evacuated. You don't take chances with an amok. When I got out of the helijet, I almost smiled: there were armored vehicles, blue and green uniforms—the police and the army—machine guns, stunners (against a metamorph! Ludicrous), an ambulance; dialogues crackled back and forth on the radios. The whole parade. And all that for a single metame.

Not for any metame, though. For an amok.

The police officer gave me back my ID, saluting very stiffly—clamped jaws, shifting eyes—like someone who's not sure whether he must do it or not.

"He's on the top floor, Sera Berger."

With a gun and fifty kilos of plastex.

The building was an old one, full of cracks, as haphazardly repaired as

the whole block. There were puddles and mud everywhere, remains of the last daily tide, which had pushed the river Seine out into the city streets again. But, like everywhere else, the city dwellers held out. They lived in the upper levels of the buildings; they paddled out in boats whenever they had to. They made do. They survived. Where would they have gone, anyway? They were the dregs of society; they had not been among the chosen when the Lagrange Stations were settled. Paris: an endlessly dying city, for an amok who wanted to die. He had postponed his own death, though. He had asked for someone to be sent. He wanted to talk.

"How did you find him?"

"His family. They live here."

And they had reported him. The child-prodigy returns. Help! Police! We were taught that some parents are like that, even with their normal children. Sad, but common.

"His file." The officer held out a glossy sheet, the file beamed down from Lagrange 2. First surprise: the holophot was a young woman's. *Joanie Bordes, born Paris...* I knew that name. Forty-two years old, one of the first wave metamorphs. *Specialties...Service record....* Very, very impressive. And no incident before this one. Statistically, though, considering her age, there should have been. If it was the first time, of course, she might still be helped.

I gave the file back to the officer, who folded it and put it back under his bullet-proof vest. Then he made a short, awkward gesture towards the building, as if to say, "It's all yours." He seemed to think that I knew what to do, that I was used to this. Actually, I was the only metame near enough when Central called, that was all. I never thought of refusing. You don't refuse an assignment when you're a metame.

And only metames can try to handle amoks, and help, even if they've never met one in their life, like me.

First, because they're the only ones who can get near enough to them. I walked towards the building, splashing through the puddles. I shouted through the megaphone to the open window high on the last floor, "Bordes, can we talk?" There was a gun's sharp retort, an impact on my left thigh. I staggered back, but I was prepared. She didn't shoot to kill, though, perhaps a good sign. I gave a little shake and I heard the bullet clink down on the pavement. "May I come up, Bordes? You did ask for someone!" Another shot, another shock, in the right leg this time. Then no more: now she knew what I was.

I entered the building and began walking up the stairs. Eight floors. She did not blow herself up at once; would she do it now that I was inside? She did ask to talk to someone. She came here, she must have known they would report her, she wanted to be found. She wanted help. If she wanted others to die with her, she wouldn't have waited to be surrounded, she'd have begun shooting everyone in sight from up there. Fifth floor. She hasn't done it yet. She won't, then. Even if she did it now...and even if she did it when I was on the eighth floor, I was in no danger. But once I was in close proximity...my being prepared wouldn't help any. Don't think about it. No use. It's our job, after all. Risks of the trade.

I stopped on the last floor. A door was open on a shabby apartment.

"Bordes?"

"Here."

The voice was masculine, calm. I came in. There was some light further away. I paused on the doorway so Bordes could see me. The room smelled of mildew, stuffiness, oblivion. It was a small attic-bedroom, right out of the end of the twentieth century—or that had never been out of it: rotting rock-star posters on the walls, an ancient keyboard terminal on a small metallic desk. One chair, painted red. A narrow bed. Shelves

crammed with ruined books and tapes. And the ubiquitous, clinging dust.

A man was sitting on the bed, a gun near him with its butt on the floor. Packs of explosive round his neck, his chest, his thighs, everywhere. But his hands were loose between his knees, far from the switch. He was lean, with a two-day beard and very blue eyes, almost shockingly sharp in that paleness of his. He made a small motion with his hands, including the whole room: "It was my place."

Condemned and duly forgotten by everyone from the very day he left, of course, thirty years ago at least. I pointed to the red chair. "May I sit? My name is Paula. Paula Berger."

He surprised me. "The underwater specialist, yes. I am John Bordes, now."

"Since when?"

A tired smile. "Long enough."

He was studying me with those blue, blue eyes. The smile vanished. "Poor Paula. Never done this, have you? Never even seen an amok in your whole life."

Was I so obvious? I thought I had my emotions under control. And I was not near enough for him to be able to sense them. I was still looking for something to say when he patted the bed beside him.

"Come here. Don't be afraid. I may be an amok, but it's my problem. I won't hurt you. Come. If you've never met one, now's the time to feel firsthand what it's like."

I came in and sat on the bed, a good two meters away from him. I'd never exercised that much control over myself. What could I say to him? What could I do? We stayed like that for a while, aware of our mutual auras, the metames' silent communications which cannot be avoided: I had no total control over the biochemical processes of my emotions. Neither did he; even this far away, I could feel him: a deadly weariness, beyond rage, beyond sadness. And *that* was an amok? It couldn't be! He was much more self-possessed than I was!

"Not what they teach us, is it?" Almost no irony, some aggressiveness, but remote, as if smothered by resignation. And not directed at me anyway. Likewise, he was not talking to me when he said, "So many things are not like what we've been taught..." The blue stare was on me again. "Ever thought there were some things you must learn all by yourself, little girl?"

The reflex took over—I didn't know what else to answer, anyway. "I'm twenty-eight, you know!"

"Doesn't matter. I was a little girl too, three years ago, on Lagrange 2. In the nursery. So very quiet, so well-behaved. Fifteen, twenty, forty-five, it's the same. There are things you must learn by yourself."

I made another try. "You have to be alive to learn them, though."

An unexpected smile. "Not bad! Not bad..." But the smile vanished again. He shook his head, not a denial but a rejection: he wouldn't let himself be ensnared in an argument. I tried again.

"Did you learn those things by becoming a man? By staying down here on Earth? Explain this to me, please. I'd really like to know."

I should not have said that. The blue eyes didn't see me anymore. "Explain..." He shrugged. I forced myself to sit nearer to him while deliberately not controlling my emotions as tightly as before, to let him feel my distress, my compassion, how much I wanted to help him. But he was too far gone now to react as I hoped he would, beyond all human bonds. Awkwardly, I kept at it. "You did ask for someone. There is no fatality in it, you know, we don't have to..."

And then my voice caught in my throat, and he smiled unexpectedly again. "To kill ourselves. Yes. We can kill others, too."

So tranquil. So tired. So far away. But I had to go on, even if I was on the wrong track.

"We don't have to be amok. To stay that way, I mean. On Lagrange 2..."

"Oh yes, Lagrange 2. We can be treated on Lagrange 2, that's what

they teach you, don't they? Yes. Until the next time. And the next. Never thought they say that because it's much easier to kill oneself up there? A mere explosion, out in the void. So much cleaner, so much more discreet, too!"

He looked more animated now, but I'd rather he stayed remote: something in him felt like anger now. Wanly, I said, "You asked for someone. Why do this? Wait. Why do you want to do this?"

"Oh, but I don't *want* to do it. I'm an amok. I'm mad. My body's mad. Programmed biological destiny. That's what they teach us, don't they?"

"It is not programmed; it is not destiny!"

Was his anger contagious? I moved back a little, away from his aura. Already his animation was gone. "No, it is not destiny," he said in a low voice, with a sudden, detached kindness. "But it can be a choice. We have the right to do what we want. Ever thought of that, little girl? Anything we want. When we want to."

He was amok, then.... Did he feel me inwardly drawing back? "It's *my* life and *my* death, not theirs," he muttered. "Sorry, little one. Not very fair, I guess, asking for someone to come. Selfish of me. To explain.... Useless. A kind of weakness. Lord, but I'm tired.... Sorry."

He was receding from me, unmoving, as silences grew longer between each fragmentary sentence. Stupidly, then, I threw my revolt at him. I completely stopped controlling myself; I heard myself say in a very low voice, from the gut, "Don't do this!"—and he must have heard what I was really saying—"Don't do this to me!" I was holding his arm. I did not realize I was holding his arm, and he unhooked my fingers one by one, he stood up, pulling me up with him, a gentle, deliberate traction, he took me to the door, then through the apartment, then to the front door, to the landing, kindly, irresistibly, and he was eager, though in a weird, dreamy way, he was eager to see me go, to be done with it, to die. I tried

to resist halfheartedly, looking up at him. I had to stay with him; he wouldn't do it if I stayed with him! But he shook his head; he put his hand on his chest, on the explosive packs. "It's my life, little one." Then, after a slight pause, as an afterthought or a concession: "Your life is yours, isn't it? Think of it." He went back inside the apartment, he closed the door. I raised my hand toward the door handle... and I bolted away, I ran down the stairs, I fled.

He blew himself up as soon as he saw us take cover.

The call from Lagrange 2 was waiting for me on my room terminal at the hotel. Not anybody: Nakamura himself. *The Nakamura*. No questions about what had happened (the cop must have made his report anyway). But when was I coming back up there?

I heard myself answer, "Not yet," and I was still amazed at myself when I saw Nakamura's face take on a slightly worried frown, very fleetingly, after the usual com-lag. Then, pleasantly, carefully, exactly not too much so: "When?"

I realized then just what it was that I'd said, and I decided to stand by it. (Decide.... Was it really a decision, a choice? What I felt was a kind of massive, hazy stubbornness.) "Not now. I don't know. I need some vacation, I guess."

Electronic comings and goings, then a small smile from Nakamura, with a touch of friendly complicity: "Lagrange 2 is not bad, for a vacation."

"Know it too well. That's home, Lagrange 2. Need a change of scenery. Fresh air. Kind of."

I heard the incoherence creeping in my voice. I reached out to switch Nakamura off, but he was already talking—he must not have waited for my answer: "I have someone here who wants to talk to you. Marian Bauer."

Her face replaced Nakamura's. I was vaguely afraid of what she was going to say, but she didn't speak at once—of course. Her tired eyes studied me, gravely, lovingly. A vagrant

thought suddenly burned through me: she's even older than Joanie-John Bordes; she's first wave, first generation, the less stable. Is she also going to... I put my fingers on the switch.

"If you go to Baiblanca, then, you could go and say hello to the Iguerras for me at the Embassy," Marian said. "You know the address?"

I was brought back into the semblance of a real conversation by her easy manner and I automatically jotted down the address, acknowledged that I already knew it, even told her I would surely be back in one or two weeks. When the screen faded back into gray, I was Paula Berger once more, an orderly metamorph taking a rightful leave on Earth with Central's blessings. Not a metamorph within an inch of a fatal breach of contract, a metamorph slightly out of order, perhaps on her way to becoming....

I knew I should have gone back up to Lagrange 2 after this episode, even if my Earth shift was not over yet. To be debriefed. To talk to Nakamura or some other psych. (And to Marian, yes, Marian.) I understood perfectly well the rationale behind this debriefing process. But I didn't want to go back. I wanted to take this all by myself, like a grown-up. I'm a big girl, aren't I? I'm not a little girl anymore.

I caught myself thinking this and I froze. But then the stubbornness came back, as it was earlier with Nakamura. I repeated out loud, deliberately, "I'm a big girl. And it's *my* life."

Whoever said anything to the contrary, anyway?

I finally got down to doing what I should have done earlier: a complete check-up. Get rid of those toxins, loosen those muscles, repossess my physical self. The temptation was to go overboard in the other direction: to coerce my body into an artificial serenity. Not really artificial, as those substances are naturally secreted on orders from the brain. But artificial nevertheless; I did *not* want to neutralize myself. Something had happened, in *my* life, and I wanted to

understand what it meant. And as I finally lay down on my bed, I decided that I would not play the small games normals play, asking what comes first, organic chemistry or emotions. When you are a metame, you know it's not that simple.

The next morning, when I woke up, I was surprised to have slept so easily and so well. I was surprised, but glad. I had been right to choose to stay on Earth for a while. I was perfectly able to deal with all this on my own. What had happened was very sad, even horrible, there would be after-effects for me to reckon with, my present equanimity didn't fool me a bit. But I could deal with it on my own. I was going to spend a few days visiting—free from the Service for a while, I was going to think all this through, calmly, reasonably. I checked the state of my bank account—excellent, of course; we have practically no expenses on Lagrange 2, and the work on Earth is very generously paid. Suddenly there was amusement for me in all this, a queer lightness: I did need a vacation after all. Let's shop till we drop, let's indulge in some silliness!

But then, before the inward eye, Joanie-John's lean face, the blue, blue eyes, the gentle, weary stubbornness... I forced myself not to flinch away from the memory. It was normal. Yes, it's my life, and yes, I'm thinking about it. Guilt-tripping a bit, but that is normal too. It was not my fault, really. I happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Had I stayed there with him, nothing would have been different. Bordes was really amok. His call for help was nothing but a last moment's second thought, an empty gesture before the final act. Even a true specialist couldn't have done a thing. The metames' first wave... almost none of them are left. The mutation is not stabilized yet. Sad. But not my fault.

Baiblanca: the unavoidable stop. In Lyons, I was not very far away from Eurafica's capital. Baiblanca, built high and proud on its rocky coast along the southern end of

Spain, cocking its snook at the rising waters (which won't rise that high—one may hope, at least). The magnificent Bay, the Waterfront Promenade sheltered by tall evergreen trees, the gentle weather always a bit moist under the sky, always a bit cloudy—blue-gray for the rains, a dull orange for the volcanic ashes.... And that faint unreality which touches all cities built too quickly by Man's will and not by the slow whims of history. A bit too carefully haphazard in its layout, Baiblanca: the way the residential areas compensated for the business districts, the great straight avenues balancing the small, winding pedestrian streets, the capricious garden-malls and the majestically paved esplanades, the spattering of blatant artificial fountains and tiny shaded pools, still canals, sparkling waterfalls.... Baiblanca: the splendid, obdurate human will to survive in spite of everything that the universe can throw at it.

But it was a mask, too, an alibi, like all the other brand-new capitals of the world. Of what is left of the world: pocked with radioactive or acidified, barren wastes, slowly nibbled at by the rising waters, shaken by volcanic eruptions and earthquakes almost every day, as if the Earth, terminally annoyed, were twitching to get rid of us....

I was thinking of this two-faced world while looking down at the beauty of the city from my hotel window. It was a charming, old building, very last-century, lovingly reconstituted not far from the embassy District. I had paid a visit to Ambassador Iguerra, thus reassuring Central about my current state of mind. I felt somewhat lost in that metropolitan vastness. If you don't leave Lagrange 2 on a regular basis to come and work down here or out in space, the Station would give you a touch of agoraphobia. Or should we call it *convexity-phobia*? The first time I woke up there, I was terrified. Though I had spent my first eleven years on Earth, I had quite a case of *concavity-phobia* right then.

Moreover, I had absolutely no idea where I was. The onset of the

Disease, the coma, the shuttle trip to Lagrange 2: I didn't remember a thing. I was merely certain I had been very ill; I felt so tired. And then, when I opened my eyes, there was this large window occupying an entire wall, and shapes, colors, (trees, houses) and this wide, blue ribbon, winding between yellow and green and brown rectangles and squares which could be fields, and the eye follows it, tries to follow it toward the horizon AND THERE IS NO HORIZON! Then you look UPWARD for the sky, AND THERE IS NO SKY: only a surrealistically clear atmosphere (no rain scheduled that day), and, far away, a yellow and green and brown chessboard with white dots, and a thinner blue ribbon that keeps curving back upon itself, and back and back.... I clung in terror to the bed, sick with dizziness, until somebody came, touched me, explained (Marian, who's in charge of all newcomers). This was Lagrange 2, the island in the sky, the cylinder island where you lived *inside* (like flies, I wondered fleetingly, upside down?) Lagrange 2, the Metames' Station. I was there because I had caught the Metames' Disease, because I *was* a Metame myself, now! I would never see my parents or my friends again! I curled into a ball beneath the sheets. I didn't want to hear Marian's soothing, friendly voice. I didn't want to be soothed. I ate nothing for almost a week.

I didn't know that metames cannot die that easily, then.

I stepped away from the window and I began to put my things in the archaic bathroom (cork-oak on the walls; not real, I hoped) and my clothes in the archaic wardrobe (very convincing wood paneling). Then I consulted the terminal for tourist information (it was artfully disguised as a phone-book—with leather-binding, genuine or not). I had to know where to begin.

But then I stopped cold. To begin what? The day before, it had been simple to leave Paris: once initiated, that kind of action was easy to follow through. But was being a tourist my real purpose in coming here?

Okay, so what had happened in Paris? I had met a metame, an amok. My first. He had blown himself up and I had not been able to keep him from doing it. I felt guilty, though it was no fault of mine. They don't really prepare us for that kind of thing. They explain how it eventually begins, how one becomes amok—as far as they know: *(the building somehow the serotonin levels go down but the body takes over as usual, auto-correcting (the building suddenly exploded but still standing), then they go down again, and up again, and down and up, and eventually the global blueprint, the hypothetical body matrix according to which the cells regulate themselves, blurs, alters, the auto-regulation is less than effective until (the building suddenly exploded but still standing, each fragment frozen in time before it collapses in a cloud of dust, and afterwards, after the blast, after the impact, among the rubble, searching for...).*

My mind bounced back like a rubber ball. No way. No way I could think about it now. It was too early, no doubt.

Don't think about it, then. Go out and do the tourist thing.

There were no Metames in Baiblanca. I mean, some do reside here during their shift, and there are those few who chose to live here. But they didn't seem to exist: they were not mentioned in the news, or in the entertainment media, or in people's conversations—and there was not much about them in the DataNets either. It was not that surprising; conversely, on Lagrange 2 you can easily forget the normals, they are so few. Proportionately more numerous than we are down there, though; the twenty or thirty thousand metames usually on shift all but disappear among the teeming masses of normals—yes, still teeming despite the declining birthrate, and the attrition due to various recurring acts of God. That's how we metames must be: useful, efficient, always ready—though invisible, undiscoverable, all but forgotten. As normal as can be.

Until the time comes when they need us. Then we change, usually in a limited, discreet way; like I do when I have some tricky job underwater down by the thousand or so mark, with no diving suit. Those tasks are for us. The difficult ones, the dangerous ones, the tasks which would also be far too expensive if normal human personnel had to be protected while doing them. In the contaminated zones. In space. Or during a riot. *Or controlling amoks.* Yes, that too. But we do the same for normal madmen. Or for bringing some ferocious beast back alive from the new wilderness.

I was at the Zoo, now, or rather at the "Natural Park" of Baiblanca. An antiphrasis, it is a most artificial park, like all the other ones on Earth; the surviving wild animals are kept there in domes where their reconstituted natural habitat is carefully monitored. You soon forget the domes, almost perfectly transparent. The one over the Aviary was so big that I had forgotten it very easily (THE BIGGEST IN THE WORLD, claimed a sign posted in front of it). I had not forgotten the incredible cost of the Park, however, also proudly displayed at the entrance. Weird, for a Lagrangian, that Earth obsession with numbers and money, that kind of pride they seem to feel when they talk about the cost of their survival—as if it were anything to be proud of, as if they could have done it any other way. What else could they have done? Gone on and finished themselves off? They did what they had to, nothing extraordinary; we metames do it all the time. When they realized they were not threatened with a financial or political crisis of merely human origin, but by the seemingly overall discontent of the very planet, they woke up very quickly. In thirty years, they put four Lagrange Stations in space, rebuilt their main cities well above the projected ocean levels, and went about reclaiming what they could from the new wastelands. Oh, they are still scuffling, still fighting; they even kill each other still. But not as wantonly as before. Seeing half of all their coastlines drowned in a few days during the Great Tides has

given them a much saner perspective on humanity's true place of Earth. They learned. They are still learning. Each earthquake, each newly awakened volcano, each city forever lost to the tides, keeps them from forgetting.

I caught myself looking with a rather stern smile at the people around me, as if they had all been children. I had to smile: the Guardian Angel Syndrome. It never fails, every time we're down here. We have no business meddling with Terrestrial affairs, for we are Lagrange 2 citizens, not belonging to our native countries anymore. But through constantly doing things that normals cannot do and rectifying their frequent mistakes, you achieve a somewhat parental point of view. Funny, though, that syndrome is, for people like us who don't breed so much. Normals are children enough for us, I guess. Besides, our children are normals, and stay that way. Metames don't produce little metames. Our children seem immune to the very hypothetical, never-identified virus which enables their parents to metamorphose....

But what's that? Longing for parenthood now, Paula Berger, are you? If you want to contribute to the rebirth of the human race, you just have to go back to Lagrange 2 where Michael will be only too pleased to help. Or Eric. Or Iwo: a pretty black baby for a change. And why all the talking to yourself lately?

Because many children of all ages were running around among the crowds in the Park, no doubt. And because I was suddenly feeling very much the bystander here, watching the animals, watching the normals, being a human and a metame, insider, outsider, a split identity. A bird alighted on a small tree just in front of me, on the other side of the almost invisible wall. It was watching me with its bright beady eye, sometime fluttering its wings to keep its balance on the moving branch.

"Look, look at me, I'm flying!"

I look up at the others, and I freeze, like them: Muhad is naked and he is flying. Or gliding, rather.

Two great membranous wings are growing out along his sides, from ankle to armpit, and along his arms down to his wrists and fingers. He is gliding, and a sudden, dizzying plunge brings him down on us; he pulls off close to our heads, scattering us. He lands on the flat roof of the Gymnasium and looks down at us with a satisfied grin. It is certainly not the first time he's pulled that stunt; he must have rehearsed it secretly. (Never telling me a thing?) I stare hurtfully, resentfully, at him. "Stop this and come down!" Michael barks; at fifteen, he's the leader. Lisa takes over: "Yes, come down! Have you gone crazy? If Naku ever catches you, you're in for it, you know!"

Muhad unfolds his arms and jumps from the roof—we keep staring, breathless. He lands in front of us after a long, slow, graceful glide. He folds his arms again, as far as the membranes permit it, and gives us a defiant stare. Now that the wings are not stiffened anymore, they hang around him like a cape. He is so beautiful like this, naked, proud, metamorphosed...I avert my eyes, struck by a quick, shameful arrow of desire. How could he do this to me?

"So what? What could they do to me? What can they do to us, them normals? We're invulnerable, ain't we?"

A shocked silence, then Guillaume mutters, "Not completely."

Muhad shrugs—his cape of skin ripples strangely, like water. "So? They won't throw me out into space with dynamite right up my ass, will they?"

The silence is longer this time. Without consulting one another, we come closer to him. The reproving auras tighten around him; he won't be able to resist us much longer. He doesn't even try. His eyes seek mine. "What is so bad with changing if we want to?" His voice is already pleading. I look elsewhere. "We are metames, ain't we? That's what it's all about, ain't it?"

"Not like this," Lisa says. "We're no damned circus animals," Thomas says. "We don't change whenever we please," Yoko says.

And Michael folds his arms, strengthened by the general assent: "We do it when and how it's necessary, to serve others, not ourselves. They need us. We're Exceptionals. The Exception must bow to the Rule, not break it."

In front of me, the branch was bare and had been so for a while; I had not seen the bird fly away. Muhad. I had not thought of him in eternities. Muhad, his quick eyes, his soft hands, Muhad whom we should not have called "The Bird" so often, but he was so daring in the Gymnasium. Muhad, my first one. Who had disappeared from our Level not long after that incident, and nobody had asked what had befallen him. We knew. We thought we knew. *With dynamite right up my ass...* How the grotesque image had haunted my nightmares. He'd blown himself up years later, actually, working somewhere in the asteroid belt, an accident. An accident? Well, that's what his file said, anyway. It happens. Metames can die, sometimes. Why was I thinking of Muhad now? Such a stupid thing, he ought to have known how I would react! He must have known. What could I have done? What could I have said? He had made up his mind, I couldn't have kept him from doing it. Try to disarm him? Unthinkable. He would have blown himself up at once. Convince him... of what? I had no idea why he'd done that. He was amok, it was not his fault, it was not my fault, nobody could do a thing about it, *the building suddenly exploded, the disrupted fragments frozen in time and then the blast, the shaking ground, and looking around in the rubble to find bits of no the blue eyes, the gentle, deliberate pull on my hand, unhooking my fingers one by one, don't do this to me NO*, no, it's not time to think about this, I don't want to think about this now!

Through sudden tears I saw a wet tropical forest, a luxuriant tangle of boughs and flowers and leaves. I was standing now in front of the panthers' dome. A striking sable figure amid all that green, draped over a

branch, imperial, disdainful: a panther. She opened one eye, yawned punctiliously—white fangs, curling tongue—unfolded herself and vanished lithely through the hanging creepers. And I stood there, transfixed under the glare of that one, sudden thought: were there metames in the Park, in any Park, or in any true remaining wilderness? Metamorphosed amoks, alive? Living an animal life, forever cut off from mankind? (Free?)

While going back to the hotel, upset and furious not to know the reason why, I tried to calm down. I called upon my training. I still wanted to understand—I was staying on Earth to deal with the whole thing, wasn't I? So where had all this begun? Muhad. Okay. Let's have a go at Muhad, then. His pleading question—"What is so bad with changing if we want to?"—not one of us had tried to answer it, really. The only answers we had were the lessons taught us by the hypnopedic tapes going on untiringly under our pillows, all night long—but we did not know that at the time. *The Exception must bow to the Rule*. That's normal; children like us, endowed with such power, you don't allow them to go unfettered. You give them rules, laws, protections against themselves. And you teach them very early the automatic equivalence: anarchic change is amok, madness, the unnameable—death.

But Muhad was not amok that day. But Joanie-John Bordes had not felt amok to me, either. And I, during that so brief moment when I looked at the panther vanishing among the leaves, when I imagined myself a panther roaming wild and free in her kingdom, was I amok? Was I amok now that I allowed myself to remember that fleeting fancy? And while I was reminiscing, what about all those times when I looked at the normals in the streets with the stern indulgence of the Guardian Angel? When I wondered how it would feel to reveal myself to them, to show them; to change in front of them? Mere impulses, of course, as soon mastered and dismissed as they were born; the



slick workings of a very effective conditioning. Mastered and dismissed with an amused smile. A terrified smile? Denying the deep, constant terror: *amok*.

To go amok for fear of being amok, was that what was in store for me, then? I pulled my clothes off and stood in front of the big mirror in the bathroom. Are you amok, Berger? Do you really want to go leaping into the wild, leaving all humankind behind, do you really want to indulge yourself, to change any which way, to become somebody else, something else, anything whatsoever? No? Then, *prove it*.

I pulled myself together tightly, drawing upon all my training, and thoroughly, step by step, from the inside to the outside, I changed.

After a change, even a partial one, I am always ravenously hungry. And that was a complete change, the likes of which I had not tried since the one and only complete metamorphosis they require of us for the final exam, at the end of Intensive Training—fifteen years ago. I went down and ate at one of the hotel restaurants, striving all along to suppress a large, idiotic grin of satisfaction—of relief: I had changed without being required to, I had watched myself change, and I could obviously go on functioning normally in public after having changed. No way I was in amok! Had I really doubted I wasn't? After dinner, still very pleased with myself and drawn outside by the warmth of the night, I decided to go for a walk along the shopping arcades. My all-purpose jumpsuit was a bit tight around the seams: why not shop for other clothes more suited to my new body? One hour later, I was used to the salespersons calling me "Ser," and to the deeper resonance of my new voice when I answered them.

I went back to the hotel with far more clothes than I needed, a whole set of them, the latest thing in Baiblanca chic. I dropped all the parcels on the bed and collapsed into an armchair, convulsed with a delighted laughter. Then I unwrapped



the clothes and tried one of the suits, an extravaganza in bluish buckskin (synthetic material, though), half-overalls, half-tights, widely open at the chest. It went with studded leather sandals laced high around the ankles, and a cape of the same buckskin lined with iridescent mauve silk. Stupendous. We have much less imagination on Lagrange 2 as far as clothing is concerned, especially male clothing. Like the guy in the store had said, you would have thought that suit had been made for me. Grand.

Shaking with laughter again, I admired that rather striking man in the mirror: not very tall but harmoniously built, lithe and slender, with a well-defined face, though a bit angular; the slightly aquiline nose, the high cheekbones, and under the heavy eyelids, those wide eyes of an almost surprisingly sharp blue.

An almost surprisingly sharp blue.

I don't know what hit me first. To realize who I looked like, or to think: *I am enjoying this!*

Strangely enough, I could have taken the Joanie-John's likeness in stride, somehow. But not enjoying it. Not enjoying it...

I fled to the armchair near the window, far away from the mirror. My hands were cold and sweating; the synthetic fabric of the suit was clinging to my body like a second skin. Enjoying it. Why did they never tell us that changing was something one could enjoy? I never did enjoy it while on duty, it was just...work. And you never, ever, changed while not on duty; it was just not done.

Enjoying it. Was that how it began, then? Not the amok itself (no, not after only one change!) but a beginning. An open door. And from then on...was it? That's what they taught us. Did they? No, not really. They never said as much. But we learned it nevertheless: anarchic change is amok, madness, death. *The Exception must bow to the Rule*. The droning of the hypnotapes. The falsely offhand remarks of the instructors: *Such a gift is not given you to play with*. And why not? If I had easily

stepped into character, so what? Normals do it by the score: you call them actors; nobody's crying amok about that! And anyhow, I did not want to play, I just wanted to understand. To see, to feel by myself, on my own....

On my own. Was that what Joanie-John meant, then?

Muhad's sad, pleading face just before he finally reabsorbed the wings which had so briefly allowed him to be what he was, a bird. And you never, never really change, even for work—and never in front of normals. And you don't stay changed, you always go back to your normal body, to the norm. And your reward is the warm bubble of satisfaction which surrounds you whenever you're on Earth: you look at the normals around you, who don't know what you are because you're so exactly like them, and you think of all the things you can do—for them. And you tell them silently, proudly, lovingly: *Don't worry, I'm here.*

The conditioning and its shackles: salvation—yes, but for whom?

The pleasure: threatening, anarchic, amok—but for whom?

Is asking the question the beginning of amok? If I were amok anyway, would I know it? No one's insane in one's own opinion.

I could always check my serotinine level, but it would have righted itself by now, if this was only the beginning of amok.

I might be amok and not know it.

Then I did something I had never done outside of Training: I put myself to sleep right there in the armchair. A deliberate short-circuit. Closed down until further notice.

When I woke up, daylight was streaming in through the unshuttered window and the terminal was flashing a call. Walking by the mirror, I saw my reflection, inanely surprised not to have reverted overnight to my usual self (to what?). But total change is not magic. You are trained for it. A long, hard training—and there they have you; you wouldn't go to all that trouble just for pleasure, would you? No pleasure

anymore, it died under the eyes of Joanie-John. He was right, of course. A well-conditioned little girl, unable to understand, unable to see. All she could do was run away in horror from he who was trying to tell her, trying to show her.... So why tell her, why try? Better push her outside and then the *exploded building still standing, frozen in time....* No. Better look down on the terminal screen and not look at one's reflection, whoever that is. Total change is an act of will. And to will, you must know what you want, and to know that you have to be someone. I know therefore I am. Berger, you're in bad shape, don't I know it, brother, STOP IT, better see who's calling.

SERA DOMENICA IGUERRA  
WOULD BE HONORED TO  
COUNT SER PAUL BERGER  
AMONG HER GUESTS TONIGHT.  
EVENING DRESS IF YOU SO  
PLEASE. FROM SIX P.M. 319  
BAY PROMENADE. EMBASSY  
DISTRICT

*Ser Paul Berger.* News travelled fast in Baiblanca. I had not even seen my shadow; I hadn't even thought that Iguerra would have me followed, actually. No doubt it must have been a metame, who would not be fooled.... It had to be a routine procedure, obviously. But then again, I was not used to being in...a highly irregular situation. Irregular, that's all. You don't invite an amok to a party, do you? Thanks, Sera Iguerra.

I studied *Ser Berger* in the mirror—I studied myself. The suit had not a wrinkle in spite of the night I'd spent in the armchair. The silk lining had not faded as well, though. I called Room Service to have it ironed out. Then I realized it was almost five p.m. I should have slept a little while longer. But I knew how to spend the remaining time: I stood in front of the mirror and *rehearsed* Paul Berger.

I even managed to get there the fashionable half-hour late.

The Iguerras' place was a splendid affair on the Bay Promenade, not very far from the Lagranges' Embassy. Not the most splendid—I

had seen some really outrageous edifices along the Avenue, when I had come to pay my first appointed visit to Miguel Iguerra. It was certainly big enough to welcome more than three hundred guests, while looking moderately full. Lights everywhere, like an ancient cruise ship (though with much better taste), liveried servants at the door. No invitation cards, of course; in Baiblanca, they *recognize* you at the door in that kind of party, or you're not famous enough to have been invited in the first place. The *Maitre d'* recognized me, I didn't know how and didn't care. He offered to take my cape, bowed when I declined, and pointed me to the right side of the great hall. A striking woman was already drifting towards me with Iguerra in tow: white luminous hair, a tall statuesque body bared by a tight lumex jumpsuit (not luminous, but sparkling), though it left only her face and hands uncovered. They made a piquant contrast: Iguerra was tall enough, but rather thin, with a Latin head of brown, curly hair and a very straight, almost strutting countenance, as if always refraining from some flamenco move. This woman, on the contrary (his wife, I assumed), was ample, sinuous and unhurried. She was the one coming out to greet me; he looked like he had simply been caught in her wake. He shook my hand a little guardedly but urbanely enough. *Domenica Iguerra*, however, had a definitely sensuous handshake, an enveloping—if pointed—way of looking at you; an appraisal, but with just the perfect hint of complicity. And I stood there trying my best to cope. *Domenica Iguerra* was a metame.

I could have guessed; they were Marian's friends, after all. But Iguerra was a *normal!* I had heard about such couples, of course. Here, though, in the very refined setting of the Lagranges' Embassy in Eurafrica?

"Ser Berger, it's such a pleasure to have you here with us tonight!"

"It was such a very pleasant surprise for me to be invited."

"I hope the whole evening will offer other pleasant surprises to you, as well as to all our other guests."

"I have no doubts about that, with a hostess such as you."

She had an almost perfect control. Flashing a frankly amused smile at last, she turned to her husband. "Oh, he is perfect. I'm kidnapping him, Miguel; you two will talk about boring things later." She took my arm and pulled me to small tables half-smothered in flowers, where drinks and food were artfully displayed.

"Boring things?" I asked.

"Oh, you know, man-talk. Politics." And without pausing, but with a totally different, serious intonation: "Do you know why I invited you?"

"To prove to Lagrange 2 I'm not going amok?"

"Among other things. They do so lack in imagination, you know. They see amok everywhere as soon as one indulges in a little fancy. Mere curiosity is a sin to them."

"Metamorphosis is a thing too serious to be left to metamorphs, obviously." My voice was a little too harsh.

She studied me silently for a while. "We're in Baiblanca, here. It's somewhat different. You have already made some rounds, I believe."

In spite of her short sentences, she spoke with a kind of deliberate slowness which was vaguely hypnotic. I almost missed my cue. "The Park."

She pulled a wry face. "You're going to visit another kind of zoo tonight. Hope you're aware of that?" She undressed me with that quick glance of hers. "If you are in the mood to play, you'll be the darling of the party. They all know what you are, more or less. You *are* here to play, aren't you?"

And suddenly *she* was not playing anymore. She touched my arm before I could answer. "Don't fail me. I bet on you. And don't fail yourself. If you want out of it, if it's too much, leave. No shame in it."

I still refused to open up. "With whom did you bet? And on what?"

Her hand was heavier on my arm, her now-unguarded emotions more urgent too. "With myself. That

you would stand the test, as I have. Don't let them destroy you."

I could not keep from flinching. But then I felt her hand sensuously stroking the synthetic fabric of my sleeve while she took her distance again. "Anyway, you do have some very interesting abilities, I can see that," she said with a slow, lecherous smile, so well *acted out* that I had to laugh.

Her eyes twinkled. "That's the spirit. Laugh in their faces. With all due respect, of course."

I looked at the bright crowds drifting among the tables. "In the zoo beasts' faces?"

"Beasts? Them?" She laughed disdainfully, a magnificent throaty laugh. "Oh, come on, I was referring to those naughties up on Lagrange 2, like Nakamura." She looked thoughtfully at me. "You are quite new to this, aren't you? It might be a bit too early...." A hint of worry. "Come to me if there's anything wrong, will you? Don't hold back."

"You'll be busy."

"Not for you."

We looked at each other for a moment; under the extravagant makeup, she had very ordinary eyes of a nondescript brown color, with a very ordinary, very human expression. I could see there what she would not tell, what I would not ask: her conversation with Marian about me. Then, a sparkle of humor: "You'll be busier than me. I'm old news. And believe me, most of these people are poor excuses for beasts. Very few can stand our fangs. They just want to be ravished." A frown. "That's what makes some of them dangerous, too."

A brief pat on my arm, a wink. "Go play ball." And she was gone, like a splendid battleship. As if a signal had been given, some spectators came up to me, changed themselves into potential partners with one or two lines, and I began to play.

When did I stop believing that I was enjoying it? When I saw that there were as many men as women around me, with the same seducing strategies to which I gave

the same responses? Or when I realized, a little later, that I was *not* responding in the same way to all, but that women were still as numerous as men as time went by? Were really all these people some kind of *perverts*?

And what do you think you are, by the way, *Ser Berger*? You are much more interested in the *men*. *Ser Paul Berger*.

I hid a sudden, incredulous laughter behind a glass of sparkling white wine. What a tangle of mismatched lusts! These people knew, thought, or assumed, that I had recently changed into the man. Who were they chasing but one I was not? The woman I had been, for some; the man I pretended to be, for others. And I was true to nature and nurture, if not to my present body: I leaned to the men. How did they interpret it? As a latent homosexuality, now paradoxically revealed?

It was so absurd it sobered me up. What could "homosexuality" actually mean to a *metame*?

But it did mean something to me right now, as well as it did to those normals who were wooing me— whichever one of me.

(Those *what*?)

I put the glass down. My hand was shaking. In this absurd seduction parade, in this charade, I could only lose. I was inclined to be attracted to the men, not so much because the women were unattractive, than because a hypnotape was still droning under the stifling pillow I had for a conscience. Norms piled upon norms, the *metame*'s norm and the woman's, as I had been born and raised and nailed down into that sex. Who was I, who was Berger? That was the answer: a hollow mummy, defined only by the narrow strips wrapped around it by Central. Not by Central alone; we underwent the conditioning unknowingly at first, but we validated it afterwards, we cherished it, we clung to it. And once unwrapped, we were not free; we were...an emptiness, a void, nothing, nobody, *the building suddenly exploded but still standing, the fragments frozen in time before they col-*

*lapse in a final cloud of dust, it's my life, little one, all I have left, put an end to it.*

I looked blindly for the exit, but then the lights went out in the hall. There were surprised whispers, some laughs, then silence as the voice rose.

It rose in the darkness at first. It was the darkness. But little by little it defined a still unseen space, pulling it together, centering it, giving it substance and meaning. Invisible currents began flowing through it, lighting it slowly. The voice was light now, an elusive iridescence at first, glistening, glittering, and then a growing brightness, a victorious effluence.

Then you realized that the voice had not been saying anything. That it had just been intoning a deep, vital sound, a sound predating words. But by now echoes were building around that voice, granting it space and volume, giving it flesh: a body was moving on a stage now, the source of rippling, luminous colors—the source of true dimensions, too, now that it was dancing: verticality, horizontality, depth. And the dance issued forth music; and at one with the music, the voice was speaking or singing, crying and laughing, whispering, shouting. And the newly born flesh was exploring the newly drawn space, free and merry and innocent like dawn, like life in its first awareness of itself.

The dancer comes closer now to the edge of the stage. The voice slowly differentiates itself from the music generated by the dancing body. It is a human voice now, modulating a recurrent, ascending scale: a call, a plea. Space is not centered around the dancer anymore: it widens into an unfolding vastness, alive with a mysterious presence. The voice is one sound among many once again, and like the dancing, color-rippling body, it sounds curious and delighted and fearful; it moves as if it were saying *You. I. Here. There. Together?*

The body moves more slowly now, more sharply. Space is not pulsing with free-flowing colors anymore; a stricter, unadulterated grid of

primal tones unfolds. A fleeting balance is achieved, breaks down. The colors become frantic, a mad, stroboscopic spiral. Space is winding down into an over-shrinking prison, the body shrivels, the voice dies down, the light disappears.

Darkness.

Exploding! With white light, with primal fire, with the pure, first cry of life, when death and birth are fused in the same crucible. On the stage, the body expands, straightens up, joining Earth and sky; colors break through the rails of space, music free again, a vast, sonorous wave which soon subsides into the gentle sounds of humanity: simple rhythms first—a linear beat, the heart a dual pulse, breathing, inside, outside. More complex ones, then, smoothly weaving in and out, the constantly firing neurons, the busy cells, the endless dance of molecules on the threshold where the flesh and the universe exchange their substance. And when the music gradually becomes silent again, when light and colors slowly fade into black around the quiescent body, when space has all but disappeared, the voice is still there, scaling back down to the deep, sustained sound, to the serene statement: *You. I. Here. There. Together.*

Full silence, then. The tribute of silence, the only true artistic appraisal. And then, of course, a wave of applause which became shouts, whistles, stampings, sheer noise, as if all those people wanted to crush the memory of what they had just experienced. Lights came back in the hall. The servants opened the high French windows and the guests poured over the terrace, where other drinks and other entertainments were waiting for them. It was night. Distant lights were wetly twinkling all around the Bay, defining the dark space which was the hungry ocean. Go out to the palely gleaming balustrade, look unconcerned, answer the ambiguous smiles, just enough as not to be ensnared in a conversation. Breathe alone, at last, away from them all. Calm one's troubled body. Allow a thin smile on one's dry lips: the art

critics were right, this Sirina Malvic would do for a while in Baiblanca. Very crafty show; sensors concealed all over and inside the artist's flesh, receptors scattered all over the hall and plugged into synthesizers, an array of skilled technicians hidden somewhere. Fine work, lady. Quite effective. Some fleeting dreams, some nice emotions. And then what? It's over. It was nothing. Better go back to the electric lights, the calculated laughs, the probing glances, the smiling, soft aggressions. Drift back among the normals. The normals? Nobody here, folks, but us amoks. Come and try my teeth, wretched beasts, come and confess to me who you are, as if I didn't know what I am not. You here, in your insignificant space of time, and I there, wherever that is. What is there to unite us? Neither life nor death. Especially not death.

“Paul Berger.”  
“More or less.”

I answered before turning around, and during that split second I tried to visualize the woman to whom that intimate, husky voice belonged, the woman who was going to be caught in the mirage of Paul Berger. Then I heard that those two words had neither been an apostrophe nor a question. They had sounded like a thoughtful statement.

She was different, almost comically so, from the woman I had visualized. So young, to begin with. And so different from the shining presence on the stage a moment earlier, smaller, stockier. Even the voice was different. Hers was not a magazine-cover face. Various departures from that sanitized norm; deficiencies and excesses, which had been erased somehow by the stage magic, were glaringly obvious now, not even attenuated by the light makeup. Too expressive and too naked, that heart-shaped face, those eyes neither green nor gold but somehow cycling from one shade to the next, below brown curls which owed too little to a hairdresser.

It took a second more to absorb the shock, then to wonder about it;

her emotions were so strong, so clear. She was one of those normals who have learned to control their emotional output by controlling their body. But of course she was an acrobat, a dancer, an actress, a singer, used to the constant feedback of electronics; she had had ample opportunities to learn how to control herself. Nothing like a metame, but fair enough for a normal. Besides, her emotions were "clear" only by contrast with the other guests'. In her emotional background, I could almost sense the wild tangle of unconscious impulses that we perceive in any normal—sometimes the *only* thing we perceive in them—like a continuous white noise. Or perhaps "black noise" would have been more appropriate? The unacknowledged revulsion, the sick fascination, the unnamed desires...she must hide them better than the other normals milling around, that was all.

"I am Sirina Malvic," she said, almost surprising me.

"So modest of you to introduce yourself. Or do you believe I am even more parochial than I look?"

A slight backward move, a quick reassessment. She let the silence stretch on, just long enough, then she said, "Do we begin all over from the start, or do you really want to be left alone?"

No aggressiveness; under the deliberate calm there was even a hint of true hesitation. No use to show my claws before she unsheathed hers.

"Let's start again. Very pleased to meet you, Sera Malvic. Very nice show. When do you bring it up to the Lagranges?"

"When I know for sure how I perform in weightlessness."

"We have an Earth-normal G, you know."

"Yes, but I want to do it in null-G, or maybe half-G. Easier to come by in the Lagranges. I'm working on it right now."

"A secret, or a scoop?"

"A secret."

"And you go around telling your secrets to strangers?"

"You're not a stranger to me."

"Is that so?"

The quick glance again, from the eyes to the mouth back to the eyes. Strangely, I did feel she was not evaluating the various possible answers (*You've just changed into a man instead of going back to Lagrange 2 as you ought to; or, You are going amok*), as much as evaluating me—as if I had asked a true question. And not a hint of flirtation from the beginning, either. Refreshing.

"You are lost. You are scared. And bored to death with this party," she said in a rush.

I turned towards a servant threading his way through the crowds with the smooth grace of an underwater swimmer. I took two glasses and I gave her one, smiling, back in control again. "What about you?"

"I'd rather go back home after a show, with friends."

I pointed out the brightly lit terrace, the hall, the jewel-studded dresses, the hum and laughter weaving in and out of the music. "No friends here?"

"No more than you. Or no less. Many admirers. Consumers. Vampire-style."

"Why did you stay, then?"

A wide, sweetly embarrassed smile. "For you. I've wanted to meet a metame for a very long time. But you are a very...protected species."

Well. She took more time to get to the point, but she came there more neatly than the others, at least. I smiled. "You should go to Lagrange 2, then."

"It is one of my reasons to get there."

"And what do you want from us metames?"

"Oh...." She laughed suddenly, like one who is finally through with caution. "To talk, to ask questions, perhaps answer some...you see...." A last pause, and then she plunged. "My older brother was a metame. He...did not live through it. He was only one year older. We were very close."

She surprised me by stopping there. I thought I was in for her life's story. I saw she was watching me still; the confidence had been carefully calculated. But somehow sincere. I

had felt it too. Not so ingenuous, then, Sirina Malvic. All of a sudden the game was much more interesting. She went on, surprising me again.

"You can imagine. The identification with the beloved brother, the endlessly frustrated curiosity about metames—to everybody's disgust, as it is a taboo with decent people. And in the end, instead of being a good little girl who makes a lot of babies to replenish the human race, bad Sirina becomes—shudder!—an artist. Well, a glorified showgirl, really, you know. Just because she happens to feel it is the nearest thing to metamedom."

Her smile suddenly vanished (her eyes had never been amused, though, had never left mine). "Am I shocking you?"

In spite of myself, I said sincerely, "You are surprising me. No metame would ever dream of being a showperson."

"Then I am surprised. Why not? The possibilities are so numerous they seem limitless."

I took a sip of the wine, fighting for control. "Nobody really likes limitlessness."

"Is anybody really happy with limits, either?"

I looked at her clamped jaws, at her hand suddenly closing around the fragile stem of the glass. "You mean you are not satisfied with what you do? It's very effective, though."

I was surprised again. I felt she would have reacted to that world, had she not restrained herself. She faked a smile. "An artist must never be satisfied. And anybody could have done what I'm doing as far as fifty years ago. Granted, they suddenly found they had a lot of other things to do, with the Tides. So I happened to be the first to make a comprehensive synthesis, to explore logically every interface between electronics and the human body. But it is a finish line, not a starting point. A limit. The human body is the limit. But not for you."

I could not help laughing then, a bit too harshly; she sighed and put her glass down on a nearby table, very carefully. "You are angry now."

Come on, let's get out of here. It is too...Baiblanca, here. We cannot meet, only...collide. Will you?"

"And what exactly am I supposed to agree to?" I had a grip on myself now—and yes, I was angry at being caught slipping.

"Don't pretend to misunderstand!" She was angry now. And almost at once vulnerable. "If you don't want to talk, just say it. I'd understand. I'm too straightforward, I know." A humorous glint: "I shall not last very long in here, I fear."

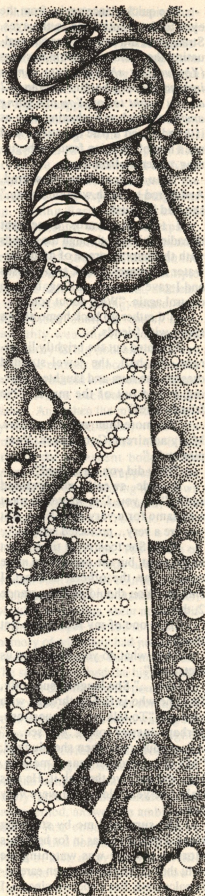
So quick, so bright; mercurial. But not elusive as quicksilver, just whole, somehow. Very attractive. I put my glass down. "So let's go somewhere else."

Somewhere else was her apartment, not very far, on the last floor of the Embassy; she was *Domenica Iguerras'* guest for the duration of her stay in *Baiblanca*.

"Why didn't you try to talk with *Domenica Iguerra*?" I asked. "She is a *metame*, too."

She went on switching on the lights everywhere in the apartment. "I was too busy with the show. I heard about her only tonight, and I arrived this morning. Seems everybody knew but me. I will talk to her, of course. Do you want a drink?"

I did not answer. I was staring at the picture. It was a big laminated reproduction of an engraving, under a glass frame. On a dark background almost totally hidden by numerous spheres of all sizes, there was a slightly angled man's face on the right, a woman's on the left. The two faces were at once made of and delineated by spirals of an unwinding strip of some material, not cloth but stone or plaster. Each spiral formed a transverse part of the sliced face: the top of the forehead, the eyes and the higher part of the nose, the lower part of the nose and the mouth, the chin and the neck. The eyes were directing a fixed, vaguely hallucinated stare to nowhere; the expression on each sliced face reminded me that of classical statues: an intense, but vacant brooding.



"Escher. It's my mascot in a way. I take it with me wherever I go," she said behind me, her voice slightly wavering. "What do you think of it?"

I took time to control my voice, surprised and angry to need as much, and turning to her, I said, "Interesting."

"You don't like it," she saw at once; her voice was low, perplexed. "I call it '*Metamorph*,' though that's not its title; there were no *metames* in Escher's time, but that's what it means to me. You don't like it." She looked thoughtfully at me. "We don't see the same thing in it, I gather."

I laughed then, a barking, naked laugh of pain, but I had no other answer left.

Her face darkened. "Why did you come here? You don't really want to talk, do you?"

In defiance, to hold back the rising tide of memories, I deliberately quoted *Joanie-John*, a parody: "A kind of weakness...." My voice caught in my throat. I could not finish. I turned away so she wouldn't see my face. Found myself facing the picture.

I sprang to the door.

She was there before me. Surprisingly hard hands on my arms. "Wait, please, don't go like this!"

I almost hit her then, and she flinched, just a little, not letting go of me. She had caught herself a *metame*; she wouldn't let go before winding it dry. I shook her, shouting. "Okay, so go on, talk, tell me whatever you want, I'm not listening!"

She gave me a wide-eyed look, letting go of my arms. "But I am listening to *you*." She was very gentle, very sad. "I told you almost all I had to tell. Perhaps you did not hear me. But it's all right. I am listening to you, now. That's all I wanted, really. You said the show was nice. Did you really like it? The others, the normals, I mean, usually they don't really understand. Too straightforward, they say, too raw. I guess they are afraid. I thought that you...I had hoped.... What did *you* like? What did *you* see in there? I wanted it to speak to everybody, but I guess...."

She sagged a little, breathing hard as you do when you don't want to cry. Then she hung her head and stepped away from the door.

After a while, I surrendered. "What do you want from me, really?"

"Nothing. Anything. Whatever you can give. Whatever you want to give. You are *somebody*, aren't you? A human being. We can be together for a while, you and me, even if I am not a metame?"

I thought I understood, then. "You would like to be a metame."

"Oh, but I am one, in my own way. I'm trying. Shouldn't we all? To be more...encompassing. More resilient. More human. No?"

I collapsed on the sofa. She was looking at me with faintly imploring eyes.

"No."

"Isn't that what being a metame is all about?"

"Exactly the opposite."

"When you can be anything, anybody?"

"Nobody. Nothing."

She sat beside me. I had no anger left. Paula Berger was dead tired, too tired even to force Paul Berger's body not to be tired anymore. I closed my eyes. I felt I was drifting away.

"It's not true," her small, stubborn voice went on. "Here, now, you are somebody, aren't you?"

This little girl was sweet, really. "Who do you think is here now?" I said in a low voice, not opening my eyes.

"Who do you think?"

The rejoinder had been unexpectedly quick and strong, and with such a stern intonation, too. I cracked my eyes open, glanced at her: yes, stern.

"Do you know..." each word weighed tons, but I forced myself to go on, "...what they call Lagrange 2, in French? The French initiated the whole thing, you know. They call it the PROTÉE Project. For Proteus, the demigod who could change itself at will, you think? Oh no, that's the acronym for 'Programme Total d'Education des Exceptionnels.' But

it really is 'Programme Total d'Elimination par Endoctrinement.'"

In the following quiet I let my eyes close again. But Sirina Malvic would not let me go to sleep. "And were you nobody before the indoctrination? And throughout the indoctrination? And afterwards? Didn't you just change? Why did you? Do you know?"

"I am in amok." There, it was so easy to say after all, to acknowledge it at long last. I repeated it with a sort of sick satisfaction. "In amok."

"Just because you changed? But don't you think it's normal for you to change? That's what metames *are*, shapechangers. You are perfectly *normal*."

Her anger made me look at her; she was somehow refigured with her passion, taller, beautiful, lost. I smiled at her, kindly. "You are a normal."

"I am much more in amok than you are! I do want to change, to be anybody I want, to be anything, and I should not. I do want to live for a very, very long time, and I won't. Did you ever think of that? No metame has ever died a natural death yet, *did you ever think of that?* And I am not a metame, and my brother was, and it killed him. And yes, you can do everything I want to do and can't, and if you don't do it, then you *are* mad. But don't you see, *they* are mad, the whole PROTÉE Project, the whole concept, the normals who do this to you, don't you see what they are doing, don't you see how they are afraid of you?"

"Mama, it's me, Paulie."

I hardly recognize her, she is so thin! Or rather, it's as if she had shrunk in every part of her body: the waxy skin is very tight, defining the bones with a bizarre accuracy. And that dull stare...is she already that far gone? Doesn't she know me anymore? I have not changed that much in five years. I sent them pictures, even if they never answered my letters.

She frowns; her eyes glimmer faintly, come into focus. She opens her mouth. On a shout, a strident call.

Somebody comes charging down the stairs outside of the room, a gangly figure appears in the doorway. François, asking a worried question, and falling silent when he sees me.

"Take her away!" Mama cries in a shrill voice. "Take her away!" Her eyes are closed, her head turns violently to and fro on the pillow. François takes my arm, roughly, but also as if strangely reticent; he pulls me out of the room, into the corridor. I don't resist. I repeat, stupidly, "But it's me, Mama, it's Paulie," all the way, even when the bedroom door slams shut.

François lets go of my arm. He stands there in front of me, heavily shifting his weight from one foot to the other, biting his lower lips, averting his eyes. How big he is now! He's taller than me by a head, at least.

"What got into you? Why did you come here?" he says in a muted voice, as if he does not dare to be openly angry. I stare at him. I can't believe my ears, and he adds, "I thought they didn't let you out of there before you were...broken in."

His lips curl on the last words, as if in disgust. I don't reply; I can see now how wrong I was in demanding to come down here, how right Marin was. Still, I say, "I wanted to see her, that's all. To see her before she..." In spite of myself, my voice breaks. But my brother's expression only becomes more stubborn, more resentful.

"And to flaunt your good health, is that it? Your eternal good health! She really did need that! Nobody needs that! We don't need you! Go away!"

He doesn't push me out, though. He rams his fist into the wall—because he doesn't dare hit me?—and he runs up the stairs, stumbling on the landing. His bedroom door bangs shut.

During a brief, very brief moment, so as not to hurt so much, I want to shout very loudly some very stupid things, like, "I will never die, never ever, and you can all croak, see if I care, and anyway you deserve it!" But I'm not a little girl anymore. I'm

sixteen years old, and I leave the house in a very dignified way. I don't cry. There is only that truncated sentence I learned some time ago, revolving round and round in my head, curiously soothing: *The metame's burden. It's the metame's burden.*

She is very close to me now, Sirina Malvic is. I did not see her move. Her hand is on my arm. *Don't you see how they are afraid of you? Because we could live very long? Because we can survive almost any of the things which kill them? Of course I see it. Of course I knew. It is part of what Lagrange 2 teaches you. Explicitly teaches you. The metame's burden: I shall be alive when you're all dead. And beneath that, the implicit warning: I shall be alive, perhaps, when you're all dead. Perhaps there is still amok's Russian roulette, amok's blind justice. So perhaps that is the first step downwards, to think I shall be alive when you're all dead, and the guilt, the terrible, never-acknowledged remorse. And simultaneously, the secret terror: knowing one is potentially immortal and nevertheless threatened by that incomprehensible disorder—amok. And they must know that, the crafty people on Lagrange 2. They must know that all the strips they wrap us in only makes the explosive end more certain. That destiny—we may be the ones who program it, through our minds, not our bodies. The more I try to behave under the fetters, the more anger seethes beneath, frustration, fear. The less I die, the more I die. That's what happened to me, isn't it, Joanie-John? No death. I knew about death; and not even your death, but my death, mine, a knowledge always denied but always resurgent. Oh, how I hated you for reminding me, how I wished you had blown yourself up before I came to you, how I wished you had never existed—and that's what you felt, Joanie-John, it was not my fault and you knew it, but you felt it and you died. *Don't you see how they are afraid of you?* But we are much, much more afraid,*

we hate ourselves so very much more! And they must have known. That's why they sent me. I was not supposed to help you. I was to push you over the edge with my fear, my ignorance, my hate.

I look at Sirina's hand on my arm. A small, brown hand, finely cut. It just lies there, very lightly, as if to say...what? *You are here, and I am there, we are together?* I take it by the wrist, between two fingers, I turn it upside down to see the palm, and she lets me do it. I begin to squeeze. "You are not afraid," I say.

She does not stiffen, does not pull away. Her gaze stays locked to mine. "Less afraid than you are, perhaps; I have fewer choices. But you have so many, you are so free, it must be frightening, sometimes." Then, calmly, softly: "You're hurting me."

"I could kill you."

"You don't have to kill yourself, either."

I let her go. I stand up. *You don't have to kill yourself, either. And what else is there? The miserable beasts of Baiblanca, of anywhere else? That you will stand the test, like I have. But for one* *Domenica Iguerra* who survived it, how many *Joanie-John Bordes*? They don't like us, they're afraid of us, they envy and resent us; what is there to unite them and us? Death, especially not death?

*(White light, primal fire, when death and birth are fused in the same crucible.)*

Sirina Malvic has not moved. She looks up at me from the sofa, her small brown hands neatly folded on her lap. One step, two steps towards the door, and my hand on the handle, but the picture is there in its frame, the picture is like a magnet. Once the eye has glanced at it, it is caught, it has to follow the spiraling strip, it spirals up and down with it, and again, and again. The strip is only shaped like a face, and once undone, *the building already exploded falsely standing up the fragments frozen in slow time and it crumbles it falls in clouds of dust and afterwards we looked in the rubble, sifting through the rubble to find* NO but the tape

catches and somehow repeats itself to find the red little pieces no no but I have to hear, I have to see *Joanie-John's little pieces, not dead yet, Joanie-John's little pieces, beginning to heal up, and were they slithering towards one another under the rubble, Joanie-John's little pieces of flesh?* Somewhere in my memory, François rams his fist into the wall and I ram my fist into the last tape—it has said what it had to say, the last strip gives out—with all my strength.

After a while, Sirina leaves the room; she knows she can leave me alone, now. As she walks by me, her hand alights fleetingly on my arm. I don't hear the door closing, she does it so softly; the door is not really closed, just pushed to. I'm looking down at the picture, which the impact has unhooked. It lies against the wall, at a slight angle. The reproduction itself shows no trace of the violence. Pieces of glass fell on the carpet, but without a sound. In the lower right-hand side of the picture, the last loop of strip forming the man's neck goes on to the left side to become the woman's neck, then spirals upwards into the woman's upper head, the last loop of which goes on to form the man's upper head on the right. Through each winding strip you can see the dark background. But it is not a void: there are the spheres, the endless, perfect, eternal dance of the spheres. Some of them even float in the foreground, before the tranquil faces. The engraving's title appears in several languages in a small cartouche on the lower right side: BAND. BOND OF UNION. BANDE OHNE ENDE. LIEN INFINI. 'Bond of Union' or 'Endless Binding?' The titles don't have the same meaning in each language.

And Sirina calls this picture 'Metamorph.'

I crouch down. The glass pieces still clinging to the frame offer sharp shards or larger, irregular, but still cutting forms, into which I can see the reflection of a scattered face, looking like someone I briefly knew. I gather the larger pieces of glass on



the carpet, then I go and bring a wastepaper basket to the fallen picture. The first piece of glass that I try to pry away from the frame comes out easily. The second one is stuck; I wrap my hand around it, I shear it away from the frame. When I am finished, I inspect the carpet. I missed a big piece, near the sofa. I pick it up, I turn it over in my right hand. My unbleeding right hand; *that* conditioning goes so deep that it becomes totally automatic: a second nature. I pull the sharp edge against my palm abstractedly. And then I do it in earnest, willing the skin to be wounded. The flesh opens up like a small mouth. I go further against the protecting reflex and I let the blood flow. The mouth reddens, it fills up, it spills over. I must accept the pain now; I must will it. I hold my hand out in front of me to see the first drops of blood form. And I hold the other hand out, to intercept them before they fall on the carpet. They gather wetly in the uncut palm. Why not? I alter the cells in that hand, make them porous, and now my right hand's blood is slowly reabsorbed through my left hand, as in shifting sands. Pumped through my heart to my arm to my right hand. And back again through the docile net of capillaries, blood vessels, arteries, from my left hand to my left arm to my heart. A closed circuit. An unbreached enclosure. *Bande Ohne Ende.*

But then I lower my wounded hand and I let the blood drop on the carpet. It needs a few seconds to begin sipping through the deep fabric. There will be a spot. One, two, three drops of blood, that is enough: an offering. *Bond of Union.*

I pick up the frame and I put the picture back on its magnetic hooks on the wall. On the laminated, gleaming material, I can see the reflection of a face superimposed on the segmented, distant, vaguely indulgent faces of the man and woman. Hello, goodbye, Joanie-John. *Your life is yours; think of it.* Yes. I do. Thank you. Forgive me. And hello, goodbye, Paul Berger. *I am the one who will open that door, I believe.* ■

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# WHEATFIELDS BEYOND

Dave Wolverton

Illustrated by Russell Morgan

*Tana Rosen met Karl Ungricht three times in her life*

**T**ana Rosen met Karl William Ungricht three times in her life, twice before the end of the world and once long after.

The first time they met, Tana worked as a criminal psychologist who spent her days judging violent men in spite of her petite size. She had thin fawn-like bones and wiry legs that would easily curl up under her butt for hours as she sat on the floor to watch TV.

In the mornings Tana worked as a pretrial consultant for the Utah State Attorney's Office, sorting men the way another person might sort good pea pods into one pile, culls into another. "This juvenile car thief needs drug therapy more than prison; the mother up for child abuse is probably scared straight; and the neo-Nazi in the corner is competent to stand trial for capital homicide."

Tana worked afternoons at the Utah State Prison, trying to restore men who were emotionally sick, men ravaged by addictions, men whose brains were so miswired from birth that they did not know right from wrong and were therefore morally crippled. She would advise the doctors and program administrators: "This schizophrenic child molester needs Haldone; that cowboy thief should be taught to read."

At age 28 she had her Ph.D. At age 28 she had a job that would have bewildered Solomon.

People had become things to mend or discard, and over and over again she found herself discarding people she wanted to mend. She would sign papers verifying that a criminal was competent to stand trial, and after consigning some miserable asshole to hell on Earth, she would drop her pen, wring her thin hands,

stare at the lines of her own signature that wandered across the paper like an ant trail. At age 28, Tana Rosen yearned for salvation.

It was a cold night in late January, 1991, with Joel working late at Novell. The Gulf War played on TV. Tana didn't watch; she was tired of green tracers flaring into the night, of pinpoint explosions, of chubby American generals flaying their opponents with clever jibes. With the Iraqis bombed and broken in their trenches, she could think only of their children, malleable little Moslems teething on desolation, groomed in a society that exults in revenge. She believed that any victory would be temporary, a fitful battle, a long uneasy sleep until the next generation matured.

So she worked late at the prison, drove home to Provo and bought



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oranges at the Albertsons off I-15, then stopped to grab a hamburger at the Rocky Mountain Drive-In. At night this part of town was desolate. The auto shops and pawn shops closed early, dimming their lights, and the big snow-covered park across the street yawned wide; the scruffy houses to the south were the abode of poverty and Tana's future clients.

Tana felt edgy, feared she might spot one of her past rejects out on parole, still carrying a grudge.

The clerk turned out one bank of lights up front as she prepared to close, so Tana sat by a post in the darkest corner of the restaurant and toyed with her hamburger. She had grown comfortable being alone. Living with her husband Joel was about the same as being alone, and Tana didn't have any real friends.

Few cars drove by. Across the street in the shadows, a man crawled from beneath a half-demolished bandstand. A low fog had frozen into ice crystals which drifted between the barren branches of the alders in the park. In the 20s and getting colder. Too cold to sleep without a fire, Tana mused.

The girl cook began tearing down ice-cream dispensers, and Tana scrunched closer to the wall as a pimple-faced boy mopped the floor beside her.

A moment later she heard a *pop* outside. The man from the park pulled the lid off the trash can. He was in his twenties, sunken cheeks, straw-blond hair under a stocking cap, a stained army jacket. Just someone's lost boy, nobody Tana recognized. He pawed through papers, found half a Coke which he set on the ground, then scavenged for loose fries and chicken strips covered with mustard sauce. He wrapped the fries and strips in paper, absently shoved them in his pocket.

A car pulled into the lot, washing Tana with lights. She realized she had been staring. She nibbled at her fries for a minute. Through the double-paned glass she heard a man say quite distinctly, "Jesus."

Tana looked up, saw a sagging belly of a man who sat behind a desk all day, white shirt and tie under his suit coat. He wrapped his arm protectively around a little girl, perhaps seven years old, as if to save her from ever having to look upon a homeless person. Clean folks. Bathed in softened water. Citizens out for a bite after an evening movie.

Mr. Belly dipped into his wallet and pulled out a twenty dollar bill, shoved it in the derelict's hand, said, "Excuse me, garblegarblegarble eat?"

The derelict looked at the money as if pondering the relevancy of currency to his life, crumpled it and just

held it, staring vacantly at Mr. Belly, who finally either got tired or embarrassed and brought his daughter inside.

The derelict fished a hamburger from the trash, a big one with a couple of kid bites taken from it, then put the lid back on the can and sat on the curb to feed, shoving hamburger in his mouth in fistfuls, lubricating with Coke.

Revolted, Tana looked away; thought: *Ah, a story with a happy ending.*

She played with her fries, not wanting to head for her car with the derelict so near. The darkened restaurant was safe, anonymous, and she could watch through her window as if viewing the outside world through a television screen. Mr. Belly ordered. Tana spaced out, thinking about a case at the prison, about a necrophile who had killed his own grandmother and kept her in a freezer.

The next thing Tana knew, Mr. Belly was outside again, shouting, "Damn you! Do you think I want you here? Do you think I want my kid watching you eat out here like some animal?"

The derelict sat on the curb, looking up, fries hanging out his mouth, and tried to swallow.

"What in the hell do you plan to do with the money? Buy drugs?" Mr.



Belly shouted, and the derelict started scrabbling backwards to get away. He fumbled in his pocket, set the \$20 in the snow. Mr. Belly's eyes glazed over, a dangerous fixed glare, and he kicked the derelict and started screaming incoherently, "Ahyaaahahahaahaaaaa!"

The derelict fell forward, a red gash on his brow. Mr. Belly had opened him up with the toe of his dress shoe. Then the whole thing became macabre: Mr. Belly kicked and the light from the window shone in his dark eyes, and he was intense, focused. His foot lashed out and the little derelict's gray stocking cap flew off as the boot caught him in the temple. The derelict rolled, eyes closed, away from his attacker, but the big guy kept screaming, kicking for throat, crotch. Tana heard ribs crunch, saw a splash of blood and a flash of white as some of the little man's teeth flew out, heard the chunk of his carcass (she was sure he would die from the beating) as his head hit cement. The restaurant help stopped cleaning, stopped breathing; the compressors for the refrigerators abruptly died as the freezers went to defrost. Even through double-pane windows Tana could hear Mr. Belly wheeze. The beating became nearly soundless—the grunts of the antagonist, the swish of his clothes as he kicked.

*Every day, Tana thought, I work with criminals but never witness the maniac glee in the attacker's face, the whimpers of the victim, blood splashing over frozen snow.* She jumped from her seat, ran out the door. Mr. Belly half-turned when he heard her coming, and he slipped on ice and some of the derelict's greasy fries. Tana was pleased to hear his shoulder crack as he collided with concrete.

Inside the restaurant, Mr. Belly's daughter issued a thin scream, a child's version of the wail an older woman might have made.

Tana ran to the derelict. Blood covered the matted straw of his hair, and he lay twisted on his side, face down in the snow. Blood poured from his mouth and eye, and the hot breath from his nose steamed as if he

were exhaling tiny puffs of smoke. He stared into the ground as if he were gazing at the heart of the Earth. Some splashes of his blood were impossibly red under the glare of neon, but the blood pooling by his mouth was dark and purple. In the cold air it quickly jelled like pudding with a thin skin on it. In his right hand the derelict held the hamburger, as if he'd planned to carry it if he got away. His left hand held a twisted yellow paper and the last few fries.

The cleaning boy stood at the counter phone, pressing 911. All in all, Tana figured the attack had lasted less than thirty seconds.

Mr. Belly grunted and shouted, "Call a doctor, I broke something! I'm hurt!" Tana glanced back. The fat man was struggling to lift himself from the ground with one hand.

Tana whispered to the derelict, "It's all right! You're all right! The ambulance is coming." The hospital was only nine blocks away. Mr. Belly's daughter screamed in the restaurant while the female cook held her. The fat man had managed to raise to a crouch. Tana shouted, "You keep back! Keep back!" for she was sure he would attack again.

"Where's the knife?" Mr. Belly asked. "I swear to God this bum pulled a knife on me." Tana looked into his eyes. Guilt, fear. "It has to be here somewhere." He got up, headed back into the restaurant. Tana watched him go, relieved.

The derelict spat a mouthful of blood, spoke through wheezing breath, "My teeth. Where's my teeth? They dropped here somewheres." It was useless to hunt for them in the dark, in the snow. Tana retrieved his stocking cap, set it under his chin. Mr. Belly came back outside, and Tana saw silver flash in his hand as he stashed a kitchen knife by the garbage can. She pretended not to notice. The big guy nosed around, recovered the \$20 the derelict had dropped.

It seemed to Tana that the ambulance should be coming by now. Joel kept an emergency blanket in the trunk of the car, a thin piece of plastic with a mylar backing. She stum-

bled to the car, opened the trunk. When she closed it, Mr. Belly was hunkered over the derelict in a strangler's pose. She looked in the restaurant window: None of the employees were watching. Mr. Belly lurched away, and Tana rushed to the derelict.

Nothing had changed. The derelict lay in the same position, a pool of blood by his nose, breathing shallow. His eyes had closed, swollen white ridges growing around them, but in his right hand, instead of a hamburger, he now held a kitchen knife.

Tana looked up at Mr. Belly, and his eyes were wide, frightened. He crouched by the trash can. "You found it!" he said. "You found the knife! He had it all along! He stabbed me!" He held out his hand, showed a tiny puncture wound.

At that moment, the cashier came outside, the others behind. Tana thought, *even if I toss the knife, these are witnesses. They will have seen a weapon. I'm too late. and if the police dust the knife for prints. I'll bet they find only those of the transient.*

Framed. That easy.

Tana wanted to run; she thought wildly of trying to hide his bum under a building or of dragging him home and putting him in the bathtub. Any place seemed safer than here, but she couldn't move him, knew he needed more than a roof over his head or warm water on his wounds, and down the street an ambulance siren blared. Tana looked up at Mr. Belly and said, "Damn you, you animalistic mother!"

Tana didn't wait for the ambulance. She drove home, her mind racing. She knew she could tell everyone that Mr. Belly had framed the derelict, but she had no proof. A solid citizen would swear that a transient, an empty condom of a man, had brandished a knife. The jury would jail the derelict even if they believed him to be innocent, because down in their hearts they feared he *might* be dangerous. But what would the charges be? Attempted murder? Even plea-bargained down to aggra-

vated assault, he'd be hit with a first-degree felony. One to fifteen years. They'd lock him up with the vicious boys in the Gladiator School, the dorm for young offenders.

But Tana could fix it if she never admitted witnessing the fight. She could avoid the trial. *I can run a psyche profile on the transient in the morning*, she thought. *No matter how straight and sane he comes out, on paper I'll show him to be a madman. Hell, half the Mormons in the valley can't pass the Minnesota Mental Health Inventory. As soon as they admit belief in gods and devils and revelations, they're down the tube.*

Tana had faith in her abilities. She'd practiced her presentations on videotape. She knew how her wise little mouth hardly opened when she spoke, the words barely pushing beyond her teeth, so that when she was done, her judgments hung in the air by her taut face like breath on an icy morning, and you could look into her little scythe of a smile, the cold blue unblinking eyes, and she always sounded so damned right.

She could get him committed within the week, and in a few months the state hospital would set him free. In fact, he'd be better off. For three months he'd get out from under this godawful cold, have a chance for three square meals a day, a bath.

Tana thought to herself, *I'll be doing him a favor.*

His name turned out to be Karl William Ungricht. She sat at the desk in her office four days after the attack, studying his paperwork. Twenty-four, a high-school dropout up on attempted murder. Like many homeless on the streets in the "kinder, gentler America" created by the current Republican administration, Ungricht was certifiably insane, a schizophrenic lost in a perpetual dream. (*Not unlike the current Republican administration*, Tana mused.) Still, she had no firm plans for Ungricht. On the night of the attack it had been late; she hadn't been thinking clearly. It would have been so much easier just to claim that she had seen Ungricht's attacker

plant the knife and stab himself, even embellish the incident.

*But lying under pressure isn't my strong point*, Tana told herself, and so she had set on the equally undesirable course of embellishing his psyche profile. She had thought about talking to her husband Joel about her dilemma, but knew that he wouldn't give her any worthwhile advice, since he wouldn't want to risk being wrong. Nor would he offer any sympathy. Over the past four days, Tana's life had been hell, and she wanted now to give up her stupid scheme.

After a soft knock on the door, a guard ushered Ungricht into the office. He wore the fluorescent orange coveralls issued to all inmates at the Utah County Jail. He stumbled in, clumsy and out of place, then stood staring at her or through her, someplace a million miles away. Ungricht's mouth was open, showing the gap where two upper incisors and a right bicuspid had been. His face was horribly purpled, clumsily stitched in places, but his hair looked cleaner. He just stood.

"Mr. Ungricht, I'm Tana Rosen, and I'll be doing your psychological evaluation. Are you there? Can you hear me?" she asked, not sure from his paperwork just how far gone he might be.

The derelict finally looked at her. "I hear you, just not awake this time in the morn'." He spoke with a central Utah accent, rare in one so young, so that *morn'* rhymed with *barn*. He smiled, then began laughing.

"What's so funny?" Tana asked. She wondered if she should stay in the room alone with this man, or if she should push the alarm under her desk so that a guard would come sit with them through the interview.

"That sign on your desk," Ungricht said, nodding down.

It was a long, three-sided piece of wood. Each side had a different message. The one Ungricht read said, *TO ERR IS HUMAN, TO FORGIVE IS NOT STATE POLICY*. Tana flipped the sign over so that it simply read, *TANA ROSEN, PSYCHOLOGIST*.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"No need to be sorry." He smiled, and behind his eyes he looked all right. He was scanning the room now, eyes tracking normally.

"I've been reading your paperwork, Mr. Ungricht—"

"My friends call me Willy," he blurted.

"I'm not your friend," Tana said.

"Humph." For a moment he glared, eyes full of pent up anger, and Tana thought he might hit her. "You're playing it mighty cold," he said. "Thing is, you was there when that fellow put me down. I looked up from the ground, saw your face in the window, and I could see the hurt in your eye. I know you care. And ever since I got here, strings has been being pulled. I hardly got my head stitched up before they shoved the psyche papers in front of me. I been jailed before, and that's not natural. You been pulling strings for me. So don't you go telling me that you're not my friend!"

He talked just like any jailhouse con, too aware of her motivations, a professional manipulator. He'd probably learned it while panhandling, the give in a citizen's eye when he planned to drop a quarter into your palm. He knew her pity clouded her judgment, and he planned to take full advantage.

"Your chances for a light sentence look pretty good. Your urine specimen came up clean, no drugs, so that will go in your favor."

"My chances might look good from your side of the table," Willy said, "But not from mine. They found a *knife* in my hand! Got my fingerprints all over it! They say I dug it out of the trash and tried to stab that guy in the chest, and all this just had to happen four hours after some hobo got beat to death down on the railroad tracks." Tana looked in Willy's eyes, saw genuine fear. He was right. The county was rounding up transients as fast as they could. "They're looking at me real close for that one, too, Ma'm!"

"But they won't find anything, will they?" Tana said.

"I've never hit anyone in my life," Willy said, "and that's God's truth. I stole things once in awhile when I was a kid." Tana believed him. Willy had a low-violence profile. She doubted he would ever strike except in self-defense.

"Sit down," Tana said. "I got your jail records from Idaho, and your records from the mental hospital in Arizona. The psyche profile looks consistent. So, tell me, how does God speak to you?"

Willy had pulled up his chair, but as soon as she asked how God spoke, it was as if he left the room. His eyes became fixed and he stared through her once again, almost as if she had thumbed a switch in his brain, turning him off.

"It's a curse from God, that's what it is," Willy said distantly, as if the voice rose from deep within. "A curse from God."

"What is?"

"The dreams. Them's the curse."

"Tell me about your dreams."

"Every night, God sends me a dream."

"Did he send one last night?"

Willy nodded vacantly, licked his swollen lips. "I was a woman in the dream, and I was in the mountains. Real icy cold. Mountains like the Rockies, sandy brown and barren. I remember that someone had said food had fallen from the sky, and I was starving. My ass itched, like I had the runs, and I had thin flabby teats that nursed a baby, only nothing came out. I felt like... worms was in my stomach, eating me alive, making my brain itch, and my gums ached, and I knew I was going to die soon, and that my baby would die. We was high in the mountains, the air clear and icy, and in the valley on the other side of a ridge I heard the tinny sound of an engine driving up windy roads. The campfire's warmth and light were the only things that made the night bearable."

"Someone whispered that the engine was an Iraqi patrol, and we had to douse the fire. I sat in my robes, the baby sucking my empty teat, and as they doused the fire I refused to help. Better to die from an

Iraqi bullet than cold and hunger. Someone said my name, Irena, but I was already dead."

Willy continued staring at the desk, staring into his own dark world beyond the desk, rocking back and forth. Lost.

The dream was consistent with others recorded in Arizona. Six months earlier they'd sent him packing, having determined that he was no danger to himself or others. They surmised that Willy's eating disorder, his "Moral opposition to eating any food that doesn't come out of a trash can," was caused by childhood trauma, but they didn't know. Ten million kids across the country were badgered into eating dinner every night by being told to "think of the poor starving kids in China." Maybe Willy Ungricht was the only one who really ever did feel guilty about the millions who starved; perhaps that led to his compulsive desire to eat refuse.

"God, Willy, you had twenty dollars in your pocket. Couldn't you have just bought a hamburger?"

"No." Willy kept rocking. His hands trembled; he breathed shallowly, like a woman in labor. Tears came to his eyes. "You don't believe it. You think I'm crazy, but God told me to live like this. He sent his angels in a dream, and they said, 'You got to follow your heart, Willy, and you'll be okay,' and when I woke, my heart wanted me to walk out the door, leave home and never go back, so that's what I done."

"When you were sixteen?"

"Something like," Willy said.

Tana fumbled with the mess of papers on her desk. Lots of records testifying to the same thing. "Okay, Willy, I'm going to pull your strings. You're right about the attempted murder charges. I know they're bogus," Tana hesitated. "The thing is, if I try to fight this now, I'd have to go in front of a jury and tell my side of the story against four other witnesses. I could say that I saw him plant the knife—but the value of my testimony has been compromised since I've waited so long. The charges might stick, and, Willy, you don't need prison."

"So if you agree, I want to stack the deck in your favor and fight these charges my way. If you agree, then I'm going to declare you incompetent to stand trial. It will be a sure ticket to the mental hospital. It's clear that your dreams, your illness, is at the heart of this, and you weren't in your right mind when that guy tried to kick your brains out. Still, if you want, I'll take this thing to trial, and I will be a witness for you."

Willy laughed a melancholy laugh. "You plan to send me down to the hospital?"

"Yeah, Willy, I do. Just for a few months—three, maybe six."

"Will they let me eat from the garbage?"

"Maybe. They'll try to break you of it."

Willy sighed, picked up Tana's name tag and flipped it back over: To err is human, to forgive is not state policy. "I expect the food there is about the same as garbage. If this goes to trial, I'd spend six months in the county jail anyway just waiting for a trial date. I guess you're doing what you can. You're saving me."

He sighed. "You know, most folks in the world don't eat food any better than what I pull from the trash. I'm not doing anything wrong."

"I know," Tana said. She paused to study his files. "There is something I wonder about. You did poorly in school, and your psychologist in Arizona says you have an attention-deficit disorder. He's also written something here about a poor concept of time. I just wondered, do you see your life as a story, with causes and effects?"

"No," Willy said.

Tana sighed. "Do you see that your dreams, that your feelings of guilt about eating, are related to what happened the other night? This disorder will destroy you."

"Look, I don't believe that," Willy said. "God told me that if I follow my heart, everything will be okay."

"So life doesn't have causes and effects?"

"Not like what you imagine," Willy said. "Life is just a deck of



cards, flashing in front of you, all of them just appearing at random. Shit happens."

Tana shrugged. This one needed mending, so she would send him to someone who did it full time. She pulled a green spiral notebook from her desk, wrote her work address on the cover, put the pen in the spirals of the notebook. "Willy, I want you to write me. I want you to look at your life, from start to finish, and find a pattern. When you do, write that pattern down while it is clear before your eyes, and send it to me."

Willy looked at the pen. "I can't take that pen into the jail. It would just get stolen by some tattoo freak."

"I'll put it with your clothes," Tana said. "The guards will give it to you when they take you to the hospital," and Tana sighed in relief, hoping she would never see Willy Ungricht again.

After he'd been in the Utah State Hospital for six weeks, Willy's evaluation restrictions were removed; but his therapist took a month to sign the recommend that allowed Willy to leave the locked facility for supervised recreational activities. They released Willy for the first time in early March, when the sun had melted the snow and the endless temperature inversions had let the cloud of polluted air begin to rise from Utah Valley.

The recreational therapist in charge, a kitten of a girl named Lisa Snow, took Willy and a dozen other patients to the dollar theater to watch *Green Card*. It was a perfect movie for schizophrenics—no decapitations, no devils inhabiting the bodies of small girls, nothing to feed the delusions of the audience. Willy sat on the last seat of the row, next to a patient who was so far gone as to be a zombie.

All through the movie, Willy ate popcorn that others spilled on the floor, and wrote furiously in the notebook Tana had given him. He sketched out his life, looking for cause and effect, but nothing made any sense to him, and he finally threw the pen down in disgust.

At the end of *Green Card*, when the French lead and the weird New York chick realized they loved each other, Willy looked down the row and saw Lisa crying into her hand. The male aide two seats down was no better off. Willy whispered to the zombie, "Wish me luck."

Willy slipped from his chair, walked up the aisle, hit the exit door. He sprinted through the parking lot, leapt a fence, and ran north along the Provo River.

When the credits came on screen, Lisa counted her patients. Willy was three-quarters of a mile away. The zombie at the end of the row turned to Willy's seat and said, "Good luck."

In 1989, the ozone hole over the Antarctic had opened permanently, and across Australia millions of frogs began to die, species that had lived for well over a hundred million years. In 1990, scientists studying the combined influence of ozone depletion and the greenhouse effect testified to a Congressional committee that up to seventy percent of the world's plant and animal species could be destroyed within fifty years. In 1991, the average world temperatures broke heat records for the seventh year in a row.

Frogs and salamanders began dying in the northern hemisphere, but computer simulations of ozone depletion provided President Bush with some happy news: the U.S. could continue polluting at current levels for another decade and cause only five percent more skin cancer deaths around the world during the following fifty years.

In summer of 1991, an El Nifio formed in both the Atlantic and Pacific. Warm waters ruined much of the world's fishing for the second time in a decade. In February of 1992, NASA released a preliminary report claiming that chlorine monoxide in the upper atmosphere was found to be at such high levels, that, under cold conditions in mid-winter, ozone could be lost at the rate of up to thirty percent per month. President Bush's aides slammed the report,

claiming that NASA's chief was seeking to turn ozone depletion into a campaign issue. NASA's chief left his post in disgrace. A week later the European Space Administration announced that northern Europe had lost up to thirty percent of its ozone in the month of January, 1992.

In 1993, NASA administrators played down their reports on ozone depletion, saying only that ozone levels over North America hit "an all-time low." In the summer of 1995, the oceans heated again at the equator, reaching thirteen degrees above normal, and climatologists coined the term *El Padre* to describe the phenomenon. Tropical storms belted coasts from Texas to South Carolina, and all through April and May, armchair tornado watchers were gratified on nightly TV. In Illinois, one enterprising man mounted cameras to an armored truck, vowing to shoot footage *inside* a tornado. When the Wheaton Thresher hit, he got sucked up like all the other chaff, but the salvaged footage was spectacular.

Tana and Joel spent the Fourth of July with friends in Vegas during the summer of '95. The day was deadly hot, 117 degrees, and to Tana the summer sky seemed to glow whiter than she remembered from childhood. They gambled at Circus Circus so Joel's friends could keep their kids entertained, but somehow Joel's friends got separated and Tana ended up alone, working the dollar video poker games on the main floor, her eyes stinging from a cloud of other peoples' smoke, winning some, losing more, her ears numbed to the ringing of bells, the chink of tokens pattering into aluminum bins.

Suddenly the lights flashed and the bells kept ringing just two screens down. Over the intercom, a pit boss announced a \$4000 winner, and Tana glanced at the winner, annoyed. A gaunt man with wheat-straw hair, eyes as blue as her own, shabby Levis, and a Terminator 3 tee shirt. He smiled at Tana, a strange vacant smile, his upper teeth missing.

Tana's heart pounded, for she recognized him only as a client, and

she couldn't remember what hell-hole she might have consigned him to.

"Remember me, Willy Ungricht? From up to Provo? You watched me get my face kicked in?"

"Yes," Tana answered, relief washing like cold water through her veins. Then she remembered that he had escaped from the mental hospital. "How are you doing?"

"I'm rich, right now," Willy grinned at the money. Only twenty-five dollars had dropped into the bin, but the pit boss was coming with the check. "Got myself married and had a baby girl. Had to leave, though. Couldn't stay in the house. Tried for awhile. I wanted to write you, but I lost the address on that notebook you gave me, and I figured it wasn't a good idea to go back to Utah. But I did what you asked, I figured my life out, put it down on paper. Do you want to see?"

It came back to her then, the food guilt, her questions. She really had meant to follow up, but Willy had gotten lost in the pile.

"I've decided," Willy said, "that I ain't human. I ain't like you."

Dizziness struck Tana, and she wondered if she should call the police, have Willy picked up. She recalled something about angels. "If you aren't human, what do you think you are?" She expected him to say "The Son of God."

"Oh, just a transient." Willy sounded embarrassed by the admission, but there was something odd in way it came from his lips—*trans-nt*—crushed as if it were a single syllable. Tana realized that, like some yogi out of India who tries to make sense of the world by redefining everything around him, Willy had redefined that word to describe himself. *Trans-nt*. Willy. Not human.

"What's a transient?"

"Oh, well, that takes a bit of explaining," he said, "I'll tell you in a minute." Just then a Mexican in a white shirt came up and took Willy's name, address, and social security number. Willy had the check sent to some girl in El Paso. When he was done, he and Tana sat by their video poker screens.

"After I run off from the hospital in Utah," Willy said, "I tried real hard to do what you asked. I tried writing in that book and making sense of my life, but none of it made sense. I headed south down to Zion's Canyon for awhile, and one night a big storm blew in. I sat in the dark and watched lightning strike this big stone mountain, all around, going boom, boom, boom, and the lightning was like the thorns in the crown that Jesus wore when he was crucified—bloody and full of light, and cruel—and I realized I had seen this all before, the lightning and the crown on Jesus' head. But it was in another life, a long time ago. Still, the memory was all written in my bones. That's when I figured I wasn't human, but I didn't know what I was, and it scared me. So I headed to Texas."

"Why Texas? Did you think it would be more safe?"

Willy looked at her as if she were crazy. "Course not. It was just a place. But on the way, I felt like I was on to something. I could feel something inside me, waking up or coming alive, and I started to understand things, and I wrote them in that notebook you gave me. For awhile I thought I might be normal, like you folks, and that maybe I'd been a little sick in the head and I was getting better, but no.

"Anyway, in Texas I went to sleep in a culvert one night, and I found this girl, a runaway. She'd left home a month before, had no food. I thought I'd teach her the ropes, and she followed me around. One thing led to another, and I accidentally knocked her up. She said she loved me, so we got married, took jobs and settled."

"What do you mean, settled?" Tana asked hopefully. "Were you able to hold down a job, manage your money? You know, basic life skills?"

"Yeah, we rented an apartment. We both took jobs washing beef carcasses at a meat-packing plant. The money was good, and we made out all right." Willy pulled a cigarette from his pocket and stuck it in his mouth without lighting it. "Thing is,



it didn't last. At first it was okay, but after little Juanita was born, I had to start getting out of the house, taking long walks at night—ten, twenty miles at a time.

"I was walking through the park one day, and I'd left Teresa at the apartment watching TV with the baby, and my legs just kept saying 'keep moving, keep moving,' and I looked out in the park—" As Willy spoke, his voice grew in intensity. "And that's when it hit me: I saw two kids sitting in boxes, with their backs to the bottom, looking out, *pretending they were in caves*. And three other kids was also sitting there with blankets pulled over their heads, and they were looking out as if they were watching from *caves*, and that's when I knew I wasn't human!"

Spittle flew from Willy's mouth. He had stopped blinking during the conversation, and his eyes had grown wide and strange. He clutched the rim of the video poker machine.

"How...how did you know you weren't human?" Tana asked, scanning the room quickly, searching for Joel.

"Because. I *Never*. Played like I was in a cave when I was a kid!" Willy answered. "I *never* sat in a box or wrapped a blanket over me when I was a kid! Even now, when I'm sleeping out in the weather, I never find myself a box to sleep in. The idea makes me nervous. The fear of it seems to be written right at the core of me, and when I saw those kids pretending to be in caves, that's when it all made sense!"

Willy grabbed her hand, hunched forward. "See, when I was a kid, I didn't have a daddy. My mom worked as a waitress at a truck stop, and when I asked Momma who Daddy was, she used to say, 'Oh, just some drifter.' I figured he was a truck driver, but now I know he wasn't. And that's when I realized I was a drifter, too, that it was written in my bones, and I'm not like you."

Suddenly, Tana understood. "You mean genetic memories?"

"Call them what you will," Willy answered, and he released his breath.

"But there's no such thing as genetic memories," Tana answered. "If there were, we would know."

"They aren't memories," Willy said. "They're feelings. They're the hidden drummer. I kept walking down the street, and it wasn't just the kids who were pretending to be in caves. I saw some old woman sitting in a rocking chair, looking out the window, and I realized that her whole house was just a cave, and the window was just the mouth to the cave, and it made her comfortable to dream she was in a cave.

"And then I walked down the street and watched the trucks and cars go by, and all the people were sitting inside their little movable caves, and watching outside, and the windows were like mouths to a cave.

"Everywhere I looked, people were in caves. And when I got home and Teresa was there, sitting in the dark and watching TV, I realized that she was sitting in a cave, looking into a machine that was like looking out the mouth of a cave, and my mouth went dry and I started sweating.

"So that night while Teresa slept, I went for a walk. I went down to the railroad tracks, and I just took off my clothes and laid on my back, naked, watching a night sky so full of stars and clouds, and for the first time in my life I felt at home.

"You got to understand. I love my wife and daughter, just like any man, but I couldn't go back and live in that cave with them. I'm a *transient*."

At that moment, Joel came over and stood beside Tana. He had played tennis all summer, burning his winter fat away, leaving him lean and muscular. He must have wondered why Tana was speaking to this intense, ragged, toothless man. She imagined what Joel thought the man was saying her. "How are you doing, honey?" Joel said, rubbing his right wrist.

"Fine," Tana answered. "Joel, I'd like you to meet a friend, Willy Ungricht."

Willy asked, "You got something wrong with your wrist?"

"Guess I hurt it playing the slots. Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, you know.

Doctor says I may have to stop beating off with my right hand."

Willy didn't smile at the tasteless joke, and Tana glared at Joel. Their marriage was on the rocks, and here Joel was tacitly telling a grumpy stranger that their sex life had become nonexistent. *Is he trying to bully me into sex*, she wondered, *or let Willy know that I'm available*. For six years now she had been judging men for the courts of Utah, yet she told herself that if the personnel department had seen the mistake she'd made in picking a husband, they never would have hired her.

Willy rose uncomfortably. "Well, I got to go," he said. "I just wanted to thank you for all you done. I owe you. You folks have a good time here in Vegas, okay?" He walked out, his thin hips not even swaying as he left through the murky gambling hall.

"Who was he?" Joel asked.

"A madman I once sent to the mental hospital," she answered. She wondered if she should turn Willy in. She had sworn to uphold the laws of the state of Utah, and if anyone ever learned that she had failed, her boss would definitely put the screws to her.

"Is he dangerous?" "Probably to himself," she said. "He told me a story, a tale told by an idiot...."

"Huh," Joel said. "Ungricht. Good solid Aryan name. His ancestors probably fed our ancestors to the ovens at Auschwitz. I don't want you talking to people like him again. I'm going to play roulette. See you later, hon." Joel left, shaking his wrist.

Tana tried to put the episode out of mind. She began dropping tokens in the video poker machine, and an hour later came up with four of a kind, then used the doubler button and doubled her winnings twice. She was suddenly up \$400 for the day, and she thought of going to tell Joel, perhaps even play with him, but the roulette wheels and crap tables made her nervous. She preferred to gamble in the anonymity offered by the darkness around the video poker terminals.

While waiting for the coins to drop, she looked up. Her eyes scanned the cloistered gambling floor. Amid the clouds of smoke, thousands of people huddled and stared into the bright worlds of their video poker and slot machines. She couldn't help but think of Neanderthals staring from the mouths of their caves into the daylight.

In 1996, for the first time in several years the world didn't break a new heat record, and the U.S. and Russia began a joint test of a plan to close the ozone hole over the North Pole by seeding the stratosphere with ethane to bind to the hydrocarbons. The first test would be small, allowing them to assess environmental fallout. Everyone was full of hope. It would have been a good summer, if not for a carbonaceous asteroid dubbed 1996 BA.

The University of Hawaii's 2.2 meter telescope atop Mauna Kea first picked up the asteroid, which, with a diameter of 214 miles, would pass within 300,000 miles of Earth. Many astronomers believed the asteroid would impact the Moon, while others argued that its mass was too great and it would simply blow on past.

Quacks, new-agers, and religious fanatics of all ilk decided it was a sign, that the asteroid would bring the end of the Earth or begin the Millennium or raise Atlantis. On August ninth, millions of people watched from their rooftops.

For once, the fanatics guessed right. The asteroid approached the Moon slowly over a period of hours, a small bright disk about one-tenth the Moon's diameter, and actually passed close behind. Then the asteroid swung around and for eight hours it seemed to grow in size, while all over the world the folks on the rooftops suddenly felt intense sympathy for the dinosaurs.

One might argue that the asteroid landed harmlessly in the Atlantic, and it was only when eight million cubic miles of debris erupted from underneath Perth, Australia that the real damage occurred.

Microscopic diamonds rained from the sky, and the air filled with black dust. Around the world, coastal cities succumbed to massive tidal waves, and dead volcanoes boiled into frenzied life.

The Missouri River Valley rose 92 feet. Fires raged across the world's plains.

Through heat and friction, free carbon from the asteroid mixed with oxygen in the atmosphere; when that added to the already dangerously elevated levels of carbon dioxide from years of pollution, the greenhouse threat became an instant calamity. A blanket of black smoke and dust absorbed the incoming sunlight, raising atmospheric temperatures even further.

Sulfuric ash from volcanoes and the asteroid mixed with water in the ionosphere, forming weak acids that eroded the ozone layer by seventy percent during the winter of '95. As global temperatures soared by twenty degrees, rain forests dried and withered into kindling, which quickly caught fire, so that free oxygen became more and more scarce.

With the ozone depleted and the algae at the poles dying under the onslaught of ultraviolet rays, it soon became apparent that Earth would not have much oxygen left to breathe for a long time. Some scientists speculated that with reseeded of the planet, oxygen levels might be restored to near normal within three or four years. They pointed out optimistically that most plants thrived when carbon dioxide levels were somewhat elevated. Others predicted that the oxygen would not return for at least three hundred years.

September storms frequently raged with winds in excess of 200 mph, eroding the soil, blowing away seeds and sprouts, eroding the hopes and dreams of the disaster's survivors.

Generations later, rumors would say that one of the Arab nations had been the first to decide to go out with a bang instead of a whimper. They may have hoped that dropping their bombs would let them grab some arable land to the north. No one blamed them.

As the nations of Earth began trading nuclear blows, the world became hell, but by God, the flaming sunrises and bloody sunsets were glorious.

Near dark, thirty years after the fall, Tana thought she'd finally die. The four dirty young animals who'd taken her captive had raped and beaten her plenty, then made her walk ten miles through the wilderness in the Rocky Mountains near what had once been Price, Utah. When she finally dropped from exhaustion near a stand of stunted aspen, they ripped the last shreds of hides off her for good, tied her to a pole and carried her to camp.

Dangling from the pole, she closed her eyes and breathed shallowly, pretending to be dead. She could fake it good, and she recalled that sometime in the dim past it had saved her more than once. She fought down the pain and embarrassment at the rape. She'd become good at that, too, over the years.

As the boys brought her into camp, she opened one eye enough to scope it out. A big fire surrounded by forty or fifty grubbers, wild folks like something that crawled out of California. They wore animal hides and had painted their faces with blue clay to keep out the YouVeEs, just like the boys who had caught her. They were squatting in front of ramshackle huts next to a coal mine. This place had been abandoned for years, until now. Tana closed her eyes. The boys dropped her by a campfire. Naked little savage children pranced around her.

"What you got there?" a deep-voiced man asked.

One of the teenagers who had carried her into camp, a brute named Scott, pushed her closer to the fire for all to see. "Found a scrawny old birdy woman asleep, holed up in a cave about ten mile from here. She's been there a long time—has a good-sized garden with fresh corn, lots of old junk. We found this on her." Tana imagined that Scott was showing her AR-17, brandishing the dear sweet old hunk of steel. She heard



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the rush of in-drawn breath from the crowd.

The big man moseyed close, grunted as he bent over Tana. She could smell the soured bear fat on his body, his uncurled deerskins, the scent of shit. "You alive down there, woman?" he asked. When Tana didn't answer, the big man put his hand over her mouth, expertly pinched her nostrils closed.

Tana held her breath for forty seconds, then shook her head as she gasped for air.

The brute who hunkered over her was enormous—broad, heavily bearded. "You alive? You answer me straight, now, when I talk to you!" He slapped her hard enough to make her head spin. "Damn it, don't glare at me, woman!"

He glanced at the boys. "What you figure to do with her?"

Scott shrugged. "I don't know, taker fer a slave, I guess."

The big man spat on her. "She ain't worth the food she'd eat. You boys go on back up to her cave and clean it out. We'll leave her behind in the morning."

"Now hold on, Bronson!" Tana heard someone say. The hammer of a revolver clicked, and her smelly captor raised himself up. Across the campfire stood a thin man with blue eyes that gleamed crazily in the firelight, a long wispy gray beard and hair that hadn't been cut in twenty years. He wasn't dressed in ragged hides like the others. Instead he wore tanned buckskins decorated with wooden beads, and he had a revolver pointed at Old Man Bronson's head. "Now, stealing everything that scrawny old bird has wouldn't hardly be worthwhile for you, would it? But it's as good as killing her!"

"She ain't long for this world anyhow, as I see it," Old Man Bronson said. "Besides, this is my camp and my business. You and me got a Traders' Truce—no weapons to be drawn!"

Tana held her breath. Old Man Bronson wasn't the kind of man to show her any mercy. She could hear it in his voice. But this stranger in camp, this madman with the

revolver, acted more civilized. If he had entered camp under the protection of a Trader's Truce, then he had to be mighty important—a leader from another camp. And he risked a lot just to pull a weapon. By breaking the truce, the stranger could start a war, and Tana feared that her rescuer would reconsider, feared he might decide Tana wasn't worth the risk, so she yelled in a cracked voice. "I didn't do nothing, Mister! Save me!" The madman didn't look at her, but his eyes widened, got more and more wild.

Behind Tana, young Scott Bronson snarled and reached for the AR-17. The madman pulled off a shot. Scott grunted, fell backward and started kicking in the dust.

"The Traders' Truce is off!" the madman said. "So you just pull out your knife, sidle up to that woman real slow, and cut her loose, or I'll do you like I done your boy!"

Old Man Bronson stood, hand poised on his Bowie knife. His muscles knotted, and he made a low growling as he bent and cut Tana's hands free. Her wrists were pained and rope-burned; she could hardly feel her fingers.

"You think this is your lucky day," Bronson said to Tana loud enough so everyone could hear, "but you two won't get far from this camp. I swear—I'll wear your hides come winter."

"I wish you wouldn't threaten me like that," the silver-haired stranger said, and he pulled the trigger and blew the back off Old Man Bronson's head. Tana rolled, grabbed her AR-17 from the ground, and everywhere the young men began diving for the huts. Two pulled guns, and twice more her benefactor fired and put them down. He only had two shots left; he leapt through the campfire and grabbed Tana, then they dashed around a building.

Some crazy kid no more than ten years old jumped from a window, brandishing a knife, and Tana fired a single shot. Bullets were so scarce, she didn't dare shoot more. She figured she missed, but the boy

jumped back a respectful distance, and then they were running through the brush, zigzagging through sage. Five shots cracked behind, and the crazy man dropped on top of Tana. Everywhere behind them gunfire began crackling, thirty or forty shots.

"Stay down!" the fellow whispered. "They won't dare come after us, but let's not let them see our backs." They began crawling uphill in the night, and Tana couldn't seem to get her old body moving fast enough. If it had been a race in the daylight, the Bronsons would have slaughtered her easily.

Once they topped the hill, they ran farther than Tana had run in years, nearly six or seven miles as far as she could tell. Her weak ankles hardly held her, and her feet got cut and bruised on the stones. The old man pulled her along until they climbed a ridge and dropped to a crumbling freeway, where there was a camp.

Tana had expected the old fellow to be from a clan something like the Bronson outfit in the mountains, but nothing like this: It was a sea of tents and wagons, horses and cattle, maybe two or three thousand people with five hundred campfires. She could see men and women dressed in real cloth tending the fires, and babies crying, and around the fires people played guitars and sang while youngsters fell in love. It seemed a vast, movable city, poised there on the old highway.

Tana stopped running, her heart pounding, lungs wheezing. The stranger took off his shirt and draped it over Tana's shoulders. She sat cross-legged, holding her sore, bloody feet, her mouth open in wonder as she stared at the camp below. And she cried. Civilization.

"That's my caravan," the old fellow said between breaths. "My name's Willy Transent." He offered her his hand as if he shook hands with strangers every day.

"Tana Rosen."

"I sure—I sure didn't want to do that. Kill those folks!" Willy wiped the sweat from his forehead and said, "Whew!"

"That Bronson tribe is just a herd of pigs," Tana said. "No harm in killing them."

Willy watched Tana as she spoke, and there was infinite sadness in his eyes. "Well, they were real people once, and I figure maybe they could be real again."

Tana jerked her chin at the tents below. "You their leader?" Willy nodded. "Damn fool of you to go trading up to the Bronson camp alone."

"It was my first meet with them," Willy said. "I wanted to earn their trust."

"Hmmm. What do you call yourself in your camp—the King, Lord, or what?"

"I'm the mayor, elect," Willy said, and he smiled. His upper teeth were gone, as were most of Tana's, but she looked hard at him. Somehow it seemed significant.

"I haven't seen that many people in one camp," Tana said, "since the Mormon prophet got up in Temple Square and said that Utah was now about as parched as the hottest corner of Hades, so they might as well head back to Missouri where they believed the Garden of Eden once was."

"You were there?"

"Oh yeah, I saw them leave. Must have been two million people with bicycles and wagons, some artillery scrounged from Army and Air Force bases, all of them heading up highway 215 toward Denver. I've always wondered how they fared. When they left, it was like they took the law with them. Grubbers came up out of California, looting and killing. That's when I lost my husband."

Willy nodded. "There's law in my camp, too. It's a scarce commodity, but not too scarce nowadays. Our caravan travels up and down I-15 mostly. We winter down in Saint George, summer up in Idaho. When we started, it was rough. My kids grew up on lizard meat and cactus and wild turnips, but we've made good. We trade along the way. Everyone on the trail knows us. We get pecans out of Saint George, watermelon from Green River, potatoes and sugar out of Idaho. I don't

often run into a pack of grubbers like them Bronsons anymore."

Tana savored the words. "Sugar, pecans, watermelon? Oh please, I haven't had any in years."

Willy moved a little closer. "Look, if you were any other old woman, I'd offer to trade you for some fresh corn, maybe even set you up with cloth and ask you to do needlework through the winter, so we could have more to trade next year. But I don't think you had better go back to your cave. Them Bronsons are sure to hunt you. So, I'll tell you what: I can send a hundred of my boys up to your place and bring your stuff back down, if you have a mind to come with us. Them Bronsons won't want to go to war with a camp our size."

Tana looked over the camp spread below them with fires like stars fallen to the ground. Her feet were a bloody mess. She listened to the guitars, and part of her wanted to run down there right now, sit next to those fires. But the camp was full of strangers, and she hadn't seen so many people in one place in thirty years. Old Mr. Bronson had been right. She wasn't long for this world, and she didn't want to be a burden to folks who might not like her anyway.

"I figure I already owe you," Tana said, "so you can have some of my fresh corn. It does get tedious in my cave when the snow flies, though, and I'd be grateful if you could lend me some needles and cloth so I can do some honest work for you. Next year, save me a watermelon and a couple pounds of pecans and sugar. We'll make a trade."

"What if them Bronson boys come back?"

"They won't find it easy to get near me, this time," Tana brandished her AR-17.

Willy nodded. "I respect that." Looking her over, he wiped some blood from his side. Tana suddenly noticed that he'd been shot, but it was a small wound. Willy said, "I'll go on down and get you some bandages and moccasins, send some boys to help you get home. We'll give you some cloth and thread,

pecans and sugar, maybe some butter and salt to go with that corn of yours. Consider it advance payment. Next year, maybe you'll plant a bigger garden, knowing that we'll be back."

Tana thanked him, and then Willy left. An hour later, some boys came up. One of them introduced himself as Willy's grandson, a black-haired boy that could have been a Mexican or Navajo. The boys had to carry her back to her cave.

Once she'd sent the boys away, Tana went to the back of her cave and lit a poorly made candle. It was a rare treat, but she felt she needed the light. She surveyed her belongings, looking for damage. Tana didn't have much. Four people could haul off everything she owned. But the Bronson boys had smashed the old oxygen compressor that had carried her and Joel through the rough years at this high altitude. They'd opened all her clay pots and food bags, searching for weapons. She looked at the spilled food. *Is this what they want to kill me for?*

She went to the mouth of the cave and watched the valley by moonlight to guard her patch of corn and tomatoes. She doubted the Bronson boys would come raiding tonight, but she couldn't take the chance, so she cradled her AR-17 in her lap as she ate a little raw brown sugar Willy had left. The sugar tasted stronger than she remembered, almost sickening in its sweetness.

A great horned owl hooted in the distance, breaking the peaceful silence of the night, while locusts whirred in the Russian olive trees. Thirty-four years since the asteroid hit. In the past five years, Tana had seen a world on the brink of ruin suddenly begin to thrive, grass and trees shooting up so quickly she could hardly believe it. Finally the ozone, the world, people—seemed to be coming back.

She thought about the campfires of the Mormons as they fled Salt Lake for the Garden of Eden. One of their prophets, Brigham Young, had once said that when the Mormons returned to Missouri there wouldn't be "one yellow dog there wagging its

tail to greet them." She suspected Brigham was right, and Tana wondered if maybe the Mormons were still out there somewhere, tending their golden wheatfields. She'd often envied them. She'd lived with the Mormons for years, feeling like the only Jew in Provo, Utah. She'd never liked them particularly, never made close friends with one, but she envied how they clung together, envied them because they were not alone.

She thought about Joel, who had never been worth a damn as a husband even after the asteroid fell. She missed him, though. She missed everyone desperately—the whole big, sweaty, cantankerous, rollicking world.

Willy Transent. She fondled the name in her mind, saying it over and over, so that if he came back next year, she'd remember.

Up in the hills along the ridge where the aspens grew thick, Tana heard a twig snap, followed by a cough and the sound of many walking feet. The sounds carried clear and far in these mountains, and the Bronson boys may not have realized how close they had come to her camp. Tana listened to the boys stalking her, then felt the ground beside her knee. She had five full clips for her AR-17, more than enough to handle these grubbers.

Tana sat in her cave, stared out into the starlight, and wondered about the Mormons. On tough days she imagined that there were golden wheatfields beyond the cave where children could dance and play without a care. Missouri might well be an abundant garden, lush and green, where the living was easy. Dreaming about it made her hard life more bearable. So it had to be out there, somewhere, a place with food, shelter, law and love.

Or more likely these were all just dreams that the Mormons had died for, and even now their skulls, bleached white by the sun, littered the tall bluegrass on the plains of Kansas.

One of the Bronson boys laughed cruelly, and some of the others made shushing noises, trying to

quiet him. Death, stalking the cave. Tana looked out at the skies: dawn was hours away. She could hear them grubbing Bronson boys, softly moving down the long slope of the hill, sliding through the grass on their bellies like snakes.

*They're coming.* Tana realized, and she didn't know how to stop them. *Let them come then, she thought. They might kill me, but they can't drive me out. I'll never let them drive me out!*

Tana stepped out of her cave, set the AR-17 to full automatic, and sprayed the hillside. Someone screamed in terror. In the dim starlight, a dozen shadows howled and danced away in fear. Tana hadn't left so much as a rock on that hillside for cover. They ran full tilt in the darkness, taking long strides as they tried to reach the hilltop and the safety of the trees, and Tana just stood in the open where any one of them could have turned and shot her. She let them escape.

She began panting and found her hands shaking. The grubbers would come back, Tana knew. Maybe they'd even kill her, but they couldn't drive her out of her home. She took comfort, realizing she could have shot them boys. No, no one could drive her out. She had proven that now.

Tana stayed on watch, but her eyes grew itchy, tired. Sometime during the night, she fell asleep and dreamed of a younger Willy, a madman with his teeth kicked out who told her about people who lived in caves and people who just couldn't. His pale blue eyes were flashing like the win lights on a slot machine, and he held a three-sided piece of wood that spun magically in his hands, flashing the messages:

TO ERR IS HUMAN, TO FORGIVE IS NOT STATE POLICY.

TANA ROSEN, PSYCHOLOGIST.

PEOPLE ARE MORE VARIED AND FASCINATING THAN YOU IMAGINE.

When Tana woke, she sat for a long time and forced herself to remember. For years after the asteroid she had blocked off her past life,

finding it hard to think about. Tana believed she didn't need to think about the past because it had become so obsolete. But the fact was, she had blocked the memories because it pained her to recall what she had lost.

Tana considered. Civilizations had collapsed before: Pizzaro struck down an Incan king, and after five hundred years the Incan people remained scattered like leaves from a fallen oak; a volcano on Crete decimated the capital of the Minoans, and their culture never rose again; and once the Goths sacked Rome, its empire began the long spiral into decline. Nothing new. Some civilizations collapsed in an hour, some decayed over centuries. Tana remembered watching the asteroid descend—scientists claiming it was larger than the one that had wiped out the dinosaurs—remembered the stark terror that threatened to unknit her muscles, the utter helplessness. For months after, people said that those who died of fear before the asteroid struck were lucky—they never had to suffer through the blackened skies, spitting volcanoes, skin cancer, starvation, radiation sickness, endless battles.

*We sat in our caves, Tana thought, and we didn't die from lack of goods or thin air: we died from wars and poverty—from lack of composure—symptoms of catastrophe as much as the catastrophe itself.*

So Willy Transent and his people took over. Garbage and lizard eaters, creatures who slept under stars because something in their bones whispered it was right. People who would never suffer shock from losing homes and loved ones because something in their genetic makeup kept them from forming such bonds. For a time, they would be the Lords of Earth, the keepers of civilization.

Tana stretched, went outside. A faint summer breeze began blowing through her hair, carrying the scent of dry grasses and bitter sage. Up near the top of the ridge, the whispering leaves of aspen fluttered in the wind. Tana let the breeze blow over her, just enjoying its texture on her face, in the dark, beneath the vast

river of stars. She tried to imagine living without a roof over her head, without some comforting womb-like shelter. She extended her tongue, tasting the ease and freedom mingled with the wide-open horror of life outside the cave.

She could almost feel a presence out there. Something beckoning. Perhaps the voice of a dream.

A startled sparrow peeped on the ridge, and Tana looked up. Willy Trantser was standing just inside the line of aspens with a few of his boys, holding a lantern in his right hand, a rifle in his left. His long silver hair billowed in the wind, and he was staring down at Tana. "Hey," Willy shouted, "Tana Rosen, I remember you!" Voice hesitant, uncertain. "I remember you—from before. Are you all right?" Relief swept over Tana, more refreshing than the mountain breeze.

After a lifetime lost, someone had found her. An hour before dawn, Tana wrapped her bloody feet in rags, slung her AR-17 under her shoulder, and began the trek down the mountain to Willy's caravan. ■



## PITFCS

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In 1958, Theodore R. Cogswell sent out a postcard to certain members of the SF establishment. The result, with really astonishing speed, was one of the craziest, most wonderful, occasionally dead-serious journals ever published. It was a fanzine for professionals, and over the twenty years that followed—well, there was a seventeen-year break in there—just about every professional, from all over the world, joined in. Now the original spotty, hectographed and photo-offset pages have been translated into a dignified and permanent volume. But it is not to be mistaken for a scholarly text. You will be astonished, amazed, delighted, and might occasionally foam at the mouth.

*"I wrote the introduction to this volume, and I have seldom spent my time to better effect."*

—Algis Budrys

# DIERDRA, ALIVE AND DEAD

Virginia Baker

Illustrated by Margaret Ballif Simon

*Dierdra was dead. Camila couldn't have saved her...could she?*

Camila leaned against the sink in her warm kitchen, looking out the big bay window to the view of the orchards beyond it. The low Connecticut Fall dragged into Winter one day at a time, each day growing whiter (the sky, paler; the ground frosting later and later in the day) before finally accepting that the snow would come.

A flock of sparrows vaulted into the iron gray sky and Camila blinked, unable to tell if the birds were real, if they had flown up from the trees in her yard at the sound of her ringing phone, or had simply flown free behind her eyes, part of a sudden vision of Dierdra, young again and somehow flying with them.

But Dierdra had died. Camila turned off the taps at the sink, where the water had droned and hissed and steamed the panes of the window

until she couldn't tell whether there had been birds or not. The phone went on for a very long time, and she let the surety of that instinct, of Dierdra's finally letting go, settle between each shrilling of the bell.

Camila turned off the oven, undid her apron. Then she simply stood, looking out over the orchards. Fog wound around the trunks of the apple trees, and the fruit glowed in the flat whiteness around them: red and green and hues of gold. The taste of fifty years of apple-picking rose in Camila's mouth, sharp and sweet. It brought the tears, finally; a few, and those were silent.

The phone stopped ringing.

The oven ticked slowly, the sound of its cooling loud in the stillness. Camila stood and listened, counting the ticks until the last one, which did not come, fell heavy in the

silence. She realized she was holding her breath.

*Because Dierdra had died, oh yes. She said she never would, but here it was, she had sickened, she had died, she was she had she...*

A wind outside stirred the leaves from their neatly raked piles, and a sudden, strong gust threw a handful of them against the window. They struck against the cold pane between Camila and the outside, battering against the window with their spidery veins and paper-thin palms. Camila flinched when they hit, bent against the sudden scare, the shock that drove through her spine and down the tips of her fingers. It was electric; she could almost smell it.

The heat in the room was suddenly terrible; the smells of the meat and the spices, terrible. It jarred against the chill that touched her





heart and made it sit like a stone in her chest.

Camila blinked and looked back up. Her own reflection in the window stared back at her, frosted around the edges. Outside, there was nothing more than the scattering leaves and the gentle sway of late Macintosh apples, heavy on the limbs of the unpicked trees outside. The window-glass shivered with the last of the wind, which sighed its cold, breathy moan, climbing through the eaves around the roof. Her reflection moved in the glass, rippling in the pane: a spare old woman, her hair gone silver, her light eyes too large in her face.

In that reflection, her lips moved in a litany she was wholly unaware of: A song of *Dierdra is dead*, and then, *Oh God, Oh God, Oh God...*

“At least it’s not like weddings. Nobody expects you to buy a gift, though flowers are getting more expensive every day.”

It was true, Camila nodded, *flowers were dear*. She stood in a line braced with floral arrangements and listened to the woman—whom she didn’t know and who certainly was not from town—yammer on about the high cost of dying.

She didn’t listen, much, but thought of the flowers: how they should be dancing in a breeze, carry-

ing their scent and seed in the wind. Instead, they were piked into soft green wedges and symmetrically arranged. They lay in graceful shapes, in hearts and circles and sprays, but they were dead just the same. The beauty of their fragrance was lost in the room, which was close with people and the stale air that was a part of every viewing parlor. In this room, what breath the blossoms had was heavy and too sweet, like sugar gone over.

“I never thought they were for funerals,” Camila said. “So fresh, still so beautiful. It just doesn’t seem right.”

“They don’t last long, being cut, it’s true,” the woman said, and told Camila her name was Chloe and asked if she had known Dierdra.

Of course. Of course I did, Camila said, and wondered why best friends had no place in line at a time like this, an honor they shared with blood and lovers and very close friends at weddings and birthings and blessings, with children and then grandchildren underfoot.

They came to the casket, and the woman, Chloe, leaned over it, touching Dierdra’s hands, speaking to Dierdra’s body as though crooning to a small, frightened child.

Camila suddenly pictured Dierdra waking, sitting up and slapping those hands away.

“Doesn’t she look beautiful?” Chloe asked, and Camila had to admit that yes, she did, she always had. “Just as though she were asleep,” the woman said.

Camila found herself wondering who this woman was, fawning over Dierdra’s body (and telling her to wait, to be patient, it wasn’t long now. *What nonsense*, Camila thought; *dead was dead and she was already there, for God’s sake*), ministering over Dierdra as though they’d gone to the same church and had shared the same hot months of growing babies in the womb.

Then the woman, this stranger, turned to Camila. “Here, touch her,” she said.

She took Camila’s hand and pressed it close in hers.

And an image floated up, a bubble of heartbreak: Dierdra in her blue velvet sailor dress, pink ribbons in her wild black hair. Her face, many years ago—before Johnny, before Camila’s own Ferrin, before any boy for either of them—when Dierdra had taken Camila’s hand and placed it on her breast and made her swear a solemn promise and the world had slid on its axis in a sickening tilt of love and terror.

Camila remembered little else of that moment, certainly not the promise made by small girls many years ago, but its image was stapled



onto this one and she pulled her hand away.

"No," she said.

The woman narrowed her eyes. "But I thought she was such a good friend. It's your last chance to say good-bye."

But Camila shook her head and laid both hands at the casket's edge. She looked down on Dierdra, whose hair had always been beautiful and dark and always uncontrollable—like the girl herself. It had been done for the funeral more or less as usual, and Camila wondered what it was that made the hair look a little less than real.

She stared until she noticed: it had been sprayed into place; the fullness of it, which had always lifted like a dark, brilliant spray around Dierdra's face, was gone. And everything that was Dierdra was gone with it. Her eyes were closed; the blush on her cheeks nothing more than hectic spots of color. And Camila wanted to reach into the casket and shake her, shake her hard, and tell her this wasn't funny, not a damned bit funny, and didn't she have any respect for the dead or any love for the living?

She didn't do it, of course. Didn't she know what the dead looked like? Hadn't she seen enough folk pass on to know? Wouldn't have been right, shaking a corpse as though she could slap it back to life like some newborn thing.

But the idea had been there. It had nestled in some far corner within her, like a small bird, battering the thin material there.

Camila closed her eyes and tightened her grip on the casket. She realized she had been standing there too long when Johnny came and took her gently by the shoulders. He led her away, past the casket and toward a chair with wide wing backs sitting in a quiet corner. She didn't look back. Didn't want to.

Standing by the punch, Camila saw the woman Chloe coming to her again, and Camila had time to think *why in the world?* when the woman said, "Didn't her color look just wonderful?"

And Camila had to admit that it had. And it *had* been good, at least far better than the last corpse she'd seen, another member of their set who had died after failed surgery. That good man had looked yellow, and there was no mistaking that his liver had gone first and the way he had died, without ever waking up, with his urine soaked into every pore of his skin. "What kind of God...?" she remembered thinking then, and then hadn't let herself finish: Death was unnatural enough; it didn't need any goading.

"*Never going to die,*" Camila whispered into her punch, all but seeing herself as a child and Dierdra beside her as her breath rippled the candy-colored liquid in the cup: their first funeral, the first sight of the corpse; the two of them no more than ten, young girls with a large world of living, where there was no room yet for death. Looking into the coffin, at the first sight of Dierdra's great-Aunt Celestina lying against the inlaid satin. It couldn't be real, surely. A doll dressed up in Sunday clothes. Not a woman; not a woman at all.

It had been scandalously rouged. And under the rouge, that pale greenish color.

The body's lips were sewn shut, the black thread making tiny x-stitches (each no bigger than a child's thumbnail) through the tender skin.

Camila saw herself, the *moue* of her own face, looking away—turning away from that thing inside. She came away dizzy, as though she had ridden a Merry-go-round too long; too young then to see it; she knew now what had made the world slip then: seeing one dimension of truth laid on top of another, layered in angles that were utterly flush, yet vulgarly fit.

But *Dierdra*—she had taken one long look into that coffin and come away reeling. Her eyes, huge and dark, were set against the whiteness of her skin; she would be sick, Camila thought, she would faint. But the hurt in Dierdra's deep violet eyes went deeper than that. It was the hurt of a child looking on an obscenity, a capering, terrible thing that never

should have been (and how could God and the adults have ever allowed it?).

Instead of falling down, Dierdra spat six words out vehemently, as though sickening something rotten up: "*I'm never going to die,*" she'd said. "*Never.*"

But nature took its patient turn, and standing by the glittering punch (and the eternal finger sandwiches stacked like pyramids on all the plates on the table, filled with dilled tuna and cut into crustless wedges), Camila smiled to herself, sadly.

"It helps if you touch them," the woman Chloe murmured, and looked at her, too close, too intimate, her eyes filled with assumptions that were at once outrageous and unreadable. "After all, she loved you so," she said.

Well, she had touched one corpse in her life, Camila replied, and that had been enough.

How many times had she touched her husband and touched *him*—not the meat of him, but the whole of him? The abomination of it, that one touch after his death: touching the flesh without the vibrancy of his soul and the radiant warmth of it in his skin. The truth of that touch had made the world a dark and vicious place; had made her husband a changeling with whom there was no arguing or pleading or threatening, but only a cold, stony face where there was nothing of him to hold to.

"They shouldn't make them beautiful," Camila said, setting down her punch, untouched.

"What do you mean?" Chloe asked. "Don't you want to look your best at *your* funeral?"

"Shan't have one," said Camila.

"But you must."

"Why? I don't want one. Won't do me any good."

"Not for you. For everyone left behind. They've got to say goodbye."

"Then they can say it now, while I'm still around to hear it," Camila said, and realized her voice was too loud when others turned to stare. "When I'm dead," she said, quieting herself, "I'm going to *look* dead, so no one can be confused by it."

The woman only smiled her maddening smile. Watching it grow, Camila thought there was something in the shade of the woman's lipstick that wasn't quite right on a warm and human mouth.

"Are you confused?" the woman murmured, and lifted her cup to those dark, laughing lips.

"Don't be ridiculous," Camila said.

But she skipped the sweet cakes, and, after only another minute, went directly to her car.

There she sat in the comfort of familiar smells (oil-and-vinyl, and just a shade of Dierdra's lavender sachet). Very still, she could have been dead herself. The key waited in the ignition, ready to be turned, but Camila just sat, staring at the sky to watch the clouds scuttle across, racing ahead of a strong, clearing wind.

Little children passed her by, wearing black capes and the faces of witches. Camila thought wearily that she probably knew them, might have taught their parents poetry in some former year, though she didn't recognize any of them. She groped for their names for several minutes before she realized they had been wearing costumes.

Halloween. That's why they'd looked so strange. All Hallow's Eve, not three days away. She'd have to buy candy. She'd go do it now.

Instead, she sat in her car and laid her head square against the steering wheel.

*I could die here, she thought. This could be my coffin. My shroud and headstone.*

Then came the image of the woman laughing, her dark mouth stretching slowly over her teeth: *And what would THAT look like?* the honed voice asked.

Begging herself a headache, Camila decided she would not attend the burial.

She woke that night from a scream that died half-born in her throat. She opened her eyes, then closed them, and though she told herself to be an adult, to stop being silly, the thing that had terrified her, had

thrown her out of sleep with the force and clarity of lightning, was superimposed on her eyes nonetheless.

A dream. She had been driving down a highway long and tedious. Though she did not recall her exhaustion, she did remember an old highway game she had played with her children many years ago: as each car passed, she glanced quickly from the road and into the passing car at the driver.

She had done this thing before. Road trips to Tanglewood or Coney Island; even one memorable cross-country trip to California, where I-15 stretched from Arizona and Nevada into the barren inner parts of California, raising boredom to the third dimension, to a power of likeness that seemed to forever mirror itself, catching the weary driver in its eternal reflection with no promise of ever letting go.

So when a dark blue sedan (whose make was so nondescript she could not even tell or care what it was), approached her in the other lane, she looked inside out of habit.

And he stared at her, straight at her. Her mind had time enough to register three things with extraordinary clarity: that his face had no flesh, that he was alive, and that he bore her more malice than she had thought the world had in it.

Like any other car, his should have passed on quickly, passed mercifully on and beyond her. But this one stayed: The mirrors had frozen, and the two of them were frozen with them.

His eyes were huge, eaten away, with no skin around them, no skin on him at all. So wide—unblinking, unwavering—they sealed upon her a terrible, nameless blame. The mark of those black, empty places in his face bore into her wide, wild eyes, and she thought: *I've looked upon his nakedness. Oh sweet God I am marked, like Cain, worse than Cain. I've seen his face.*

She had screamed, or tried to scream; to name the thing, to break its hold. But her voice rose only as far as her throat before it sat on the back of her tongue and grew there, a

malignant lump she would have to vomit out before it choked her air off entirely.

She'd had to awaken, of course. Come to real life and the solidness of her bed beneath her and her house, quiet and unmoving. But that face had come to her and it stayed, whether she wanted it or not, and she shivered in her sheets till morning.

Later in the day, she found herself too tired to do much more than clean out old closets. She found in her own closet a box of letters from Dierdra, stacks of them wrapped in pink ribbon. The paper of the envelopes was old and very dry; the letters themselves smelled faintly of lavender and verbena, written with a fountain pen in Dierdra's wildly flowing rendering of Palmer script, slanted against the grain but somehow so utterly graceful in its very singularity.

As she handled the stacks, Camila thought of the warm, sunny days just after the Great War, when the women wore lace and linen and carried umbrellas whether it was raining or not. She still had the silver hairbrush her grandmother had given her.

She unwrapped the pink ribbons and realized that only the women of her day would really understand their elegance, the ribbon and perfumed paper and the harmony of loving other women. They had all been the sum of the little things then, like canning together in August or walking through the orchards in October, picking apples and laughing over their doings as the dew or wet grass soaked the hems of their skirts. She knew how good that could be. Weren't the flowers in her yard, even the letters she held in her hands, her witness?

She had received letters from Dierdra—in fact, had been separated from her—only once in her life. From the early days of their marriages, their houses had shared back yards, and the stone fence between them had been purely symbolic: Dierdra planted creeping phlox and columbine on both sides and said that, between the two of them, they shared an English countryside.

Then Dierdra had simply disappeared—gone to Paris without telling anyone, not Camila or even Johnny, her new-wed husband. Her leaving rocked the town, and in her wake rocked Camila with it. The town did not ostracize her, but looked at her more closely. Women she'd known all her life watched her from their windows, which were more often than not beaded and sweating from the sharp change of temperature between their warm, fragrant kitchens and the numbing cold outside. They smiled, of course, but their eyes were speculative. There were whispers of lovers in Paris, for wasn't Paris the city of lovers? And they had been so close. If the one could go wild, well....

The letters (sitting now, so fragile in her hands) had been Camila's life-line. Dierdra, always knowing the small revolutions of her heart, had filled page after page with the doings of the French gentry and, dearest to Camila, long and colorful portraits of Paris and Provence, like splashes of verbal watercolors, describing the many shades of the Fall leaves (never "red," but *flame* and *vermilion*; nor "yellow," but *ocher* and *amber*) and the way the shadows crept along the hills of Bordeaux at sunset.

After so many years, it was still fresh to her. In the quiet of her home, Camila handled the ribboned stacks with gentle hands. The paper was yellow and crackled at her touch; the smell of them, and the feel of them in her hands, wrapped her in the soft cloth of memories, where she knew she would be polished and young again, and not at all alone.

There was one letter there, though, in her hands, that one letter. Especially crumpled, it stood alone, singular, sandwiched in the middle of the fragrant stack. There was no perfume from this one, no welcome of any kind, really. This was her beau's letter—Ferrin's, and hers alone; it lay, in the midst of Dierdra's letters, like the landmark to a tragedy only barely averted, and Camila had kept it, she supposed, to remind her how fragile all things are,

even love, and how easily the precious things could be destroyed.

This letter (which she had received just before Ferrin proposed, in fact) had simply reported, in Ferrin's quiet New England way, that he had heard the news of the town while he had been staying with his cousin John in Maine: that Dierdra was no longer welcome at the Ladies' Society functions of the church (even though she had not yet returned from Europe) though the Pastor Brettnor was working still to save her soul. "Witch hunting is just sport here," her Ferrin wrote. "Been done before. Seems like it's never enough." He then dropped the subject as abruptly as he'd taken it up. But, at the end, a note in his strong, scrawled hand said simply: "*Tell me that you love me, and she'll never come between us.*"

Camila had puzzled over this last for months, never quite daring to ask Ferrin about it. And then, when Dierdra came back, radiant in her new black dress and chic cloche (though she'd never bobbed her hair, thank God), she simply laughed at the gossip and told Camila how it all got started: "Just a *book*," Dierdra said, and laughed in that gentle, chiding voice of hers, which was musical, like muted bells. And then: "But of course I have once again regained the favor of the congregation," having renounced, she said, certain studies in exotic theologies that were not appreciated by the Ladies' Society.

Camila remembered snorting with laughter over Dierdra's answer, though she hadn't shared it with Ferrin; he wouldn't have understood. But Camila knew: There was always that one curious streak that ran through Dierdra like a damned deep well. No one knew entirely what was underneath it all, or where her strange little caches of knowledge went once she had exhausted her interest in a given subject. It was what made her wild, just a little—not enough to be a permanent scandal, but maybe just enough to be exciting. Like her hair, lifting just a bit out of any bun or braid or bonnet she'd tried to bind it up in.

Now, two days after Dierdra's death, Camila reread all of these letters and sat very still after, holding the sweetly scented pages (so delicate now) to her, as close and as tight as she dared.

It occurred to her, teary-eyed over the old, yellowing vellum-and-linen writing sheets, that Johnny was a widower now, and that he might need some of the same gentle sort of comfort he and Dierdra had given her, after Ferrin had died. She would call him. See if she could help. Knowing, too, that she would hear in his voice something of Dierdra's life that was alive and vibrant still; something she could feel (almost touch) and take comfort in.

As she reached for the phone, it rang.

It rang so rarely, these days, that its shrilling jarred Camila, who didn't want to hear that bell again for a long time, maybe never. In her hands, the pink silk ribbons that had bound the letters curled around her fingers like baby serpents seeking her warmth. And outside her window, the night had come on without her knowing it.

Camila dropped the letters and picked up the phone. At first she was met with only silence, with the wind hitting in the receiver as though from a very far distance.

"Hello?" she called. "Hello, hello?"

An eternity of seconds; and then a ruined, far-off voice whispered her name against the low howl of the wind. "*Camila. Camila, Camila, Camila—*"

Camila dropped the receiver in her lap. The noises coming from it changed, and the receiver laughed up at her with a child's high, sweet voice. Shaking, Camila put the receiver to her ear again. And heard a little girl, no more than five, speak to her. Her words were like reed music, lilting the high octaves over the low ones, the way a child does when it plays with an adult.

"Camila? Are you there?"

"Who is this?" Camila demanded, thinking that all of her children, the ones she had taught to be many years ago, were too old to be calling

her like this, playing pranks in a baby's voice.

The voice giggled. "You know."

She was about to get cranky, to tell the little girl to get off the phone and leave her alone, that she absolutely did *not* know; when she suddenly did, knew with a clarity that stopped her heart from beating and sent a flush of cold fear spreading dully through her bowels.

She remembered that voice from childhood: the silvery sound of a girl-child's laughter.

Camila put the phone back in its cradle, but gently, as though it might whip back and bite if it knew what she was doing. She sat very still, staring at the phone. It was plastic and beige, a bland piece of contemporary, and if it knew what it was doing to her, it gave no sign. It simply sat, innocent of malice, while her clock chimed half past the hour.

When the phone rang again, Camila didn't jump; but her blood slowed in her veins, and her thoughts rushed at her so fast she could fend them off only by not thinking about anything at all.

She let the phone ring. She did this five times during the evening and into the night; each time, it rang until she thought the sound would drive her mad. She went to bed weeping, after pulling each extension from the wall.

The weight of the darkness she woke to seemed to seep like syrup into her pores. Her head was too ponderous to lift. God, she was tired, she was heavy. She wanted to go to the bathroom, but that weight, like a large and fleshy cushion of air, kept her down on the bed.

A voice deep within her, that wasn't tired at all but fought against the numbness stealing around it, told her to get up, to stand up and run, *to run*.

The rest of her knew it was too late, and almost welcomed what came then: a face forming on the ceiling above her, like a Jack-o-Lantern carved by a child, crude and humed and painted in obscene colors. It smiled at her with a mouthful of



sharp teeth, each cast in the harder shapes of geometry: triangles and squares and razor-like rectangles.

As it formed, Camila sluggishly wondered how the same face could come to her again; she never dreamed of the same thing twice, even if she tried. But then she thought: *I have seen its face*.

It pressed upon her like a lover, then: raising her up, driving her down; lifting her only to swarm over her mind and body again.

Down where her voice had been, where *she* had been, everything grew smaller. She turned inward with it, to herself, into a state where she was neither dreaming nor awake.

There she saw herself clinging to the outside of a train rushing nowhere. She clung to the ladder while the ground whistled past just beneath her ears. The woman from the funeral, Chloe, laughed from the open door of the car.

"Renounce your God," the woman said, and all Camila could see were her lips, those dark lips that moved over teeth stained with who knew what.

And Camila thought she would, just this once. Renounce Him. Where was the harm, in a dream such as this?

As soon as she thought it, the fabric of the thing began to let her go; the cold feel of the metal she clung to began to fade, and she felt herself slipping, being released from the force that had bound her throat and her mouth from speaking.

But as her tongue was loosened, the anger came: images of the woman laughing, smirking over a cup of punch. And Camila screamed at the witch, with a voice that blew over the woman like the gale of a heavy wind: that she was loved, had been all her life; that he had been the only one to touch her; and how dare a stranger handle her body in its grave, when she lay so helpless to stop the fawning hands, the loathsome, crooning voice?

"In the name of Christ, leave me alone!" she cried against that laughing mouth.

And it began to break up. The

ground chipped away as though it were being eaten by a myriad of small, vicious mouths. The train crumbled; the look of the woman decayed from triumph to a horrible, venomous surprise before she blew in and then blew apart, scattering to the wind that howled around her, like a sacrament of feral head.

Camila shivered herself awake, blinking in the strong sunlight, which streamed from her bedroom window to touch her face, her lap. It was warm. The terror of the dream had mostly passed, though she didn't remember falling back asleep or into other dreams. Even in the sunlight, so strong and warm against her skin, the memory of the dream still skittered its weakening currents just under the gooseflesh on her arms and body and the nipples that hadn't been hard for decades, that now hurt with the force of their hardness.

"Dierdra," she whispered, and found that her hands were sore and stiff, clenched together in the attitude of prayer.

Later that morning, she went to mark Ferrin's grave with a bouquet of silk flowers. She knew better; the cemetery workers hated it. She passed signs that forbade it. But she couldn't cut the flowers, couldn't bear to see them wither so quickly away from their roots. And she couldn't come without an offering.

She didn't stay long at Ferrin's place. He wasn't there and she didn't like to pretend that he was.

The sky was bright, but cold. On the graves—some old, some ancient, some newly dug—patches of bouquets were drooped. It had been days since anyone had come. It was getting into Fall, after all; the leaves had dropped; the holidays were just starting. In the coming months, there would be turkeys to carve and presents to give. But first there were pumpkins to light and candy to press into eager little hands.

The cemetery would be closed tonight. She didn't know why some souls came out here at night at all,

much less All Hallow's Eve. The thrill of it, maybe. Kids.

She took a walk. Under the sun, in the bright blue of daylight, the stones shone like the skyscrapers of a small city, or gray buoys in a dark green sea capped with runners of brown foam.

And she realized, only after seeing the upturned earth, that she had headed almost straight to Dierdra's grave, though she'd had no idea (until now) where Dierdra had been laid. A stake was planted at the top, with a small yellow tag that fluttered in the gentle swell of a crisp, October breeze and flipped up letters, written in thick, black marker: *Dier—, Di—, Dierdra Jane.*

Camila saw no one at the site, no one who would stop and ask her (like cawing birds: *why, why*) why she had not been at the burial, so she sighed and followed the short path to the clearing where Dierdra had been laid to rest.

On her way, she saw one stone that was at least nine feet high and four feet wide. It had only one word: *McKay*. At the foot of the stone there were flowers and, oddly, a footlight. Looking at it, at its smooth, unblemished stone surface which even the birds had not dared to dirty, Camila thought (out of the blue) that it should have marked a place much stranger than a grave.

Another stone, quite near it but much smaller, bore three names and a simple epitaph written above them in large letters: *OUR CHILDREN*. Camila stopped to note the dates: the births, all different, a few years apart; the deaths, all the same: June 21, 1987. Ages 16, 12, and 9.

Camila abruptly remembered her dream: the car coming toward her, the death inside; the unexpected, sudden glimpse of it. The shock that ran like a wild current along her spine and ended clinging at her fingertips and the roots of her hair.

Had these children seen what she had seen? Had they named the name of the beast, and died?

The rippling of the yellow marker seemed to laugh behind her back, and suddenly she wanted to

weep—for Ferrin, for Dierdra, for these poor children. For the exquisite shortness of life and the bitterness of finding wisdom only just before death, if at all.

Instead, she turned and walked down to the place where Dierdra was buried. Her grave sat square in the middle of a grove of trees, and the trees fanned out in a circle that was nearly perfect. Stepping into that circle, coming inside it, Camila could almost see the trees as attendants, each dressed in the heavy green of pine branches. She sat on a long stone bench beneath one of the trees; the needles smelled sharply of pine sap (a blind aunt had once scented the New England air of Camila's home, heavy with pine, and said, "Green. This smell is green," and the hackles had risen on her neck even then, coming on the heels of an afterimage of something she couldn't quite remember).

Such a smell; nothing like it in the world. But there had been the underlying thread of blood, that one time. She didn't want to remember, but the sun was just so, shining through the branches, daubing the air with thick flashes of gold and white, and oh, that smell was good, good (but what was under it then had been bad, old-meat bad, maggoty-bad, and she didn't want), she—

*She had been twelve and would feel the pain tomorrow, but for now, there was only the brightness of the fury that hurled her forward, crashing through the brambles. It was well past her bedtime, but she'd heard the shrill screams of a rabbit outside, a small thing being gulled by a dog, whose baying belled deep under the night-time clouds and seemed both a hundred miles and a dozen feet away. She'd vaulted from her bed, her heart beating frantic in her chest. Now she couldn't remember if she'd run through the door or shimmied through her window and down the tree outside. She only knew that she had to run, her breath as loud and savage in her ears as the snarl of the woods and shrieks she heard in the grove beyond her.*

She stumbled through the foliage, half blinded by shadows, the hidden moonlight, and the beating of her own heart pounding the blood hard beneath her forehead and her eyes. Thorns scratched bright streaks on her cheeks and her arms, pulling her hair and leaving strands of it, like bright glittery ribbons, caught fast in the branches of a wild rose bush.

A heavy branch of pine slapped her smartly, scraping sharp weals of blood over her nose and cheeks, tearing at her nightdress as she entered the clearing, blinking and wiping vicious tears away.

She was sure she had gotten there first, had come to this place alone. But there was Dierdra, in her blue sailor dress, its dark velvet almost black in the shadows, standing over the rabbit. Its screams had died away to vague whimpers; blood ran in thick rivulets from puncture wounds at its throat and torn swathes of its belly.

"Where is it?" Camila cried, almost screaming, her own voice as frantic as the rabbit's had been; in her fear and fury, she shrieked the words, and they flew as unseen echoes against the trees and into the sky.

Dierdra only looked at her. Her eyes wore a far-away expression, as though she had been somewhere else and was only just now coming back, jolted back, into a foreign place that had once been familiar. Blood smeared her hands; she looked down at them, at the blood on them, then smiled a little and shrugged, showing Camila her hands.

"I tried to stop it," she said.

"Stop what?" Camila asked.

"The dog, silly."

"Where is it, then?" Camila asked, and when Dierdra could only look at her, vaguely distressed, as though she couldn't quite remember her own name, Camila had said, "The dog. Where is the dog?"

"He ran away," Dierdra said, and waved her hand toward some bushes. Her hand flashed, a small, pale moon smeared red in the high, silvered light.

The rabbit was only barely alive. Blood was in its nose now, and every breath bubbled more blood out of its nostrils, each time a darker red.

Camila had just begun to wonder what Dierdra was doing here, in the grove this late at night, when Dierdra came to her and took her hand solemnly.

"You have to swear," Dierdra said.

And Camila remembered herself then, thinking that Dierdra must be added from all the violence (she wouldn't have thought then of her own shock, but there it was), nodding slowly. Her gaze was fixed on Dierdra's eyes, which caught the moonlight and somehow threw that cold light back in dizzying glints of yellow and gold.

Camila watched as Dierdra bent and touched her forefinger deep into the rabbit's entrails. The rabbit shuddered its last breath as she did this, and Dierdra lifted her hand. The blood pooled on her finger, almost black; dollops of it fell onto the grass. She lifted her finger and the high, gamey smell of the blood came closer, shutting out the air, the light, as Dierdra smiled and daubed the blood first on her own forehead and then upon Camila's.

Camila began to weep.

"You have to swear," Dierdra said, and placed Camila's hand on her breast, which was so young yet that it was only a bud of nipple underneath Camila's hand. "On your life. On mine. Swear."

And that was when the world had tilted.

The Moon flew to the east and the Sun came up, cycling, like ninepins thrown too high into the air, dappling yellow and gold through the fluttering leaves of birch, the slow sway of pine; blinding, dancing on her eyes like a shimmer of sunlight glinting hard and bright off the waves of the sea. She heard Dierdra say something like (like a chant, it was a chant) and—

She couldn't remember what she'd sworn. Lord, that had been 60 years ago, and if Dierdra had asked

her not to tell a soul, had sworn her to secrecy in that midsummer grove, it was just the game of young girls and only time had made her forget the words.

Then Camila recalled, with a nasty start, sitting on the cold stone beside Dierdra's grave, that she hadn't really remembered Dierdra's chant or the promise she had made to her then, either. The time she had passed in that childhood place might have been hours or might have been days. The only sound she could associate with that memory now was the low fluted murmur of pines as the wind went through them, and a deeper tone that shivered up from the ground into her blood.

Beyond this, she knew only that she had walked slowly all the way home, a young girl alone, wandering in her father's dawn-dappled orchards, raising shocking cold sprays of dew with her feet and thinking only of the wonder of it—the rabbit and the miracle ("the trick, you mean," her father later laughed, though he hadn't laughed at the blood or the cloudy way her eyes drifted back to the trees, or that she hadn't come home till early morning), the miracle that had come after, and she would not remember her hand or the feel of Dierdra's pulse, feathery and light beneath it, not for some 63 years later, when a woman named Chloe would take her hand as Dierdra had done then.

That woman, Camila thought, her lips twisting into a moue of dark distaste. She couldn't help but see the remnants of last night's dream, and the woman laughing, then scattering, blowing to the winds in dry, tattered pieces of bone and dust.

Camila looked away from that image, into the clear October sky. Though she could still feel the afternoon sun, she saw a small gray wisp of haze poised over the trees, just above the grave site, lingering there like a small, dark thunderhead. Then it began to break up, like trails of gauze unraveling in the wind. In the remaining streamers she saw, for one horrible moment, the deathly face of the last nights' dreams: she saw it

clearly, in the wind-blown widening of its eyes and the gaily twisted shape of its smile.

Slowly, languorously, it began to swirl away. An echo of laughter on the wind told her that it had all the time in the world. Or that she had already been marked, and it would simply wait.

Camila pulled her coat close and tried to remember the words she had said, with Dierdra, so many years ago. Hadn't there been anything else, beyond that deep vibrating tenor of sound that had danced through the blood of her body when Dierdra had touched her forehead? No, Camila told herself: nothing. Just the early morning after, when the dawn had come to cool the clearing and the dead-rabbit smell to a pictographic clarity. She had opened her eyes then (had finally dared) to find herself alone. Dierdra had been gone, if she'd ever really been there, and the sap had been on Camila's own hands, on the trees, and she thought she had seen—

*The rabbit, panting and dazed. The blood dried on its muzzle, on its fur. But the gashes, the cruel work done to its body, were gone.*

*The rabbit sniffed the air. As it looked at her, its eyes flashed red in the growing light. Camila flinched at this and it bounded away, its jump graceful, the life imminently fluid in its moving body.*

But that had just been the light, that strange cold gold of sunrise. No living thing since Christ had come to life out of death (*so fluid, that jump*) but it hadn't been Christ, it had been a rabbit, dear God, and a long time ago.

It only *seemed* like today, she told herself, because here was another grove, sweet Lord, and here, another death at its center, at its heart. But in *this* grove there was no living Dierdra, only a dark representation of her carved in the earth's surface, which had been turned up to show the brown and rocky soil of a New England grave.

Camila daubed her eyes and argued against it all, even self pity (that old, honeyed bone). She

couldn't help that her eyes were misted; they were old and had seen too much. Filling with tears but not overflowing yet, by God. Under their vague, listless gaze the dirt over Dierdra's grave moved and danced, and brought new patterns to bear under the fluttering yellow flag. Soon enough there would come the headstone, a clean slate of gray; the writing would bore deep into the stone, as though a bright finger had written on its smooth, dark surface. *Like an old stele, she thought, or an obelisk in the desert, where the sand would move around it and tell its stories of the dead.*

Still, there wasn't enough wind here to make the dirt dance like that. Had to be her eyes. But it wasn't, and she knew it, from that pit at the bottom of her soul that sang with the tides and knew the rise of the Moon, whether it told her so or not: *It had moved.* And Camila moaned and looked away from it, because the dirt lay different now. The curves of the grave were gently shaped, like a woman's body—the rise of a breast, the barest slope of thigh.

A whimper welled up in her throat, spilling out in a low moan; she felt it vibrate there, in her head, before she heard the sound itself: *No. No, dear God, not again.* She began to keen, a hurting intonation that came from somewhere deep, where a 10-year-old girl still lay, stunned and bloody, on the sodden grass of a moonlit grove.

Camila became aware of herself almost (*almost*) immediately. Snuffling, half blind, she fished a crumpled linen handkerchief from her pocket and brought it to her lips, then pressed it against her eyes. It smeared her face more than cleaned it, but it was cool against her skin.

Camila wiped her eyes and lowered the hanky. She breathed as deeply as she could, and sat up as straight as she could manage. Then she looked hard at the ground of Dierdra's grave. And it was only dirt again. No breasts, no moving parts of clay.

And the sudden thought hit her, as bright as the sun winking hard

through the branches and the leaves: *I haven't brought any flowers.* Not fresh ones certainly, but she hadn't even brought silk, not for Dierdra; nothing to cover this hole in the earth; no offering of any kind. And Camila realized, as she sat and stared at the newly dug place, that she had never intended to bring anything, had never intended to come here at all. Ever.

The tears did come, then, and she closed her eyes and let them come. How long, she didn't know. They didn't cleanse her soul as she thought they might, but touched her cheeks with hot, feathery kisses instead, like the paper-dry lips of a fevered child.

Camila wrung her hands at her face to cleanse the illness of them from her skin. When she looked back up, still sorrowing, she saw it more clearly: the ground *had* shifted there; though there was no gap in the gently rounded pile of earth, the dirt there in all its infinite patterns lay differently now.

A young girl stood on the edge of the dark soil, her polished patent-leather shoes barely over the line cut in the green earth. Her back was to Camila. Her dress was sea-blue velvet; black piping lined the hem, and a pink silk ribbon fluttered in her wild black hair.

Camila was about to speak, to ask the girl her name ("*who is this?*") when the girl turned to Camila and looked at her with violet eyes and the wisdom of an old, old woman. Her irises glinted yellow in the soft glow of the sun behind the trees, and her dark hair skated like winter branches around her face.

Neither of them spoke, but Camila heard the voice on the phone echoing in her heart, in her ears, saying sweetly, in its well-loved silvery girlchild's voice: "*You know—*"

Camila stood quickly and began to back out of the clearing; she didn't take her eyes off of the girl in the dark sailor dress, nor did the girl waver her knowing gaze on her. The trees shifted and the sun shone in the clearing and Camila saw a fading bruise of brown right at the center of



the girl's forehead. It was shaped like a thumb print, as though somebody stronger than Hecate had struck the girl hard on the forehead with only a thumb and had sent her sprawling into the dirt.

She could even see one whorl of brown, shaped like the curlicue on a fishhook. In the lines and the color of that print, Camila saw the hell of promises made and broken. The anger in the child's eyes weakened Camila's knees, and grew, until all Camila could see was darkness and the violet irises beginning to turn gold. Then Camila hitched up against a sharp stone and almost fell. She cried out and stopped, and the girl laughed: a low, self-mocking sound. The child seemed to vibrate, as though she were little more than a rim of pure crystal, struck for its highest note.

In that high chord, Camila heard words coming from the girl, though her lips did not move beyond her sorrowful, ironic smile: "*You were to be the key. You PROMISED.*"

Camila felt her hand go to the center of her own forehead and was powerless to stop it. There she felt a fine crust that, when she touched it, turned to powder and dropped brownish-red speckles onto her blouse. Even then, she could feel the shape of it: round like the print on the girl's forehead, and engraved with fine, swirling lines, almost like a rune.

The child nodded and smiled, a bitter twist of the lips that both condemned and released Camila from her unremembered sin. Then the girl's eyes, with their radiant irises, shifted, and she turned to throw flowers on Dierdra's grave.

Camila glanced down at the headstone that had nearly tripped her up, then looked quickly back to the girl at Dierdra's grave. For one terrible moment, Camila thought she would see them both: Dierdra and Chloe, the witch-woman, standing together in the clearing and holding hands. In a moment, the woman would lead her away, take Dierdra by the hand and pull her into a fine wisp of smoke, curling over the



trees. She knew it, in her heart, and was afraid to look.

But when she finally did look up, there was no one; nothing in the clearing to catch her eye, except for the gentle movement of petals, bright where they had fallen on the dark soil: splotches of red and a fluttering yellow, a pale bunch of purple and the faintest note of lavender lifting in the air.

Camila moved away from the stone in her hands (and the smell, the smell of sap) and found she had not clutched a headstone at all. She looked down; her vision caught on a bit of writing—strange characters, like the thin and elegant footprints of a bird, were scrawled on a harsh stone post. The post, proclaiming its memorial or benediction (or even warning)—she had no idea which—stood on a raised gray podium. Next to the post was a small stone box with a metal door. In front of this door was a small granite shelf, like an altar or a trough.

Three drops of blood were pooled there. Still fresh, the drops stood out against the stone, a vibrant red that shimmered brightly against the gray marbled trough. They dribbled on the stone slab to trace a minute path to the small metal door, closed with a latch on the trail of blood that led inside.

The translation on the post declared that this small patterning of altars and blood was a Buddhist shrine. But even so, Camila caught her breath, caught herself wanting to open that door, to see what terrible thing was hidden inside, to see what face this death would wear.

Instead, she turned quickly back to the yard's exit. Laughter followed her in the wind, high and soft, and it swept her, with its sudden chill, quickly out, out of the cemetery and its city of the dead.

She passed Ferrin's grave without even knowing it. The silk flowers she had placed there nodded and swayed with the breeze of her passing, the tips of their silk petals only just beginning to frost. ■

# DANCE TO THE SUN

William Esrac

Illustrated by Kelly Faltermayer

*Saulus was growing increasingly disenchanted with being a superman*

Part Three of Four Parts

For Claire

## WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE:

It is after a nuclear incident which has left a devastated area in Anatolia known as The Plains of The Warlords. The land has grown back as a desert, with strange plants and insects. No one lives there. But a man is discovered staggering through it. He is shot from an aircar with an anaesthetic dart, and brought in for study.

He is named SAULUS, and Study Section quickly discovers that he has a broad range of paranormal powers. As an Outlaw, as well as a super, he is subject to termination. But he may be valuable; he must be debriefed before a determination can be made.

He is almost completely amnesiac, but remembers the name of CALLIOS LEMAITRE. LEMAITRE has never heard of him, but as an experienced Analyst and Alpha Calculator he is brought in and eventually extracts some material from SAULUS. This is reduced to a number of cassettes and a transcript, giving some details of the previous two years of SAULUS' life. It is fragmentary, both because SAULUS did not completely tell his story and because the transcript has been edited by LEMAITRE and STUDY SECTION to reflect the "important" parts of the narrative. So people sometimes come and go abruptly, and events sometimes are not completed, or launched into after they began.

An interesting feature of the transcript is that SAULUS now recalls "THE LADY," who is actually AURIA SHASTI, a female telepath with a Lure Specialty, the Security Agent who penetrated the JONAAS Clan and revealed its stronghold. THE LADY had a profound effect on SAULUS, who is thus shown to be a member or at least an associate of the outlaw Clan.

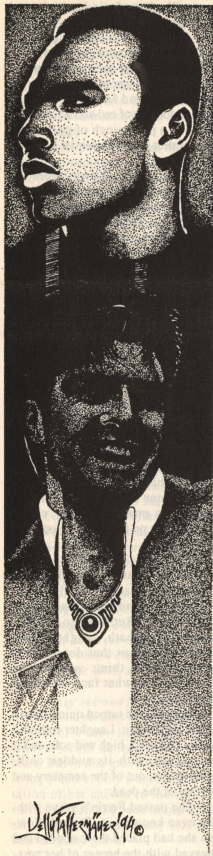
STUDY SECTION conveys the transcript to Security for a decision on what to do with this man. The rest of the story is told through the transcript. It begins two years earlier:

SAULUS lives in a cave overlooking the Plains, with his half-brother YO-YO, a retarded dwarf boy whom he cares for and loves very much. SAULUS himself is young. As he does every day, he gets up, dances to Sun-over-the-mountains, and now that his hands are complete again, feeds YO-YO and himself from the fruit stored behind the ferns.

In the valley below, in what remains of the long-dead Warlord's Red Palace, lives the Clan, led by JONAAS, a firethrower and criminal genius. SAULUS avoids him as much as possible, but SAULUS performs a great many services for the Clan, such as changing faces and fingertip-patterns, and JONAAS is very demanding. JONAAS, for instance, burned SAULUS' hands recently as a punishment and SAULUS had to heal them, an inconvenience.

SAULUS is visited by THE LADY, who is teaching him to speak Universal. THE LADY is very nice; it's too bad she's associated with HUBERTUS, another friend of SAULUS. THE LADY has inexplicably failed at some unknown work on the Outside. HUBERTUS has put a directive in THE LADY's brain which keeps her from leaving the Clan hideout; HUBERTUS also does not like her visiting SAULUS. THE LADY is enigmatic; she does not spill her thoughts like the rest of SAULUS' friends.

And so the story gradually unfolds; the outlaw CLAN living in the usable portion of former WARLORD'S wreck of a palace, plotting and doing various forms of



Kelly Faltermayer '94

criminal activity throughout Europe; JONAAS, the unstable head of the CLAN, hating SAULUS but using his ability to transform living flesh; SAULUS, growing into more and more powers but unwilling to break with JONAAS because he keeps them all organized. SAULUS largely keeps to himself, gradually transforming parts of the palace that the CLAN doesn't even fully know about, keeping the biological balance between the otherwise deadly mutated vegetation and insects, and most of all loving YO-YO, whom he is doing his best with, but the process is slow and will never be complete, so badly deformed and deranged was YO-YO. He has a few genuine friends in THE CLAN; not many.

THE LADY is at his cave for his next lesson. She has brought more books. She is very pretty and golden. SAULUS cannot resist. She says "No, I belong to HUBERTUS," but he uses a special-think.

Afterwards, she asks him how old he is, and in his opinion he is twenty. He asks her about where she came from on the Outside, but she does not answer very much. NONI has said she is a thief found by HUBERTUS in Rome, but she is surely intelligent enough to have found easier ways to live. And she tells him she is twenty-five, but her body says it is thirty. So there is something strange about her. She is very secretive about a number of things.

She asks SAULUS about his past. He explains that when he was unripe, he lived with MARIO, who took care of him because JONAAS said he must. But MARIO is a bully, and dislikes YO-YO, so when SAULUS was older he brought them to this cave. No one is afraid of him while he is here, and he feels safer away from JONAAS.

THE LADY goes, saying they must never be together again in the way they were; it mustn't happen again, and HUBERTUS mustn't know. SAULUS allows her to think he agrees. He should feel shame at his unfair persuasion. It is not a fair thing. He must not do it again. Maybe.

A think-call comes, and SAULUS goes to JONAAS in the Big Room. Numerous members of the Clan are there, and some new people. JONAAS is thinner and sicker than when SAULUS last saw him, and his teeth are decaying again. He sneers at SAULUS and calls him an imbecile. He says he needs a new body-change again, and threatens SAULUS again. He sends flame, and SAULUS' head is set afire. But SAULUS, before he loses consciousness, opens his mind wide, for the first time; something stops JONAAS before he can do more, and he screams.

SAULUS heals himself, with the help of a slatternly woman named JAZALU who

claims not to be afraid of him. And he agrees to do a bodychange for JONAAS tomorrow, but JONAAS is to keep people away from his cave, and if he ever tries to hurt SAULUS again, he'll be hurt far more. JONAAS calls SAULUS an imbecile and goes away.

He takes YO-YO with him for a lesson with AURIA and HUBERTUS. Then he goes looking for JAZALU. She has a burnmark on her arm. It's her own fault, she says; she argued with JONAAS about the Rome operation.

What kind of work will she be doing in this Rome operation, SAULUS asks. Deactivating alarm units so a storage center may be broken into, and tampering with recording apparatus so identities won't be caught by camera-eyes, JAZALU explains with pride. This is her speciality, and makes up for her lack of telepathy.

Time passes. In the meantime, SAULUS experiments with darker-blond hair and a warmer-colored skin. He develops dark mode and blond-gold mode, which he can assume very quickly, as well as his "normal" appearance.

JAZALU is back from Rome. When she goes to the mirror to apply her make-up, she screams. SAULUS has made her healthy; it is the body she would have if she didn't use alcohol and drugs. She strikes SAULUS; he tampered with her. SAULUS goes out and plays with YO-YO.

Time passes. AURIA, which is the way SAULUS thinks of her now, has taken up with JONAAS, a thing SAULUS just can't understand. SAULUS makes many repairs—on HUBERTUS' arm, which was mangled in an explosion at the Allied Chemicals sabotage job, on GUISEPPE's drug problem, on FATIMAH's knife wounds—and stays in JAZALU's good graces. JAZALU is taking over more and more of his life.

She tells him JONAAS is planning to use him Outside; SAULUS thinks about that, but he has always been curious about the Outside.

HUBERTUS calls him; SAULUS is going to Rome to work on a man who is very important to the Clan. He gives SAULUS identidiscs and clothes which fit reasonably well, since SAULUS is in blond-gold mode, but are incredibly uncomfortable.

They go by tunnel tram to a place where they get an aircar, and by aircar to Bari. Then they take a wheeled vehicle to Rome. SAULUS is very uncomfortable; the tunnel was foul and noisy, the aircar terrified him so that he made himself go to sleep. Rome does not please him either—it is full of people abusing each other.

CASSIM, whom SAULUS is to do a body-change on, is very overweight and has a body with many self-imposed deteri-

orations. SAULUS goes to work, tearing down CASSIM's body fat and going through a variety of other procedures which take four hours, leave HUBERTUS nauseated, and smell horrible, but end in CASSIM's being completely new. CASSIM is beside himself with joy. Afterwards, HUBERTUS takes SAULUS on a tour of the city. SAULUS does not like it at all. He is very depressed, and can't wait to get back to the Clan hideout.

More time passes. SAULUS has to deal with the ecology around his cave, which has nearly gotten out of hand during his absence. Then he has to deal with YO-YO, washing and feeding him. YO-YO is actually making attempts to speak, and SAULUS is delighted. Then he makes breakfast for JAZALU and goes to wander about. He finds AURIA inspecting the collapse of yet another section of colonnades at the Red Palace.

He asks AURIA if she would like to see the West Terrace, and AURIA says it is a terrible place. There are giant spiders and a tree that eats people. SAULUS says it's quite attractive, if he is with her, but she must never go there by herself.

And indeed it is attractive, to him. AURIA is both fascinated and repelled. She leaves, and NONI, who is more or less his friend, mindspeaks and laughs that his tongue was hanging out.

NONI asks him if he minds JAZALU's being pregnant with DIAM's child. (DIAM is the head of a phony religion THE CLAN is starting up.) No, he doesn't mind; she is of course saying the child is his, but he knows it isn't. Furthermore, he just wants to be rid of JAZALU. NONI goes on to say that there is a new woman in the camp, CECILE, whom JONAAS has taken up with; does SAULUS know how AURIA will take this?

SAULUS has no idea. He goes to HUBERTUS to tell him that NONI has also said she thinks she knows where TORROS is. TORROS is a former CLAN member exiled by JONAAS. Yes, HUBERTUS says; he is living with THE HAND, the king of the Paris sewers, a horribly deformed man with one beautiful hand. He goes on to wax ecstatic about Genoa, which, along with several other Italian cities, was the recent site of a Solar Faith rally. Altogether, over a million people have joined DIAM's faith in Italy. The amount of money poured into DIAM's coffers is incalculable.

SAULUS is largely responsible. He mingles with the crowds, finds people who desperately need physical repairs, starts them, and leaves invisible markers on their chairs so DIAM can claim specific credit.

But things begin to go wrong. The Psi-Orgs—police with specific responsibility to catch criminals with super powers—

are trying to find evidence that super powers are being used by the new religion. SAULUS barely gets away from them, using his powers in ways they cannot detect, finding new powers as he does so. He learns that BARBIER, one of them, has betrayed them. By the time he re-joins his fellows, BARBIER has been killed and the body buried. HUBERTUS says that just a little more money, and the CLAN can move away from the PLAINS and settle on an island, where they will be safe and no one will bother them.

Again, time passes. SAULUS is in his cave when AURIA appears, and is charming. JONAAS has taken up full-time with CECILE; JAZALU has moved in with DIAM, taking most of SAULUS' money with her, not that he cares. AURIA shyly asks him if she may move in with him. SAULUS is very glad, though it's obvious AURIA has a hidden purpose. He already knows she has a powerful Lure ability, but he does not know why. He tells her not to use it on him; she doesn't need to. He mindspeaks "I love you," and she comes into his arms.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

(Continued)

(A gap of four days occurs here.

—J.T.

*Semantics Division*)

It's the 15th Day of the 9th Month when I look at the calendar. It's well after sunrise and Auria still sleeps in my arms, but Yo-Yo is pushing at my back and murmuring because he's hungry.

I slide away from Auria carefully, pick Yo-Yo up and we go to the freshener, then dress. After I've made our breakfasts and coffee, I take Auria's in to her. She stirs so delightfully and is so warm and scented when I kiss her that I'm tempted to stay. She is recovered from the sexual trauma and did not merely pretend to enjoy me last night. That's a very wonderful thing. And it makes me even angrier with Jonaas.

I go to clean up the table and then spend some time in the garden. Yo-Yo says, "Naughty," when I growl at him for poking at the mossbanks to make the beetles run about, then he runs off, chuckling.

I go in and Auria is bathed, groomed and wearing her green gown. She doesn't care for it but knows that I like it. I snuggle her until she laughs and pushes me away.

"I've been thinking," she mindspeaks.

"How alarming," I return and she pretends to hit me.

"Jazalu acted as a kind of agent for you but she didn't take that idea far enough," she tells me. "The Clan all take you for granted and that's bad for you. The one thing they all understand is that things have to be paid for. So, from now on, I'll be your agent like Jazalu was and they'll pay for your services through me. I'll negotiate—oh, don't look so alarmed.

I'll use my discretion. But it'll give you a position, Saulus. It'll give them respect for you."

"If you think so," I tell her. "And Jonaas must be included."

She looks worried at that.

"But," I tell her, "I won't have you going near Jonaas. I'll handle him."

She looks relieved but asks, "You won't do anything silly? I don't want more trouble with Jonaas for either of us."

"I'll be careful," I tell her. "He needs me to keep Diam happy for these last few Temple meetings, so he won't be stupid, either."

This is said to reassure her. I've made my decisions.

"If you're sure—" she tells me. "And we'll keep the money here, so that you'll know where it is." She shows me the lockable drawer in the big chest.

"I trust you," I tell her.

"No," she states, "from now on you'll have the key. If I need money I'll ask for it."

So I go and take the money given me by Diam from the hiding-place in the mossbanks and we put it into the drawer. She gives me the key and I immediately put it in her jewel box.

"Are you sure?" she asks.

"Quite sure," I tell her.

I'm tempted to show her the secrets of the Love Palace, but a self-



ishness prevents me. I want to keep my secret to myself for a time yet.

"I must go down to the meeting this morning," I tell her. "Jonaas came back last night and I want to be there so that they don't make my decisions for me. And I'll negotiate about my cut."

"Are you sure you can do that without bringing trouble on yourself?" she asks.

"Quite sure," I tell her, having made my decisions.

"I'll come down with you," she tells me. "I want to see Christina."

She goes for her cloak because the morning is chill and we walk down to the Red Palace, holding hands. I'm so happy that she's with me that all my decisions are strengthened. We part at the West Wing and I watch her go down the corridor before I go into the Long Room.

Hubertus, Pearlman, Carolus, Fatimah and Guisepppe are already there. And so is Jonaas. He ignores me when I say good morning to everyone. I sit next to Hubertus.

They talk on the drug-runs before the Faith is mentioned and I say nothing as visits to Rheims, Munich, Orleans and Paris are discussed. These are to be the Clan's last involvements with the Faith. It's interesting to hear of Diam's future plans for training new Solar-ministers. There are even interested people

from the Americas involved in this. Diam is amazingly ambitious.

Jonaas looks healthy and handsome since I treated him last. I can understand why women are attracted to him. It's not merely his charismatic fascination. It's also a sexual vibrancy in his looks and manner. He has great charm when he wishes. That charm is evident now as he talks with the others, complimenting them and making little jokes about their work. He manages people wonderfully, preferring to persuade rather than bully. Unless they're very stubborn, of course.

For all his megalomania he's aware that he needs the Talents of the Clan. He likes to be in charge, to manipulate forces, but he's no fool when it comes to making himself liked as a person. Even Hubertus, who is so clear-thinking usually, is willing to be manipulated by him. Perhaps, if Mama hadn't grown to hate him so and hadn't infected me with her attitudes, I could have established a better relationship with him when I was young. I've wondered, at times, if producing Yo-Yo was the cause of them souring each other or if it would have happened anyway.

He wasn't unkind to me in the early days. Only later, when I wouldn't fit into the niche he'd designed for me, did he come to dis-

like me. Too late to repine on that now. Now I have to assert myself.

They finish their discussions and rise to go. I remain seated.

Hubertus says, "We need to discuss safety arrangements for the meetings, Saulus."

"I'll come soon," I say. "I must speak with Jonaas first."

Pearlman, perhaps sensing something strange about my manner, rolls his eyes at me as he leaves. This is a warning not to do anything foolish.

The door to the Long Room closes and Jonaas stares at me coldly.

"Is this another form of dressing up?" he says maliciously. "You become more eccentric each time I see you!"

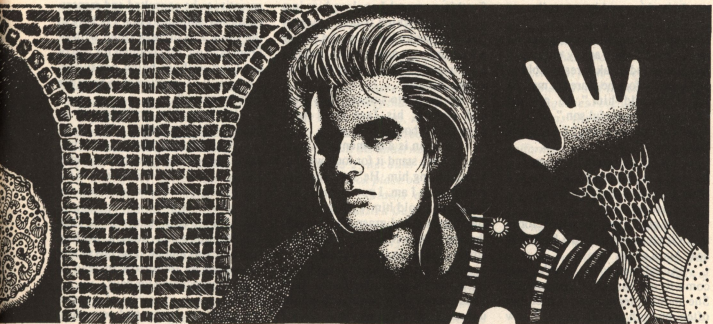
"This," I say, "is Dark Mode. I have three Modes which I use to keep from becoming too noticeable when I'm Outside. Dark Mode is very comfortable."

"Well, Black Man, what is it you wished to speak to me about?" he says and I brace myself, sweat coming coldly beneath my arms.

"You didn't wait for me before you began the meeting," I say.

"So?" he says. "Nothing will be different for you. The work is as usual."

"My cut will be different," I tell him. "I'm worth more than I've been getting."



He didn't expect this and is irritated. I smile at him in the way that he dislikes because I want him angry. This is the time.

"The Faith doesn't need you any longer," he says. "Be thankful for what you get."

"No," I say. "I've ceased to be grateful to the Clan or you. I don't need the Faith either. I'm quite content to remain in the valley and never go outside at all."

He thinks on this, calculating, for some moments.

"It's only four meetings," he says. "Rheims again, Orleans, Munich and Paris. Temples are to be opened in Paris and Orleans and Diam wants them set off to a good start. I'll add five per cent to your cut."

"Ten per cent," I say. "What do you care? You'll extract it from Diam if he really wants me."

He's becoming angry. It isn't the money that upsets him. It's the fact that I'm bargaining with him.

"You have more ambition than I credited you with," he tells me. "I suppose I should be pleased that my offspring has some drive at long last. Very well, I'll make it ten percent."

"Instruct Hubertus," I say. "Now."

His anger rises vividly. "You don't trust me?" he bel-lows.

I give him my biggest smile.

"No," I say.

Oh, he's angry! Good, good. So am I. But he isn't angry enough. I feel him mindspoke, presumably to Hubertus, before he glares at me.

"I've told him," he growls. "You're an ungrateful son."

"I'm not your son," I say. "My father was—"

"Get out of my sight!" he roars. I feel a wave of heat hover, but it's withdrawn. I'm ready for him.

I stand up.

"I'll go," I say, "but not before I make it clear that I won't have you near Auria again."

"Auria!" he shouts. "You're welcome to my cast-offs, you whelp! She should please you—I used her often enough so she must know

something about pleasing a real man!"

"Why did you reduce her to the position of a Clanservant?" I ask. "She's a Beta Calculator, a valuable Talent."

"She's a fool!" he rages. "Two jobs were botched because of her! Those sources of income were destroyed forever! I could never trust her Outside again! If I didn't know better, I could think she botched them deliberately! You're welcome to her! As far as I'm concerned she doesn't belong to the Clan at all!"

I smile big and make a laughter sound.

"How it must hurt you," I tell him, "that she should see you as such a worthless lover and reject you."

Oh, his anger swells!

The cloth of my kaftan blazes at my shoulder and my skin sizzles with the heat, sending daggers of agony to my brain. It was only a warning from him. He teeters on the edge of control but his rage is not yet enough. My shoulder is an agony that stimulates me to ferocity such as I've never felt before.

"You're a bullying savage," I tell him. "You can't even face the truth of your own inadequacy with a woman!"

Oh, how his anger flares! Heat sears me terribly for a fraction of a second before I pounce! I seize him with that ferocity which I've nurtured for this moment! I enclose him in a vice of pain which is mine, magnified, and strike him with the power which my own anger gives me! My anger is rich, exultant, glorious and as vicious as his!

He begins to scream, eyes wide and staring, his face livid with anguish, his body writhing!

The pain is a momentary thing. He couldn't stand it for long without shock killing him. He's not familiar with pain as I am. I put an end to the pain, but I hold him with my mind, step forward and grasp him beneath the arms. Dark Mode is wonderfully strong. I begin to shake Jonaas with a violence that makes his head jerk back and forth and his limbs flail! Shake him until he's limp and almost unconscious and I'm tired, then I

release him and allow him to fall to the floor like a piece of soiled clothing!

I'm not done yet.

I shout into his mind, "That was for what you did to Auria! You're filthy! To do that to any woman was a vile thing, but to do it to Auria almost convinced me that I must kill you! But I won't kill you—"

I draw his reeling awareness into mine and show him part of myself. His mind shrieks in terror and I'm pleased!

"Look!" I tell him. "See what I've made! See the alarm-pattern that I've imprinted over my basic survival instincts! See it! Next time you try to burn me, even if I'm sleeping or unconscious, that instinct to survive will attack you in full reflex so swift that you'll be destroyed totally! See it! There's your destruction! You'll be swept away like a leaf before the gale, a dust-mote in the torrent!"

I release him into his own awareness again and keep him in cruel consciousness.

I tell him, "I'm neither your enemy nor your rival, Jonaas. I'm separate from you by inclination, needs and genetics. I have no wish to control the Clan or its activities and I'm prepared to obey you in all that seems reasonable. But I'm not a tool to be used as you please or a weakling to be bullied. From now on I'm an entity to be consulted and respected for my abilities. I don't belong to the Clan. I'm merely allied with it. From now on, I do nothing for you or the Clan without being consulted. And you'll never attempt to harm me or mine again."

I release him entirely and he becomes unconscious.

His wrenched muscles and bruises will be sore for days, but his shock will be worse. I know it's weak of me but my anger has faded so I reach out and touch his mind with pleasure-pulse to ease his trauma a little. Then I manipulate his body's healing capacities so that he'll be physically recovered by tomorrow instead of being incapacitated for days.

I pick him up, aware of my own physical weariness, and carry him

from the Long Room, along to his own quarters and to his bedchamber. Cecile, putting cosmetics on her face, shrieks when she sees us. I put Jonaas on his bed. Cecile shrieks again.

"Be quiet," I say to her. "Look after your man and pretend to have some sense."

I go out, down the corridor and out to the colonnades where I sit, recovering and examining the burns which affect my shoulder, my face, my arms and part of my thighs. My kaftan is so scorched that it crumbles in places.

Presently, Auria comes running. "Saulus! Cecile is making a great commotion! Jonaas is unconscious—" she mindspeaks and then realizes my state.

"Saulus— What have you done?" "Jonaas will recover," I tell her. "I made some things clear to him, that's all. I'll go up to the Blue Place and heal myself. Would you go and tell Hubertus that I'll come to see him later? I'm in no state to consult with him at the moment."

I leave her staring in horror and walk slowly up to the Blue Place, reaction making me tremble. With food inside me, I repair the damage quickly but I'm tired. I bathe and then rest on the bed.

*(This confrontation between Saulus and Jonaas has been verified by Auria Shasti, although her coloring of the event differs. Whereas Saulus regarded it as a venting of anger and vengeance, she saw it as Saulus asserting a new authority and independence, the first crumbling of Jonaas's authority within the Clan.*

*By this time it becomes quite clear that Saulus has capacities as a Super-Talent which rival those of the legendary Narnia of Syracuse (who was, thankfully, killed during the Great Mistake), e.g. Saulus's ability to subdue Controls, suppress his own psi-field beyond detectable levels, and to control the minds of other Super-Talents, quite apart from his unusual Secondary abilities. He would have to be classified as a Unique on the basis of his Secondary alone. We must be grateful that his*

*psychology is such as to confine him to self-preservation rather than to domination.*

*Following this part of the narrative comes a gap of sixteen days.*

*The Solar Faith meetings at Rheims, Orleans, Munich and Paris attracted world-wide attention during the fortnight between 17-9-80 and 1-10-80, particularly for the establishing of permanent Temples at Rheims and Paris. There have been many developmental groups which have enjoyed great success, but I am sure there would be no argument about the growing influence of the Solar Faith as the most successful movement of its kind in modern times. It is not a religious order in the accepted sense (unless one could call it the religion of Humanity rather than the worship of a Divine Presence).*

*Many of its teachings derive from human-developmental groups and there is nothing very startling about its principles. Yet it is now becoming a world-wide organization and a valuable one since its views on the Medcenters have moderated. It has had a distinct influence on putting down the drug trade and motivating a general trend toward a healthier lifestyle.*

*Cassim Odemi is a problem which is, as yet, unresolved. If Diam Ennio is indeed Cassim Odemi it is doubtful that it can ever be proven. The Psi-Orgs, along with most other authorities, have agreed that it seems most expedient to accept Diam Ennio's value as a social influence to the good rather than cause upheavals in the public sphere. Investigations show conclusively that, whatever the Solar Faith began as, it is now perfectly legitimate and free of all associations with the underworld.*

*Saulus's account of certain events that took place on the evening of 1-10-80 explains occurrences which had puzzled Central Security in Paris for some time. At 19th hour, a call was received from an anonymous source, claiming that the meeting to inaugurate the new Solar Faith Temple was to be influenced by illegal psi-activity. Particulars were given that a certain Hubertus*

*Aanensen and his cohorts would arrive behind the central stage by car just prior to the meeting, which was scheduled to begin at 20th hour. Despite previous "false alarms" and fruitless investigations, a Security Unit was sent from Paris Central Psi-Org and placed in position behind the Temple's central pavilion and in the public galleries.*

*At 19:56, Sensitives reported the arrival of a car containing two psi-positives and an unknown. The car paused at the dressing-room entrance to allow the unknown, a man in an usher's uniform, to alight, and then moved toward the exit gates. Enforcers and part of the Security Unit closed in on the car, forcing it to stop before it reached the gates. The car immediately exploded and a paralyzing gas of the H272 type was released. The two psi-positives escaped in the ensuing chaos. A large-scale search of Sectors 5, 6 and 7 failed to find them.*

*Enforcers and Psi-Org Operatives entered the dressing-room area of the Temple and found Diam Ennio, five Temple assistants, a choir of twenty-nine singers and three ushers. The ushers were immediately arrested and the others asked to produce their identidiscs and to submit to a brief psi-probe.*

*Investigation of Diam Ennio, his assistants and the choir proved fruitless. The ushers were also found to be legitimate and released later. It was not until halfway through the meeting that an observant Enforcer noticed that there were only twenty-eight members of the choir on stage. Later inquiries revealed that twenty-eight was the correct number of members and that additional choir uniforms were always kept available. When questioned later, choir members could not accurately describe the missing man other than to say he was negroid and heavily built. No one had queried his presence since several members of the choir had been recruited for the evening. The matter had to be dropped for lack of further leads.*

—J.T.  
Semantics Division)

## EIGHT

Pearlman slows the car and Hubertus says to me, "We'll pick you up at the White Cockerel at about 22nd hour. You know where to go?"

I say, "Main Promenade until I reach Rue Verite."

"About ten minutes' walk. You'll see a park opposite it," says Hubertus as I climb back to the car.

I close the door, the car moves off and I start walking toward the dressing-rooms. It's very chilly. I must get a big coat such as Hubertus wears—

Something isn't right—

Several men suddenly appear from the shadows and a sonic alarm begins to squeal. I pause and turn to see that the car is being stopped by other cars near the gates and that two of the men are heading toward me. Too dark to see them clearly—

The car stops, there's a loud, thunderous noise and the car flies into pieces! Huge clouds of white smoke appear from the remains of the car and roll rapidly across a large area! I'm momentarily shocked until I realize that this is the escape mechanism that Hubertus told me of. The men heading toward me have stopped to stare also.

I'm galvanized into action!

I run to the dressing-room area at full speed, down a narrow passage and into a room where the choir is preparing. Panting, I tear off my jacket, transfer my identidisc, my money, and the pretty stone which Yo-Yo gave me to my trouser pockets, search frantically for a spare choir robe and take one from a hook, hoping someone doesn't reclaim it indignantly. I haul it over my head, smooth it hastily and then hang the usher's jacket in its place on the hook. I calm my breathing, try to look placid, stare about and then ask about a gold sash. I'm given one and tie it about me quickly.

A man is handing out sheets with strange marks on them.

"Tenor or baritone?" he asks me.

"Baritone," I say and take the sheet he hands me. There are the names of three songs that I know,

having heard them so often, and I realize that the sheet is marked with the tunes in music-script.

"Are you from the Elysees Guild or the Pigalle?" a man asks me.

I'm about to reply when Enforcers walk in, followed by two people in Psi-Org uniforms. My heart pounds and I fight for calm again.

One of the Enforcers shouts, "Please have your identidiscs ready for inspection! There will be a brief psi-probe! Please remain calm!"

Out in the corridor, some loudly protesting ushers are being removed by Enforcers. The choir, too, make protesting noises. I'm frightened and sweat runs coldly down my ribs.

From somewhere down the passageway, I hear Diam's voice below, "Outrageous! This is persecution! Please don't touch my robe—your hands may not be clean! Are you a member of the Faith?"

The Enforcers begin to inspect the identidiscs while the Psi-Org people "listen." When it comes my turn, I present my disc and feel a mild mental intrusion so I present a mixture of thoughts to do with my terrible headache, my annoyance with the choir Director for putting me into the back row instead of the front, and how my wife will think this is very exciting. The Enforcer presses my disc against his recorder, which pips sharply; he returns it to me and I move away, looking at my music sheet and adjusting my robe.

The mental intrusion has gone so I move over to another man and say, "Gives you the creeps, doesn't it?" He growls, "Damned peepers!" and tells me a long story about Peepers being used in psychotherapy for his sister years before and how she's as peculiar as ever, maybe even worse than before.

The choir Director, the same man who was in Turin, comes in and makes a great fuss about the interference with the inauguration. There's a great deal of discussion among the choir members about what the Enforcers can be looking for.

Diam's voice is still roaring about persecution and several anxious officials come in to see what the delay

is. The last of the choir members presents her identidisc and the choir Director begins to group us. He's very agitated and yells, "Places please! We'll never be ready! Where are the tenors? Ladies, stop talking, please! What a shambles!" We shuffle into lines and I don't know whether I'm with tenors or baritones or basses, but no one seems to notice.

The Enforcers confer with the Psi-Org people and my robe is wet beneath the arms. The Director says something about "giving plenty of fortissimo in 'Purify The Earth' and to watch him more carefully in 'Life Is A Flame.'"

I can hear Diam shouting, "We must begin! We must begin!" and a man runs in and says that the sonic broadcasters are on and where's the choir? Some of the choir-members do soft singing exercises and the Director gestures at the officials.

We suddenly begin filing out through a passageway and I follow, clutching my sheet and sweating. We come out into the bright lights of the stage and I find myself entering the third tier of the choir stalls and staring at a massed audience who all seem to stare at me. So many faces—I look about carefully but there's no escape.

The choir being in place, the Director appears on his podium and raises his arms, mouthing at us—I think it's about fortissimo. The music begins, the Director waves his arms at us and we sing the song which I always think is so silly.

*Oh, Divine Humanity,  
Purity our Goal!  
Discipline must surely be  
The saving of our Soul!  
Help me realize my worth,  
Guide me, guide me to rebirth!  
Mind and body one perfection  
Traveling in one Direction,  
Humanity entire!*

I sing loudly like the others and the music thunders. We begin to chant the Principles and I don't know them all because Diam has added to them of late and I haven't taken much notice. I mouth silently.

I wonder where Jazalu is? She was in the audience at Munich but



didn't know me because I was in Pale Mode. Are Pearlman and Hubertus safe? Did they get away? What will I do if they were caught?

The trumpet theme begins and the lights change, fading on the choir as Diam comes onto the stage in a blaze of light. We sing "Oh, Cosmic Light," which is not so silly as "Oh, Divine Humanity." Many of the audience sing, too.

Diam raises his arms at the end of the song and begins to talk. His voice is so rich and honey-smooth with dark undertones. He's such an actor. He's magnetic, holding his audience wonderfully. He's transformed from being a mere man and becomes a fountain of philosophies and entrancing words. He has such conviction and is so compelling that I almost forget who he is. But I'm soon bored from having heard it so often. I look at the audience and wish I could be part of it instead of being up here.

There are still Enforcers in the galleries and the two Psi-Org people are moving about on the second level. Oh, it's unbearable to be standing here not knowing what's happened to Hubertus and Pearlman!

I can see Jubal/Barbier up on the second level, quite clear in the soft lighting. Who's that with him? I know the face; it's one of the men who spoke to me when my face was

bleeding in Dijon. He was a Controll But he's not in uniform. Why would Jubal be friendly with a Psi-Org man? Hubertus would be interested. They're moving out of the second level now—I'm certain it was the same man. The heavy brows and that interesting nose—Ah, they're coming down to the lower level. It definitely is the same Control. They're moving out into the reception area now—

Diam has finished his opening harangue. We sing "My Life Is A Flame" which, at any other time, I would enjoy because it has a thumpy tune. We kneel for the first prayer and meditation and the audience rustles to its knees, too. Diam intones the words of the Faith Prayer and then begins the chant which sounds like "Om Pardi-mi Hom." I like the reverberation of it and find it very soothing.

But then I discover that there's a gap in the choir stall behind me. I can't resist this opportunity to escape. The subsonics are on now, adding to the sonorous sound. I shuffle back on my knees very carefully and look about. There's a space behind the choir and more steps going down. I hitch my robe up carefully and wait. The sonorous sound goes on and on—

The tinkle-bell sounds come and then a silence of brief meditation. Diam, his voice soft, begins the

prayer about the Discipline of the Mind. That goes on and on and on—the tinkle-bell sounds come again, the music begins and the choir stands suddenly to sing "As One Truth" in soft voices.

I shuffle sideways on my knees behind the choir and crawl quickly to the steps. I ease myself down them until I'm hidden from everyone, then stand and move to the door at the bottom of the steps. It opens easily and I'm in a corridor. Another door here leads me into the choir room again. No one about.

I haul the sash and robe off and hang them on a hook. My undershirt is soaked with sweat and my head aches from holding in my psi-field. I risk opening my psi-field a fraction and close it again because there are others not too distant. I need a jacket or an overtunic. I see a large over-jacket which I recognize as the Director's and grab it. No—too tight. I put it back. Ah, here's a dark gray cloak! That'll do! I drag it about me and hastily tie the neck-cord. It's a very fine cloak, long and full, with slits to put the hands through. I arrange it and go out into the passage quickly. Still no one about.

Outside, there are still Enforcers in the service area, close to the gate. I flatten myself in the shadows against the building. The remains of the car



are being removed and the gates are closed. What to do? What to do?

I edge along the side of the building, eyes on the Enforcers, until I come to a little garden, recently planted with shrubs and trees. I hide there for a moment and see that there's a small gate in a metal fence that cuts the service area off from the front of the building. I move quickly. Oh, wonderful! It opens easily and I'm out in the approach to the Temple. And there's the brightly-lit Grand Promenade with the cars moving silently along it. There are people about and I walk by with all the confidence I can muster until I'm on the walkway.

It's a cold night and there are no stars. I walk briskly until I feel it's safe to release my psi-field. Ah, the relief! I saunter along casually. My chronometer says 20:52. Strange how one loses the sense of time during periods of tension. Diam's audience must make its own miracles tonight.

I quicken my pace and soon I see a little park. I cross the busy Promenade on a pedestrianway and look for Rue Verite. Ah, there it is! I turn into a little alley and there's a bright sign that says "White Cockerel" in Francaise and Universal. I go inside. It's very pretty and fake-homely. I go to a booth in a corner and slip into it.

Ah, so good to be quiet and still! The sonics are soothing and the servex is one of the simple kinds that I understand. I dial for coffee and a flavored carbohydrate which come quickly. I enjoy both and then doze.

My chronometer shows the creeping time. At 21:35, I decide I must change my Mode. I have the roll of money that Diam gave me in Munich, so I pay the servex and go to the freshener. There's no one about so I go to a cubicle, lock myself in and begin the change.

I'm quick at it now. It takes me ten minutes and Dark Mode's extra bulk is consumed easily. I flush the wastes and dark hair away and go out to the basins. My blonde hair needs combing, but I have no comb so I use my fingers as best I can, wash my face and drink greedily. My trousers are too baggy for comfort now. I go

back to the booth, dial for more coffee and wait.

There are several people in the restaurant now. Twenty-second hour comes, but no Hubertus nor Pearlman appears. I'm beginning to grow anxious. If only I knew whether they were caught or not! I dial for more coffee and carbohydrates. People come and go, a robo-mech services the empty booths and it begins to rain lightly outside. At 22:35, I pay for my food and leave the booth, resolved to risk going back to Diam at the Temple.

As I walk through the restaurant, I see that a young woman stands inside at the doorway, staring carefully at those who come and go. She's expensively but showily dressed, wears a great deal of cosmetic substances on her face and her hair is coated with a gold lacquer so that it appears to be an ornate helmet. She's familiar and I pause, trying to remember where I've seen her before. Then I remember. Hubertus brought her to me in Rheims and I removed terrible knife scars from that pretty face. I was in Pale Mode in Rheims.

I move close to her.

"Justine?" I say.

She looks at me suspiciously.

"I'm not for sale, pretty boy," she says.

"I'm Saulus. Hubertus brought you to me to have the scars removed," I say. "Look at my eyes. I never change them."

She looks carefully. She's frightened.

"We talked of gentian," I say. "I'd never seen the flower before and you had one pinned to your coat. I said that the color reminded me of my beloved's eyes."

Her face draws into a strained smile. She's terrified of me.

"Very well, Bogy-Man," she says. "I believe you. You said you liked my blonde hair—"

"No," I say, "I admired your brown hair. It was worn free, pretty and curly."

"Follow me, then," she says, satisfied. "Your friends ran into some trouble. You're to come with me."

"Are they safe?" I ask.

"Must be," she says with a shrug. "They got a message to The Hand about you."

She goes out and I follow. The rain has stopped and it's very cold. I shiver and pull the cloak about me.

"Why are you wearing a woman's cloak?" she asks.

"Is it a woman's?" I say. "I had to escape quickly so I grabbed what I could. Is there a place where I could buy some clothes?"

She considers. "There's a male-serve on the Promenade," she says. "Do you have money, Bogy-Man?"

"Yes," I say and show her the roll of money-slips.

She walks briskly and I follow. Her own clothes are light and impractical and she's very cold. I take off the cloak and swing it about her shoulders. She stops and stares at me. "It's a good cloak," I say. "You'll be warmer with it on. I'll warm myself from inside."

She ties the cords carefully and smooths the material, then walks on briskly.

Presently, we come to some brightly-lit shops and an arcade. There are very few people about.

"In there," she says, pointing. I look into the shop and it's all mirrored and featureless.

"I've never bought clothes in a shop before," I say. "Will you help me, please?"

She shrugs and walks into the shop. I follow and the mirrors become alive with color.

A computer-voice says, "May I help you?"

Justine says, "This man needs clothes."

I say, "Trousers and a jacket and a big overall coat such as Hubertus wore when we met in Rheims. In quiet colors and not too extreme in style."

"Standard fashion trousers," Justine says to the colored mirrors. "Blue-gray."

"Size 48D," says the computer and a picture of trousers in a pale blue-gray appears in one of the mirrors.

"Much darker," says Justine before I can comment.

Oh, it's fascinating! Pictures of clothes appear, colors and styles change in the mirrors and Justine becomes as interested in the articles as I do. We choose dark, blue-gray trousers in a stretchy fabric, a heavy overtunic in rich blue, two shirts—one blue and one scarlet—and a wonderful overall coat in gray, just like the one Hubertus has.

Justine disapproves of my sandals so I bow to fate and get gray, soft boots that come up to my mid-shins. Justine says I need hose and underwear so I ask for two sets of hose but don't order underwear. She peels money-slips from my roll and puts them in a slot; a door in the mirrors slides open and I go into a little room where I put on the fine new clothes that hang from a valet-mech. When I come out, carrying the other things, she takes more money from my roll and buys me a carryall, toiletries and a comb from a little bar.

She's no longer afraid of me, which is a relief. I think this has to do with the fact of me being so ignorant about the clothes and looking to her for help. She counts my money-roll and makes me put it in my trouser pocket.

"Do you usually carry so much money about with you?" she asks.

"I don't usually carry any," I say.

She says, "It's a lot to be flashing casually. You'll need to keep a good eye on it where we're going or you'll find it missing."

"And where are we going?" I ask.

"Somewhere safe," is all she says.

We go out and the cold wind sweeps along the Grand Promenade as we enter it. We go to a hire-car rank and climb into one. She directs it to somewhere I don't know and we speed through the streets so fast that I can't look. I put my hands over my eyes.

"What's the matter?" she asks.

"I'm afraid," I say. "I don't like this kind of hurrying."

"That's stupid," she says. "This is quite safe."

"Yes," I say. "Did you know that you have something wrong with your left hip?"

"Don't peep at me, you damned mindmucker!" she says, suddenly angry and nasty.

We are silent for a time.

"I've had a pain in my hip for a long time," she says suddenly. "Is it something serious?"

"It's what people call arthritis," I say. "It's part of your body condition."

We're silent again for a time.

"Could you fix the arthritis?" she says suddenly.

"Yes," I say.

"Would it hurt?" she asks.

"Did removing the scars hurt?" I say. "I try not to hurt people. Shall I fix it?"

There's another long silence. I risk taking a look at her and she glares at me because she's afraid of me again.

"Yes," she says.

So I begin. This keeps me from thinking on other things too much.

The car stops in a dark place and we get out. Water laps one side of the street. The car moves off and I see that cliffs of brick and stone rise enormously high on the other side. She takes my arm and leads me down some steps, almost into the water, to a big tunnel where water runs and falls into the larger waters of what must be a river.

I adjust my sight and see that there's a narrow walkway along one side of the tunnel. A very strange odor of staleness comes from the stone. She takes my arm and leads me along the walkway, which is very narrow.

"This is a stormwater drain," she says and her voice reverberates in the strange place.

It's very damp and there are unhealthy gases in the air. We come to a cross-tunnel and I can see faint, luminous patches on the walls at intervals. Justine produces a tiny torch and we cross a metal bridge over flowing water, walk along another tunnel, cross another bridge and then into another tunnel.

I'm lost now. I don't think I could find my way out of this place by myself.

"Where are we going?" I ask and my voice echoes.

"To the world beneath the world," she says.

It's very cold and the air is horrible. I apply myself to her arthritis and follow closely. We walk for a long way, changing tunnels sometimes and walking up steps once or twice. It's very confusing.

She stops suddenly, shining the torch at the roof of the tunnel. I see that there's a tiny device like the ones in some public buildings that Hubertus calls spy-eyes. She shines her torch back on herself and then me and says clearly, "Justine and the Bogy-Man."

We wait and then a man's voice says, "Acknowledged."

We walk on, around a great curve in the tunnel, then there are steps up and yet another tunnel. She stops before a blank wall.

A door, very cleverly hidden in the wall, opens and we go through. Here there are glo-lamps shining and men waiting, shadowy and menacing. The tunnel stinks of unwashed humanity, gases and decay. Suddenly we are at steps and go up into a much loftier tunnel. There's more light here and several people who seem to slither away from us as though afraid.

Justine takes my arm again and says, "The word's out about you."

We come into a large, open area where several lofty tunnels meet and a lot of people peep at me and back away.

Some are so dirty that they don't look human. Some are maimed, some have minor-Talent psi-fields and some have guns which frighten me. The open area has a vaulted ceiling that rises into darkness and I think these tunnels are very old because they appear to be made of bricks and are very worn about the floors.

"Wait here," says Justine and leaves me suddenly to go into a side-tunnel. We all stand silently in that horrible place and the people have eyes like sharpteeth, all staring at me. Fear makes me angry when I see the guns pointed at me.

I say, "Put the guns away or I'll decide you're my enemies. I do nasty things to enemies."

My voice sounds loud in this place. After a moment, the guns are lowered, but the eyes remain fixed on me. It's a relief when Justine returns.

"Come," she says and I follow her into a side tunnel, then another, then through a door into another huge room.

It's brightly lit and there's clean air. The room is bizarre, tawdry and colorful. There are rich, dirty brocades and bright, silken hangings, a vivid red and yellow carpet, gilt and black furniture, a dusty chandelier and ornaments enough to confuse the eye with their variety. There's a bed, hung on chains like a cradle, so that it swings slowly and gently, and crowded with grubby, brightly embroidered cushions.

And there's a body, obese and grotesque and distorted, supported by the cushions and dressed in brilliant silks. It's a man, his legs and one arm withered and twisted, his head huge and lolling. He has eyes like white stones and a pale skin which is clean and smooth. His normal arm has a beautiful, elegant and manicured hand, rings glittering with jewels on every finger. And there's a young-old girl, pretty and slender and exhausted-looking. She sits by the bed and stills its swaying as I come in with Justine. Justine leaves quickly.

The distorted man wheezes, "I'm The Hand. Come forward and let me see you, Bogy-Man."

I move forward to the bed. His perfect hand reaches, grasps my coat and pulls so that I'm drawn to lean on the bed close to him. He smells of a sweet, artificial perfume. The beering hand reaches to touch my face and trace my features.

"Sit," he says and I sit carefully on the bed. The young-old girl peers at me intently and I'm aware of a psifield which can only be his, since she's unTalented.

"They say that you can make miracles, Bogy-Man, and that you're very dangerous," he wheezes.

"I'm dangerous only to enemies." I say. "I won't harm you."

He chuckles at that and says, "Oh, I'm not afraid of you. I'm your pass to safety. And what could you do

to me that birth and age haven't already done? Hubertus sent word that he was having difficulties and wanted you looked after until he could come for you."

"I'm very grateful," I say.

He suddenly offers mind-contact to me. He's an Alpha with something of the Calculator about him. And I realize that he's linked to the girl in such a way that he sees through her eyes.

I meet his contact and feel him draw back momentarily.

"You're a Super," he mind-speaks.

"Yes," I reply.

"I'm told that you heal people, that you can change their identities," he tells me. "I have pain frequently. Pain can be the domination of one's entire existence."

"I can imagine that," I reply. "May I look and see the source of your pain?"

"Yes," he tells me, "but carefully. I'm near death and what little life remains is still sweet."

I touch him lightly with pleasure-pulse and then examine his body. There's a wealth of malfunction and atrophy, but he's not as near death as he imagines. I close some of the nerve-pathways in his spine and withered arm so that pain ceases.

"Ah, is it death you give me?" he mind-speaks and I'm aware of his fear.

"No," I tell him. "Only release from pain. I could do much more. I could give you a strong body, sight and health. Shall I do that?"

He's full of terror and suspicion at that.

"You go too fast, Bogy-Man," he tells me. "I know no other existence. I've been like this for forty years. What do I know of the things you offer?"

"I can make you anew," I reply. "But I'd want something in return."

He's agitated. The girl moves to wipe a sheen of sweat from his forehead with a soft cloth. I send him a moment of pleasure-pulse and he calms.

"I think," he tells me, "that the old writings might be true. You're

the Demon of Temptation, come to mock me and bring cruelty."

"What nonsense," I reply. "I have capacities which I use to help, not harm."

He withdraws his contact from me and is silent for a time.

He wheezes, "I'll think on what you offer. Go away, Bogy-Man, and leave me to consider your temptations. Go and sleep. Simone, take him to Honore and Magda and tell them to care for him. Tell Justine to come in to me."

Simone beckons. I stand and follow her out into the passageway and through a warren of places until we come to a small, dimly-lit room which has a bed in it. She leaves me and I undress, hanging my clothes on a chair and arranging my carryall so that I can reach it easily. There's a basin of hot water on a stand and a receptacle for wastes beneath it. I empty my bladder and am washing myself when Justine comes in. She stands and watches as I dry myself.

"What you were saying about my arthritis," she says. "Will you do it?"

I've already done it, but it doesn't seem wise to say so. "Yes, but you'll have to pay me for it," I say. She stares and then begins to undo the catches of her dress.

"No," I say, "not that way."

"What then?" she asks.

"Get a message to Hubertus," I say. "Tell him not to come for me yet. Tell him I'll write a message to the Rome address when I want to return."

"I'll see to it," she says slowly. "When will you fix my arthritis?"

"Tomorrow," I say.

She leaves.

I'm so tired that the bed, hard and lumpy and slightly unclean, feels wonderful as I settle in it. I think briefly of Serenel, of Auria, of Yo-Yo—

*The 2-20-80 is entirely edited from this transcript since Saulus talks of little that is pertinent to the narrative. He satisfies Justine that her arthritis is cured, talks of Serenel and discusses "bodychanges" with The Hand, comments rather vaguely on the activities of the "Rats" and rambles on, at great length, about the*

unhealthiness and dirt of the tunnels. From his descriptions of the tunnels, it would appear that they are no part of any sewerage system, but are more likely to be old service tunnels for the drainage system, somehow overlooked in the rebuilding of the area.

Psychology Division 2 entertains the idea—not without justification—that Saulus was learning to resolve much that had been confusing and contradictory to him before this period. It becomes apparent that he is no longer a frightened “innocent” from this time on. He seems to have realized his self-sufficiency and it becomes obvious that his reasoning is less affected by his emotions than was the case previously. His moral code, a very individual matter, did not preclude him from being ruthless when the need arose, nor was he so ready to accept things at face value any longer.

—J.T.  
Semantics Division)

## NINE

I awake and it's cold and dark. I get up, put on my boots, wrap myself in a blanket and turn on the glo-lamp. I go out into the corridor and along to the latrine. Two of the Rats scuttle out of my way and look surprised. Don't they think I need to go to a latrine?

I go into C-Tunnel and find that Honore and her children are already stirring. I nod to her and take the big container to fill it with water from the spigot, put it over the sonic agitator and adjust the dials as Justine showed me to. When it boils I replace it with another big container so that Honore will have hot water, too.

I go back to my room with the container of hot water and wash thoroughly, dress in my new clothes and groom my hair, go to empty the water in the latrine and put the container back in Honore's niche. Then I wait for the thick porridge which she's begun preparing. She's none too clean, but her porridge is tempting this morning. I eat a large dish of it, putting on plenty of sugar and butter.

Then I look at the youngest child

who was so sick yesterday. He's quite better, but shrinks away from me in terror.

“Why are you afraid of me?” I ask. “I'm the one who took the sickness away.”

But I realize that it wouldn't matter what I said. I'm the Bogy-Man and all these people are afraid of me.

I go to see old Alouette, who is stirring among her filthy rags and sits up when I speak to her. She grins at me, showing her strong new teeth, her eyes clear of the cataracts I found there. She's wary of me, but not afraid like the others.

“Are you still sure you wish to help me today?” I ask. “It won't be pretty or pleasant.”

“Huh!” she says, “I was a med-center nurse! I don't mind a bit of a mess!”

I leave her with a smile. I like Alouette better than anyone I've met in a long time.

Going back to my room, I find Valentine, the midget, dressed in his child-clothes and looking frightened at the sight of me.

“Did you manage to get the food concentrates, the chemicals and the plastex sheeting?” I ask him.

“Yes, Bogy-Man, yes,” he says and shrinks away from me.

I go back to my room, make my bed and tidy my few things.

My chronometer says 7:30 when I go to the Hand's door and knock firmly. Justine, scrubbed and pink and dressed in a severe bodysuit, opens the door, her hair minus its lacquer and drawn back into a severe bun. Simone, painfully underweight and wide-eyed, is wearing a plain overall and a scarf about her hair. I must do something about Simone.

“You don't need to stay,” I tell them. “Alouette and I can manage.”

“We're staying,” says Justine firmly.

“I want no distractions such as fainting, vomiting or hysteria,” I say. “If you get in my way I'll put you out of the room.”

“You're frightening me!” The Hand wheezes.

“We aren't as weak as you seem to think,” says Simone.

“I know I'll be capable,” says Justine. “I know you'll do as you say.”

The Hand cackles and wheezes, “Justine regards you as something of a god, Bogy-Man!”

He's a great mound of flesh, naked and grotesque and freshly washed on his bed of grubby cushions. The room is too warm so I turn the heater off and The Hand sees this through Simone's eyes.

“I can't bear the cold!” he whines. “I want the room kept warm!”

I say, “What you want is unimportant. What I decide is what will be.”

Alouette, surprisingly clean, comes in carrying the plastex sheeting.

“Spread it on the table,” I say, taking off my overtunic and rolling up my sleeves. “Are the food and chemical mixtures ready?”

“Yes,” says Justine, indicating the trolley.

“I need him on the table,” I say. “Help me to lift him.”

The Hand is like dough and so heavy that it takes the four of us to lift him from the bed and onto the table. He has terrible bed-sores despite the care the women take of him.

“I'm cold!” he whines, “And the table's so hard!”

I lift his shoulders and put cushions about him so that he's bolstered in a half-sitting position. He's very frightened and sweating freely. I send him pleasure-pulse until he calms.

I say to him, “In a few moments I'll put you into a trance-state and when you become aware again you'll be able to participate in a whole new life.”

“What will I look like, Bogy-Man?” he wheezes.

“Like a complete man,” I say and take his mind.

Simone sees him become limp and is afraid.

“Don't hurt him, Bogy-Man,” she says. “He's my master and my child. He's all I care for.”

“Don't be afraid,” I say. “Justine, you'll need water and cloths to clean

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him with a bucket for wastes. He'll also need water for drinking at regular intervals. Go and get them while I prepare his heart, lungs and digestive system for what has to be done. Simone, you'll feed him as I tell you. Alouette, you measure out the chemical mixtures and concentrates as I instruct."

I put myself into that state which is two-in-one and direct all my capacities to examining, planning and preparing The Hand.

I begin by setting his heart-rate and endocrine system as I need, then I manipulate his digestive system. I begin utilizing the excess body fats, liquids and proteins and then Simone begins to feed him as I instruct. He gorges and I help him convert materials while Alouette supplies chemicals and protein-pastes at key points. For me, the awareness of time ceases.

Sweat and oils begin to appear on his pale skin, he begins to defecate and urinate. I am dimly aware that Simone weeps and Justine curses from time to time. Alouette murmurs and mumbles at them bracingly, but I don't know what she says.

The frame is a complex matter since it must be developed as the distortions are corrected and the muscles shaped. His body alters slowly, the usual discharges and problems appearing and fading in carefully regulated cycles.

The frame takes shape, the sinews, tendons and muscles forming about it little by little. I use my hands to assist shapes and direct trends. I talk and instruct with a tiny part of myself, the rest being all directed to this joy of manipulation and re-forming and establishing of balances.

When the basics are done, I realign the major organs and endocrines, rebuilding where necessary and balancing again and again until all is perfection. I manipulate the supportive tissues and build the muscular outlines, dimly aware that the huge lump of doughy flesh has gone. At this stage I begin to model the body to match the exquisite perfection of that one beautiful hand. His torso and hands, his newly shaped skull and body features, his physical

characteristics, all become distinct and refined.

I arrange his face, body hair, genitalia, teeth and the newly-formed eyes to become part of the harmony which has come into being. I return his state to normal function slowly.

He is a no-age adult, unlined and perfect, when I finish. I almost regret the completion because the making and utilizing of patterns has been so satisfying. I return my own state to normal awareness and re-orient myself to the greater world.

Alouette is wearily helping Justine to clean away the last of the mess and Simone is white with exhaustion.

The Hand is a handsome man, dark-haired and pale-skinned, with a solid but compact build and a strongly-boned face in the Roman style which Hubertus envies. Women will find him beautiful and men will admire.

"It's done," I say and realize that I'm very tired.

The room stinks and it's very cold. I turn the heater on and wait while the women finish washing him. Then Justine and I lift him and carry him to his bed. Simone arranges the cushions and draws the cover over him while Justine adjusts the ventilator fan and Alouette cleans the table and plaxest sheeting. My chronometer says 13:35. Almost six hours to do it all. I could have completed it with less time, but the truth is that I indulged myself.

"He'll sleep for an hour," I say to the women. "You were all quite wonderful. I admire you all."

I walk out and go to my own room, asking Honore for hot water as I pass her niche. My clothes are dirty and stink of excrement. In my room, I strip and bathe gratefully when Honore brings the water. She scuttles away as though she really thinks me to be a demon! Fool of a woman!

I climb into bed and sleep for thirty minutes. When I wake, I dress in my old trousers and new boots, wrap a blanket about myself and go back to The Hand's room. Simone is dozing in a chair, Alouette has gone, Justine has changed into a pretty gown and let her hair down. The

room smells sweet. I eat a little from the concentrates still remaining on the trolley. Simone wakes and looks at me with eyes which are full of wonder.

The Hand wakes and I feel his psi-field "color."

I mindspeak to him, "No, don't use Simone. Open your eyes and see for yourself."

He blinks and cries out at the light, one arm coming up to shade his face. I send him pleasure-pulse and place a hand on Simone's shoulder to prevent her from running to him.

I ally my mind with his and our body sits up weakly. Our hands draw back the covers and we look at our body, touch it, stroke it. Our legs move.

"I can't!" his mind cries to me.

"You can," I tell him and our legs swing to the edge of the bed. Justine runs to help us.

"Don't touch him," I tell her.

Our feet meet the floor and the bed sways. We stagger to our feet and sway unsteadily. We look at our body and The Hand cries out. I give him pleasure-pulse and we stagger to the long mirror that Justine brought yesterday. We look, heart pounding, and our brown eyes blink in terror/wonder.

"Is it true?" he cries aloud, our senses chaotic.

"Yes," I tell him.

We turn, we look, we turn again. Our arms wave, we bend, we stamp, we sway. His emotions are too large to be contained. We begin to shout and weep.

The door swings open and men rush in fiercely. We turn to them, arms wide. I calm him with pleasure-pulse.

"Speak to them," I say. "They come to protect you and now they don't recognize you."

We walk toward them, our arms still wide.

"I'm whole!" The Hand shouts, weeping. "I'm whole!"

They gasp and gasp and more crowd in. Some cry out, some murmur or curse in wonder. Simone runs to the bed and takes up the cover to sweep it about our body. I'm not sure if this is because of modesty or to

protect, but we hold the cover as she wishes. We put an arm about her and stare into her face. She is white with fear or great joy, I can't tell which. Still holding her, we walk back to the bed. We release her and sit.

I remove my control from him and am myself again.

I mind speak to him, "You'll be weak and clumsy until you learn to control your body, you'll lack coordination until you practice and you'll grow tired until your muscles become used to movement. You'll feel overly sensitive until your senses settle. Keep practicing. And find Torros, the Lifter, for me as you promised."

I collect my overtunic and move from the room. More are crowding in and they hardly notice me as I push between them. There are many more, dirty and ragged and intent, when I go into the passageway. They shrink away and one lifts a gun at me, but I pass and return to my room.

I sit on the bed and Justine comes in. She's been weeping.

"You made a miracle," she says.

"No, nature is the miracle," I say. "I merely have the skill to persuade and manipulate it. My shirt and trousers are soiled. Where will I wash them?"

She laughs a little hysterically. "you'll have the finest clothes that money can buy, Bogy-Man! I'll see to it," she says and runs to put her arms about me in a hard embrace. Then she takes my soiled clothes and runs out.

Alouette puts her head around the door and smiles at me.

"Come in," I say. "You were a wonderful help."

She's pleased at that. She comes in and I notice that she's used some cosmetics discreetly. She hands me a scriptsheet.

"A message from your friends," she says. "The radio man was too scared of you to bring it."

It's a message from Hubertus and reads, *Do not play games, Saulus. Our friends will bring you to Rome tomorrow. Hubertus.*

"Can you get a reply to Hubertus?" I ask Alouette.

"The radio man will," she says, and hands me a stylus.

I write on the back of the scriptsheet, *I will not be coming. I have things to do. Ask Auria to look after Yo-Yo. Tell her I love her. I will write to the Rome address when I intend to return. Saulus.*

Alouette takes the message, looks at it and says, "You aren't leaving, then?"

"I want to find Torros, the Lifter," I say.

She says, "The Hand has sent out word to all the Rats about it. Outlaw Talents of big power don't wait about for the Psi-Orgs to notice them, Bogy-Man. He may have gone from Paris."

"He isn't powerful," I say. "He's an Epsilon. I can only hope he's here. Why are you among the Rats, Alouette?"

She says, "I killed some people. I used to live in a lovely house, in a good neighborhood, and I was well thought of as a medcenter technician at Paris Central. Times change, things happen. Bogy-Man. I've been with The Hand ever since he organized us, sixteen years ago."

"Where does The Hand come from?" I ask.

"Who knows?" she says. "I've heard that he was in a freak show in Marseilles and that he organized the first Rats about him there."

"Are there many Rats?" I ask.

She grins and says, "Hundreds of them. But not all here. They're all over the city and elsewhere, up, down, roundabout."

*(This last statement is possibly true. Despite improved methods of crime prevention and the cooperation of the Psi-Orgs, the problem seems ineradicable. It is a sad reflection on our society that there is still a large percentage of our population willing to ignore social decency and legitimacy in order to satisfy their desire for drugs, sensationalism or unearned luxuries, which these criminals exploit so successfully. The service tunnels of which Saulus speaks, and which are, apparently, a haven for so many criminals, have been searched for*

*without success. Saulus refused to give further details about their location during questioning following the compiling of this transcript.*

—J.T.

Semantics Division)

Alouette comes back from visiting the radio man and brings me real coffee and tasty savory cakes. We sit on my bed and enjoy them. Alouette is shrewd and no longer afraid of me at all. I notice that she's changed her clothes and looks very neat and respectable.

She says, "There's a great fuss going on. Simone's dressed The Hand up and they're all having a big rowdy out there. The word that you made a miracle with him will spread and there'll be a lot of curiosity. Rats will come from everywhere. Not all of them are fools like some of the vermin here. They'd pay to get things done, Bogy-Man. You could make a lot of money."

"Would The Hand allow that?" I ask.

"If he got his cut," she says.

I have a lot of money, but more would be a convenience. I have plans.

"I'll organize it if you're interested," she says. "We'd have to discuss terms with The Hand and his lieutenants. Shall I talk to them, Bogy-Man?"

"Yes," I say, "but don't promise them too much. There'll be no more big changes such as I did with The Hand."

She laughs and says, "I won't promise anything! If you make things too easy they don't value them, you've given enough free samples about here. You leave it to me."

We go to the Common Room and look about in the side tunnels. There's a lot of noise and roistering coming from The Hand's room and all about it, so no one bothers us. Most of the tunnels are damp or are being used, but Alouette shows me a recess at the top of some steps that lead nowhere. It's dry and gets fresh air, but it's very cold.

"you'll need a heater and a curtain to make it private," she says. "And I'll find some chairs for people to sit on while they wait. Maybe you



could burn some incense and I'll find a couple of glo-lamps so it won't be so dark."

I agree.

Prime Mode is convenient but easily recognized. I'll need a disguise.

"Could you find me a mask?" I ask. "Hubertus says that a grain of mystery is more saleable than a large lump of what's known."

"I'll make a mask," she says and we go back to my room.

Justine has brought me some clean clothes and more food. I change and am very fine in heavy silks and brocade.

"Your other clothes are being washed," she says. "The Hand wants you with him to celebrate."

"Yes," I say, "he already mind-spoke with me about it."

*(I have deleted part of the narrative here since it is not of general interest. Saulus is less disapproving of the excesses at the "rowdy" than he would have been in the past and talks rather sadly of the Rats and their lives which he sees as "wasteful." He worries about Simone and "rearranges weak balances" without her knowing. He puts The Hand to sleep at 19th hour and goes to eat with Justine and Alouette. He then talks, at length, of how he misses Serenel and goes to bed in a state of depression, having politely refused Justine's offer of body-sharing. He omits mention of the next few days and gives no clue as to the date when he resumes.)*

*It may be of interest to note that Alouette, the woman who had been a medical technician at Paris Central and who stated that she "killed some people," is probably Alouette Coltain who vanished in 2263 after killing her lover and another woman with a knife. See the Coltain File 770-161-140, available from Central Files.*

—J.T.  
Semantics Division)

I awake and am aware of the stink of this place and of the cold. I put on the luxurious lounging-robe and slippers, given to me by The Hand, and go to the latrine, then Honore's niche for hot water.

My chronometer says 6:25 and none of the Rats are stirring as yet. I take the hot water to my room and strip to wash. Alouette immediately sits up to eye me from her bed.

"You're thinner and getting too pale," she says critically.

"That's not true," I say. "My pattern is exactly the same as when I arrived."

"Then it's time you did something about it," she says firmly and snuggles down again.

I have no answer to that. Alouette's logic defeats me at times.

Alouette looks quite handsome and pleasant now that she's clean and takes care of herself. Since I rebalanced her systems and corrected her heart she looks much younger and has far more vitality. Her soft, white hair is very pretty since Justine cut it.

"Why are you up so early?" she grumbles.

I turn the heater on for her and say, "The first mopes arrive at 7:30, so stir yourself. You'll need a good breakfast because it'll be a long day."

"And a rich one," she says with satisfaction. "We're doing well, eh?"

I think of the large sum in the account at the Banque Internationale which Justine helped me to open, and say, "Yes, we're doing very well. What will you do with all your money?"

This is a game she loves to play. She gets out of bed and puts her new red robe over her red nightgown, then sits on the bed.

She says, "A little villa, somewhere near or in Vichy, comes first. And none of this modern furniture, oh no! Solid furniture that can be polished, that's what I'll have. And a real garden."

She chatters as while I wash and dry myself, then rub my skin with the oil which Justine brought for me. It has a wholesome, woody scent and it helps me to keep warm without burning up too much energy. Alouette, now talking of the carpet for her future livingroom, gets up to rub oil on my back. She's becoming very motherly towards me.

"Put some clothes on before you catch a chill," she says, and her tone

is so like the one Jazalu used to adopt that I smile.

I dress quickly in the bizarre black and yellow robes which The Hand provided and go out to empty the water in the latrine. I get more hot water for Alouette and return to find her looking very depressed.

I put the water down, open my arms to her and say, "What's wrong, little bird?"

She comes to be held close and says, "I will have it, won't I, Bogy-Man? I want to leave this place. I've spent too long skulking in the shadows."

"With your new fingerprints and the new Registration-J identidisc you'll be able to do as you please, little bird," I tell her.

"Why did you choose me as your partner, Bogy-Man?" she asks.

"Who else would have the patience and the style to handle the mopes so well?" I say. "Besides, I like you more than I like anyone else here."

"Will you come and see my villa when I'm a respectable woman again?" she asks.

I say, "I'll try, little bird. Get ready now or you won't have time for a good breakfast."

I leave her and make my way to the Bogy-Man's Niche, as they all call it. The smell of incense clings to the yellow and black curtain and I light several sticks of it to dispel the odors of the tunnels. The benches and my chair need a hasty dusting, then I sweep the floor, adjust the music-wheels and the tinkle-bell and adjust the pink glo-lamps. I see that my mask is ready, check that the slop buckets are clean, and then go to see the slovenly Honore about breakfast.

It's almost 7th hour when I take the porridge in to Alouette. She's ready in her blue robes and her hair is concealed beneath a glittery scarf which she fancies gives her an "occult" look. I kiss her cheek and give her a bowl of porridge.

Honore makes excellent porridge and I'm very hungry this morning.

There's a tapping at the door and little Valentine pokes his head in.

He says, "Jacques says to tell you that Tonio and Mercier are on their way with the first mopes and some of the city Rats."

He's growing quite rapidly now.

I finish my porridge, clean my teeth and go to my niche to turn the heater on. The scent of the incense is everywhere and Lydia and Fernand are readying the chairs in the side tunnel, their robes covering their dirt.

"Comb your hair," I tell them and they glower at me.

Alouette comes at 7:25 with a list and I hear the shuffle of feet as the mopes arrive in the side tunnel.

She says, "A nose job, a failing potency and someone balding, for a start. They're important Rats, Bogy-Man, so there's no money in it, but The Hand needs their co-operation."

I nod, put on my mask and sit in the chair. Alouette ushers the first mope in with great solemnity, bows to me and departs. The work of the day begins.

It's a day very like the others. Cosmetic changes, sexual problems, balding heads, physical distortions, glandular balances, fingerprint alterations and such. I sip some coffee at 10th hour and resume until 12:30 when I have my rest period.

When I go back to my room there's a healthy lunch of salad and uncooked meat for me and unhealthy fries for Alouette. She looks guilty when I stare at these.

"Just occasionally won't hurt, will it?" she says.

"Not while I'm about to assist your digestion," I say, "but what happens when you continue to eat like this after I'm not here to look after you?"

She eats her fries defiantly.

The Hand comes in, glowing with excitement and goodwill. He tells me that Justine took Simone and him into the Central City to buy clothes, and preens for my approval. He looks very handsome and I note that his co-ordination is excellent now.

"No word of Torros?" I ask.

"No," he says, "but contacts in Sector 12 have promised to help."

"Are you really trying to find him or are you only interested in keeping me here to make money?" I say.

"I keep my promises, Bogy-Man," he says. "At least we traced him to Sector 12."

At 13:30 Alouette and I resume work and are busy with a steady stream of mopes until 17:30, when the last one is ushered away. We go to the room and Alouette drinks a little brandy before she changes into her fine new clothes. She's going to the Residencies and Land Offices to look at pictures of villas near or in Vichy and will then meet with Morian and have dinner at a restaurant. Morian is a minor path who makes a living from telling fortunes. I like him and Alouette finds him congenial company.

I change into my ordinary clothes, put on my Hubertus coat and go for my usual brisk walk along the tunnels to the back street where the grille is situated. The watchdog man allows me out and I walk through the back streets in the darkness until I come to the bare little park in the Rue de Saint Marie, once a place where Hubertus met leaders of the Rats. Here, I'm told, old people enjoy the sun on fine days. I sit on the little bench beneath the bare trees and enjoy the solitude for a time. The sky is dark, without stars since it is going to rain very soon.

I think of my mother and wonder who it was she mated with to produce me. I remember her last words about the Paris Central Psi-Org and his Security number.

It seems strange that he's my enemy, living his life with no idea of my existence. Can she have imagined, in some beautiful future which she saw in those last moments, that I would find him and say, "Father, I'm your son, Saulus!" The idea is so ludicrous that it depresses me. I go back to the grille and back to the world of the Rats.

There's a celebration going on, the usual "Rowdy" which follows the weekly division of the spoils, in the Common Room. I avoid it and go to my room to await The Hand's usual

summons. This comes late because he's busy with his Lieutenants on spoils night. Magda comes at 17:40 to tell me he's ready. I go to his room.

A great deal of the clutter has gone but the room is still overdecorated and heavily perfumed. The table is neat with sparkling crystal, fine ceramic dishes and silver eating utensils on a pure white cloth. There's the pale, mild wine which he knows I'll have a glass of and a huge bowl of lightly cooked meat and vegetables. There's white, tasteless bread for him and the dark, grainy bread for me, a jug of milk and a large mild cheese. Simone serves The Hand, but Justine and I serve ourselves.

The Hand mindspeaks to me, "Eyes of one's own are so much more satisfactory than looking through the eyes of another, and the pleasure of moving my own body is inexpressible! Is it forgivable to adore one's own body and senses? I've reached the stage of such pleasure in mine that I want to show it to everyone, and experience every delight of it! I want to be envied, admired, loved for my body! Is that such a very bad thing, do you think?"

"I'm sure you could be forgiven," I tell him. "I notice that plenty of people feel much the same way without the justification you have. Enjoy it while you're able. A few years of abuse, normal neglect and self-indulgence and you'll look and feel like any other man of forty hard years' living."

He protests, "I won't let that happen! I'll take care of myself!"

I tell him, "I doubt it. You've too much of a taste for soft foods and soft living conditions and you're lazy. Your body was designed to be put to good use, not coddled."

He frowns at me, thinking on what I've said. I notice that he doesn't touch the overly-refined bread and has only one glass of wine.

He asks, "Is your life so disciplined that you devote your energies to maintaining your health?"

I tell him, "Of course not. With me it's a matter of inclination and

plain common sense. Abuse offends me because it's more obvious to me than it is to you."

He tells me, "If you stayed here with us I'd make it worth your while to look after me. And there's plenty of money to be made from what you do. You could be a rich man, Saulus."

"I have plenty of money," I tell him. "I couldn't live like this for long."

"You don't have to live in the tunnels," he protests. "There are prettier places to go, if you have the contacts and enough money."

"But it would still be a hole-in-the-wall existence," I tell him. "I don't wish to remain a glorified Rat. I want my valley."

He shrugs.

Justine, realizing that we've been communicating, says, "Did he tell you?"

"Tell me what?" I ask.

The Hand mindspeaks, "We found your friend, Torros. He was captured by the Enforcers a few days ago and the Psi-Orgs have him now. He'd been living with a group of Outlaw Talents—nothing big—living like cockroaches in Sector 12 where the amusement parks are. He'd been very ill. He didn't try to avoid capture."

I say aloud to Justine, "Where are they holding him?"

She says, "Our Psi-Org contact says he's being held in the hospital sector of the Detention Complex in Sector 2. They'll interrogate him when he's well enough."

"Perhaps they already have," says The Hand in a malicious way, "and they already know about your precious valley."

"No," I say. "Hubertus implants a psychological block in every member of the Clan so that they can't disclose the whereabouts of the valley. I'm the only one he can't do that to. But the Org may learn about this place."

"No," says The Hand, "I implant the same kind of block in any Rat who knows of this place. He won't be able to blab. He's only an Epsilon 'kinetic.'"

"Where's this Detention place?" I ask.

"Why?" says The Hand. "Do you think you're going to walk in and take him out? It's a fortress of Controls, guardTalents and electronic alarms."

"But," I say, "you have a Psi-Org contact. I wish to talk to this contact."

"You're a fool," says The Hand.

I finish my wine, stand up and excuse myself politely. I leave them staring after me and go to my room. The stink of the tunnels seems suddenly worse and the noise is unbearable.

I close the door, undress and go to bed, covering my head and thinking anguished thoughts for a long time.

## TEN

*(There is another gap in the narrative here. What follows occurred on 18-1-81 and further details may be gleaned from Paris Central Psi-Org Files in Reports A902-4 and A902-5.*

—J.T.

*Semantics Division)*

I awake and dawn is some time away. I go to the fresher and bathe, then inspect the new face in the mirror. I'm thankful that he's not so very different from Prime Mode, but it's the first time I've changed the eyes, and the brown ones make me seem a stranger to myself. It's an interesting face, but one that indicates a certain lack of intelligence.

I dress in the dark trousers, shoes and undershirt, comb the thinning brown hair as he does and put on the Hubertus coat. I check the stun-gun, my identidisc, my wallet, the water-bag and the little pellets. I remove all signs of my stay in the Hotel, which is easy since I have no fingerprints, put my few toiletries in the rubbish-chute, and leave the room.

At Reception, I present my identidisc, pay my tariff and check that my carryalls are already consigned ahead. There are very few people about at this hour. My chronometer says 5:30.

I go to a small restaurant and dial a good breakfast which I enjoy. I pay for it and leave again. I go to the nearest maleserve and buy underwear, trousers, shirt and a jacket suitable for Torros, and leave with a neat parcel. Out in the street there's a cold wind and the sky is dark. I think it will rain later. Few cars are in the traffic lanes and no people are to be seen on the walkways.

My chronometer says 6:10 as I begin walking the now-familiar journey to the Detention Complex. I walk so briskly that it's only 6:20 when I arrive at the pretty little park. The sky is growing very light now.

I stand about, waiting for the passenger-shuttle which brings my quarry. It's very cold, but not so unpleasant as yesterday. I practice his voice and his walk yet again and finger the stun-gun in my pocket. My anxiety makes it necessary to calm my glandular activity.

Two passenger-shuttles arrive and leave again before his shuttle comes. It's a relief to see him step off and walk across to the park. I avert my face until he passes, my psi-field retracted tightly.

Every morning of my study he's followed the same routine. He walks across the grass and strolls beneath the bare trees, looking up at the little birds which huddle there. Then he goes to the same seat near the fountain, sits and puts his carryall beside him. He takes out the bag of crumbs and makes little whistling noises, then he casts the crumbs and the birds come fluttering.

Yesterday, in Pale Mode, I even sat with him while he fed the birds and we talked about them. He loves birds. I'm sure he's a very pleasant man but, more important to me, he's also the convenient Control I need.

He follows the usual routine without change. I wait until he casts the first handful of crumbs. No one is about but another shuttle will arrive in five minutes and there'll be several who get off at this stop. I have to take the risk now!

I open my psi-field, already running toward him, my heart pounding. I'm quite close before he notices the

movement and looks at me. I feel that psi-field of his and then I use my Secondary before he can react. He falls slowly sideways, unconscious, as I reach him.

I take his carryall and empty it of its contents—his lunch, another bag of crumbs and some sports equipment—take off my Hubertus coat and stuff it in, having removed the stungun, the bag of pellets and the water-bag. On top of the coat, I manage to squeeze the parcel of clothes for Torros, but have difficulty closing the carryall again.

I shove the sports equipment under the seat, then toss the Control's lunch and the crumbs for the birds. I undo his weathercoat and have difficulty getting him out of it, but even more difficulty in getting his uniform sash and jacket off. I'm panting with anxiety by the time I manage this. I put the tunic on in haste, tie the sash and then don his weathercoat.

A quick search of the pockets finds his identidisc, his Control-pass, his wallet and other things which don't matter. I transfer the stungun, the water-bag and pellets to the tunic, do up the weather coat and take his right hand to examine the fingerprints. Duplication takes precious time.

I pick up the bulging carryall, hurry to the emergency-call unit at the shuttle stop and press the button.

A woman's voice says, "Name and identinumber, please."

I shout, "There's an unconscious man in the park by shuttle-stop 20! He's been robbed, I think, and he's breathing strangely! Send a med-unit, quickly!"

I walk away briskly, hearing her voice saying something about staying calm and asking my name. The Control is sprawled on the seat with only a shirt on his upper body and it's very cold. I hope he won't become too chilled for his health.

I tidy my hair as I cross the road by the pedestrianway in great haste. On the other side, I slow down and adopt his walk and manner. I partially withdraw my psi-field and make the pseudo-Control pattern, very aware that it won't deceive if exam-

ined too closely. I see the laneway and walk down it. It's exactly as was described. I quickly shove the bulging carryall under the bushes near the glassite doors and take a deep breath.

The doors slide open automatically and I walk into the Staff Entrance of the Detention Complex. A chronometer on the wall says 6:40. I'm ten minutes early. There are several Enforcers about. I nod to one and head toward the registration-mech.

"Birds not hungry this morning, Mal?" an Enforcer calls.

"There was a bunch of tourists feeding them!" I call. "Tourists at this hour!"

The Enforcer grins. I take Mal's identidisc and place it in the slot, press my hand against the dull metal plate and wait. There's an electronic *pip*. I remove the identidisc and walk through as the inner door slides open. I'm sweating so I calm myself as I go through the business of the identidisc and fingerprints on the other side of the door where a sign says "Day Staff."

I walk along the corridor, getting the Control-pass out of the weathercoat as I near the cage. I come to the grille and present my pass to the Enforcer there. He barely looks at it.

"See you at the handball court at midday," he says as I go into the cage.

"Today I'm unbeatable," I say, grinning as I walk to the other side and present my pass to another Enforcer.

He says, "Early today, Mal?" and I repeat my remarks about tourists. He laughs and opens the cage door for me.

I take the pass and walk along the corridor, looking for the cross-corridor with the sign that says Section 4. I turn right into it and make my way to the third elevator. The doors slide open, I press the button marked 3 and the doors close.

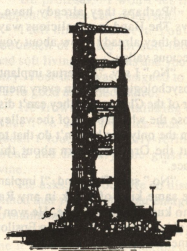
The elevator shoots upward to Level 3, the doors open and I walk out. I turn left as instructed and pass several Controls discussing some sort of duty-roster on a notice board.

(To be concluded in the next issue...)

## OUR ARTISTS

Paul Lehr has done hundreds of paperback and magazine covers, including several for Tomorrow. His work has been exhibited at numerous prestigious museums and galleries. His work hangs, as well, in the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. Now semi-retired, he paints for his own pleasure, frequently with scenes of human congestion and conflict.

Gary Davis is new to our pages. He lives in Portland, OR. His first pro job was in a newspaper art department. He is now doing comics for Dark Horse, and the occasional SF illustration. 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. Bob Hobbs holds a degree in commercial art from the University of Hawaii. Over 40 full-page illustrations comprise his second solo book, a graphic novel entitled *Scarabaeus*. 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. 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. ■



# THE PROTEAN SOLUTION

G. David Nordley

Illustrated by Gary Davis

*I feel time slipping as I watch crater after crater glide beneath us*

"It has to be down there somewhere." I feel time slipping as I watch crater after crater glide beneath us. At high magnification, the surface of Proteus seems a Monet painting of potholes; colors pastel—soft, subtle and subdued but with the texture of a pitted chaos. Here and there, frozen pools of radiation-blackened hydrocarbon mud fill the bottom of walled plains in ebony contrast to lighter, ice crystal-saturated crust. As on Triton, occasional dusty nitrogen geysers spout. Warmed inside by tidal stress, this second largest satellite of Neptune seems half comet.

"It" is an alien artifact that might give all humanity a key to the galactic library—if we can claim it before the hungry pack behind us.

The multispectral image of Proteus, enhanced, compressed and highlighted, fills the screen that covers half of our command deck wall.

We look for a glint, a reflection, a difference, an artificiality—anything to tell us where a race of troglodyte spacefarers might have holed up.

There is no response to my words. A furtive glance at my wife reveals the passionate concentration I've come to know so well. I smile. Some consider Randi self-absorbed when she ignores people. Nothing could be more wrong; she is *other*-absorbed, hardly aware of herself. Those who know her protect her when she is like this—or try.

She has reason for concentration; her father died in this quest, and she feels responsible. If our expedition to the Uranus moon Miranda had not discovered the troglodytes ten years ago, Dr. Lotati would not have come looking for them here—and he would still be alive. I touch her, knowing that though she cannot spare attention for it now, she likes touching.

I ask the ship for a bulb of chocolate coffee, release my belt and float to the direct vision port to regain my perspective. I need to clear my mind, knowing that my best chance of catching something different is through averted vision—lightly looking elsewhere to allow an awareness of—something—to boil up from the primordial parts of my recalcitrant brain. Caffeine helps, too.

Through the diamond and plastic laminate, I see Neptune's disk surround Proteus as if this pocked moon were a circular continent floating on an indigo sea. A meditation on scale: Proteus is immense—a moon the size of Poland seen all at once is small enough, has just enough human-scale relief, to *look* immense. And so Neptune becomes not just an abstract blue ball that I know intellectually to be three times as wide as Earth, but an awe-inspir-



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**tomorrow: SPECULATIVE FICTION 75**

ing monstrosity behind and hugely larger than Proteus, the way the Moon dwarfs the trees and hills on an Earthly horizon. But I know Neptune itself is an insignificant diatom in the sea of the black void that peeks around its edges. From intellect to direct apprehension back to intellect.

If we believe the last transmissions of Randi's father, a key to that void lies somewhere below us. For decades, we, and the other races we know, have recorded, uncomprehending, the modulated gamma rays beamed by a thousand library "branches" scattered through the galaxy.

Dr. Lotati's Solar System Astrophysical expedition had found that "Culture M," the troglodytes that inhabited the caverns of Miranda hundreds of thousands of years ago, had a base on or in Proteus as well, and used the Galactic library. They found, in effect, a Galactic library card—a way to decompress the data. Wanting to protect the site, they feared trusting beamed communications.

With good reason, it seemed—the *Herschel* was blown up by an explosion on its command deck, where there was nothing explodable. We found pieces of the wreckage on our way in, imaged them, and reconstructed the "accident" in cyberspace.

So dim is what goes for broad daylight out here that, away from Neptune's rim, the likes of Sirius, Rigel, and Betelgeuse find their way through my half-open irises. Is someone watching us?

A tone sounds. The ship's pattern-filtering software, not Randi's concentration nor my averted vision, finds something, announcing: "We have an anomaly in linear polarization at 387 nanometers." It highlights an area of magnetosphere-fried regolith flat enough to polarize the far infrared.

"Expand, center, image," Randi commands. Too intense for grammar, she speaks lists, and for a living I do my poor best to translate her exploration exploits to the Universe.

I was a poet once, not renowned, but published.

It is warm in the cabin, perhaps from our tension, and our shipsuits are rolled down to the waist, spacer fashion. I worship Randi with my eyes. Her skin changes from a weathered brown to a soft tan about midway down her forearms. Regenerations—she lost the originals to frostbite in the ice caverns of Miranda and has no time for cosmetics. Weightlessness is kind to her breasts; they have shrunk to looseness over the last few months because she eats too little, or perhaps burns herself away too fast for food to replace. Her stomach is so flat and hard it could be used to pave a patio.

The anomaly is also very flat, but so are fresh lava lakes. It is almost perfectly circular, but so are many craters. Yet for some reason I feel this is different.

"Flat, circular, and—" now Randi turns to me, a predatory grin on her face and a gleam of triumph in her eye, "no rim. Definitely artificial. Microwave repulsion grid, I think. Dad saw it. Had to."

"Let's not get ahead of our data," I caution.

She turns on me, exasperated. "One week searching. Three days left, best. Wojciech, dear, do you have a better idea?"

I worry. I worry about our vulnerability should we really find something. Control of information is power and a Galactic library open to everyone threatens to destroy a treasure of power. It could undermine religious dogma. It could destroy commercial monopolies with new technology. It could threaten political power based on allocation of resources.

Those who need power like addicts need drugs are not happy with us, but the rules are clear; the first to register a specific claim owns the rights. The stakes in this game, however, are far higher than fear of whatever law might be found near Neptune in this early twenty-third century frontier.

They follow us: at last count, seven ships approach Neptune with

the stated intention of filing claims on Proteus. An Interplanetary Patrol cutter lags behind. But we left in a hurry: no sponsor, no exploration robot, few supplies and a borrowed ship. That was the price of a two-week head start.

I force a grin at Randi. "We came this far; let's go down. I have several better ideas, but I guess they will wait."

She shakes her head. "Twenty minutes to set-down. Have time." She releases her seat belt and turns, dark wavy hair and soft eager breasts moving freely. She peels the rest of her shipsuit from the rags, whip-like body she so often forgets to feed. "Might not get another chance."

Soon we may die either at the hands of Proteus or its would-be looters. But to Randi, the darker the background, the more intense the flame, and she bestows total, intense, concentration on whatever she does.

We land, unload two sausage-shaped equipment pallets, and program the ship to set down far away from us to wait for our recall signal. Anyone who expects to shorten their search by setting down next to our ship will have problems finding our claim. We watch the ship—a barrel that sprouts sensor arms, landing struts, and a red-glowing flat-plane radiator for its mass conversion power supply—lift off on its attitude control thrusters, too contemptuous of the insignificant gravity to use its main engines.

Alone, we bounce gently off frosty dirt toward the middle of the leveled field. Radiation from a magnetosphere stirred to insanity by Neptune's madly rotating, off-center magnetic field bathes us. The drugs that control radiation damage while we are outside of the ship's protective magnetic field do little more than help the body rid itself of damaged cells, so we need shelter soon. No worry—if this is a troglodyte's landing field, there is a cave nearby.

Randi unpacks a set of stakes and I help her pound three of them into the regolith, several paces apart,

in the shape of a rough triangle. The stakes sing to the ground and the results appear as a translucent three-dimensional sonograph in front of our faces, reflected off our helmet windows.

"A shaft," Randi says. Yes, I see a hollow vertical shaft in the geometric center of the landing field. It runs up from a cavern far below, to perhaps a hundred meters beneath us. But the hollowness stops there; whoever dug the shaft shut the door behind them.

"It's blocked," I note, for once more terse than my wife.

"Natural cave below it," she replies. "May be natural entrances somewhere."

Where? The sonograph fades to gray before the boundary of the landing field. I dither, trying to find some clue to which direction to go.

Randi does not dither. "Have to start somewhere." She grabs the stakes and motions to me to collect the other equipment. Then she leans almost parallel to the ground and leaps in a long, low glide due north.

Later, as a ton of gear holds me down with a few newtons of force, I follow my love with long Lunar strides.

Proteus is not Miranda; it has no vast scarps and vertical cliffs of tens of kilometers. Rather, the surface of Proteus is soft and Lunar, pulverized by debris from the event that left Triton in its cockeyed retrograde orbit. But it is even less dense than Miranda and much smaller. The horizon is a soft wavy curve, only a kilometer or two away even at the top of my stride. The soil is like dry rotten snow. Proteus puffed up like a piece of cosmic popcorn—or, as gradualists maintain, rose like a cake when heated by the friction of great tidal fractures grinding against each other.

The process is not quite done; a ghostly nitrogen geyser erupts three kilometers from the landing pad. In enhanced images, a faint glow surrounds Proteus as it bleeds its dusty, volatile blood into the void.

Randi's new sonograph reaches me as I start braking the headlong flight of our gear. I drag from

behind, lightly, or I will tumble head over heels. The sonograph shows nothing resembling a cave entrance.

"Try again. That way." She points clockwise.

**A** Proteus day is over two hours longer than Earth's, and by the evening of our first, we are exhausted. We have circled the landing field a hundred meters at a step, taking sonographs each time.

"Randi, we need to inflate our tent, eat, rest, defecate, and think. We have a ton of data and are getting nowhere."

She shakes her head. "Maybe missed something in the details."

Or in the big picture. The field is flat. On a world of occasional meteoroids, quakes, and geysers, it was an area free of cracks, craters or vents.

I unstrap a pick and shovel, get my boot claws deep, take the pick and start swinging at the edge of the landing field. The regolith is cemented together with frozen volatiles, and it's like breaking off limestone, or rotten ice. In this one percent gravity, it seems I can throw a hundred kilograms over the local horizon. I make rapid progress.

"The caverns are too deep," Randi says. "You'll never dig that far in time."

I shake my head and keep swinging. "I'm not after the caverns," I tell her. I look down and see it. Another swipe with the shovel lays bare a patch of fine screen with tiny nodes at each intersection. "There! The microwave reflector, I think—maybe superconducting; it's about 60 Kelvins." Colder than liquid nitrogen.

Randi nods, examining the grid, her eyes wide inside her helmet. "Smart rectenna. Might absorb everything but their pusher wavelength. Still here!"

The last comment is significant. At Miranda, they'd taken everything of use with them a hundred thousand years ago. "Not just here, but it's been maintained! Maybe," I hazard, "they thought they would be coming back some day." But can we guess a

cave-living culture's thoughts? Their motivations? "At any rate, your dad found a treasure trove."

Randi seems to sag. "Some treasure. Fame...and death."

"Chaos." I reach over to squeeze her hand. There is no reason, I think, for most of what the Universe does. It happens, and you deal with it. You supply the purpose.

Our sounding computer finishes assembling all the sonograph data and flashes a little red light in the periphery of my vision to get my attention. I ask for a display from my current position, and it is as if the ground beneath me turns translucent. We can see the top of a spherical cavern, but where most of Proteus is a network of faults and voids, the cavern walls look thick and solid.

"Randi, are we trying to find a cave or crack a safe? No entrances, no shafts. Everything blocked. Deliberately, I think."

"Maybe not everything."

"Huh?"

"Geyser, that way." She pointed to the horizon. "Two clicks. Maybe connected, deeper."

Well, maybe. But what else to try? "Okay." We pack up, head half a kilometer toward the geyser, then take soundings.

The sonographs show lateral connectivity. Randi squeals and throws herself around me. She is down to skin and bone and still stronger than most men. Once upon a time, I was a would-be poet trying to support himself with nature writing; then I fell into *her*. She was a black hole of determination. When I passed her event horizon, my times were transformed from space-like to Randi-like. The first time she hugged me like this, she cracked one of my ribs. Now we test each other trying to merge our bodies in ways that Nature never intended, but have learned to enjoy the hurt—a special thing between us.

I chance to look up during our embrace and see two stars drift together against Scorpius, too fast and in the wrong place to be other Neptune moons. I silence my radio and touch my helmet to Randi.

"Randi. Spacecraft above."

She looks up and shakes her head.

I point toward the Milky Way between Scorpius and Sagittarius. "Just above Antares now, heading for the teapot."

"No contact. Unfriendly." She understood.

Ours has a registered, active, beacon, so the lack of communication could only be deliberate; whoever it was meant to surprise us.

"Shall I call our ship?" I ask. Was there time?

"Damn!" Randi says. "Too late—check the beacon; one of those ships is ours. It's under their control. They've stolen it."

Stranded. I feel violated, emasculated, a Viking without a longboat, a knight without a horse.

"Who, and why, would they take our spacecraft? That's piracy! They'll invalidate their claim if anyone finds out." If I shuddered.

"For who, make a list." Randi shrugged. You don't always get to find out precisely who 'they' are. "They need the ship for our bodies."

"Bodies?"

"Another 'accident' like Dad's." She seems to tremble; is it anger or fear?

I look up and the ships seem a bit larger, closer.

"So," Randi says. "Fight or flight?"

Fight with what? "Where on this once-warmed-over snowball do we run?"

"Down. Geysir. Caverns. Aliens. Maybe help. Maybe bargaining chip. Any better ideas?"

I shake my head and she grins at me. I grin back in spite of myself. Our lives may be measured in hours, but she intends to enjoy those hours. Living on the edge suits her, and where she goes, I go—which makes a lovely simplicity of life, or death, for me.

We literally gallop with our laden backs parallel to the ground; two feet to push; climbing claws on our gloves to grab, pull, and balance; two feet to push again. So we skim

the icy rounded hills. The landing field falls below our horizon as the spacecraft come down behind us.

The geyser ahead is too thin to see close up in normal vision but it stands out well in deep infrared, a fuzzy pole climbing to infinity through nonexistent atmosphere. It is hot only by the standards of Neptune's orbit—my display shows it only a hundred Kelvins over ambient temperature, and that leaves it about a hundred and twenty below zero, Celsius. I shiver.

We approach the vent.

This turns out to be a large crevasse that shrinks to a funnel. We enter, pulling our gear, through an eruption so insubstantial that no sensation reaches me through the dozen layers of macromolecular sieve that comprises my exploration vacuum suit and coveralls. An occasional ghostly mist shoots past us, and at the narrowest throat of the entrance, I, perhaps, hear something—an eerie whistling just on the edge of audibility. I take a last look at the stars, and follow Randi. Down.

Then we are in a fairyland of frozen bubbles, sinuous tubes with polished ice sides, crystal shattered and whole, and hybrids that morph from sleek to cubist when our helmet lights move. It's human scale here, room-sized. Following our suit's inertial guidance, we head toward what lies under the landing field.

For two hours, we pull ourselves down and east. Then the vent bends west, down and away towards who-knows-what, far, far, below. We need to move horizontally.

Randi inspects the wall. "Fractured clathrate. Good."

We pound stakes and get another sonograph. A major crack opens a hundred yards to our left and leads toward a cavern beneath the landing field. We find the entrance fissure and squeeze ourselves onward.

In twenty minutes, the crack opens into a tunnel with smooth, polished, clathrate walls. It is clearly artificial—but ancient; the floor is covered with centimeters of crystal dust borne by eddies of a geyser too

tenuous to be felt or heard. A fog of tiny sparks surrounds every step.

The tunnel wall is so hard we can't set our stakes even with a laser drill, so we get a poor sonograph at the crack mouth. The tunnel parallels the cavern wall, and may connect to it—but where?

We try the northwest upward slant but the tunnel soon fills with debris, slowing us. A rockfall stops us after half an hour.

We come back the other way and Randi halts me as we pass the crack exit where we first entered the tunnel.

"Gas flowing in," she tells me. "Higher pressure in the geyser cavern."

I confirm the display, but don't get the significance. "A bigger eruption?"

"No increased flow," she says. "Nothing seismic. Nothing infra-sonic."

If the source hadn't increased, what was causing the increase in pressure? "Something blocking the usual exit? A rockfall?"

Randi shakes her head. "No rockfall, but something else could be obstructing the exit." She looks at me, frowning. "Our pursuers. At the entrance throat. Coming in after us."

I think we have about a three-hour lead. They would probably follow our trail of handprints in the infrared, but they would have to look for them. No, I realized, not three hours; we'd lost an hour going north and coming back.

"Could we try to jump down there, without touching anything?" I suggest, and reach for a cold-gas reaction pistol.

Randi stops me. "That's like a blowtorch here. Not cold enough."

Then she faces the next curve, steadies, and launches herself down cleanly down the tunnel. She flips, lands as gently as she can on the wall at the curve, and bounces around the bend. Our boots are well insulated; my infrared display shows only a small, vague spot where she landed.

I follow as best as I can, but lack Randi's control, brush the ceiling



and have to steady myself with a hand as I jump around the bend. I tell myself I've left only small spots that will be even smaller when our pursuers come this way.

We are kidding ourselves, of course. When they don't find us cowering among the boulders in the upper west end of the tunnel, they will come this way.

As we go toward the south end of the tunnel, we note a large closed door in the tunnel wall, its dusty outline barely visible. The tunnel ends shortly beyond that in a rockfall, so we go back.

The door won't open, but our efforts loosen dust and expose intersecting cracks running from the door. With the frame, they form a triangular plate just larger than one of our helmets. I wonder at the stress that caused such cracks, but we hammer the triangle out anyway. The wall here is as thick as my hand.

Randi sticks her head through. "It's the cavern! Like at Miranda. Big spherical room. Central pole with ring balconies. Utility areas on the floor," she reports, breathless, excited. "But this one is intact. The balconies are full of modules of some sort. There are lights, dim and small, but lights."

I try to stick my head in. My helmet is too big, but I get a better view close up. "Randi, it's active! Those lights are infrared."

Then, with my helmet wedged in solid contact with the wall, I hear—scrapes, hammerings, and an occasional voice conducted from ...somewhere. Human. I ease myself out and tell Randi.

She looks surprised for a moment, then says, "You heard our pursuers."

I nod. So much for the lead time.

Randi looks at the hole, removes her pack and coveralls, connects an extension hose, and motions for me to try to push her through. She scrunches her shoulders, stiffens, and I try to fit the round peg of her body through the triangular hole. She sticks. I brace myself on the

opposite wall, hold her legs, and push. "Hard!" she gasps, inviting pain.

But her shoulders are too wide. We are trapped. I ease her back out.

"Somehow, somewhere, Dad got in." Randi says. Then she takes hold of me. "They're going to kill us. They have to."

I nod.

She grabs my arm. "There's a chance I can get through. But—"

"You don't fit." What was she thinking? Oh. "Even without your suit —"

"Not that. You'll have to change my shape a little. Break a bone for me."

I'm horrified and shake my head at the thought. "I, I can't do that to you."

She shakes her head. "I think we both die if you don't." She takes a breath. "A clavicle will do, I think. Just need a centimeter or two. Karate chop here. Hard. Has to be a complete break." She exhales and braces herself on the wall. "Do it, love! Do it now!" she shouts at me with an almost fanatic intensity.

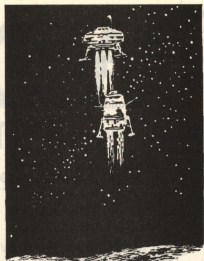
"No!" I shake all over. The worst part is that there is no meaningful way for me to share the hurt, no way that giving an arm or leg of my own would help things in the slightest. I think, think hard: she knows engineering, geology, bodies. I know words. What good is that? I can ask questions.

"How the hell do you get your hips through? You'll bleed internally. The pain will incapacitate you."

She shakes her head. "I think my hips will fit. If not, you push until they do. Internal bleeding won't kill me, at least not right away. We can deal with it later. I can handle pain, you know that." She tries to laugh. "Come on, let's get it over with and stuff me through that hole."

I still can't. The pursuers can't be that close. There must be another way. "Randi, what can you do in there?"

She sighs, sounding both exasperated and relieved. "Open the door? After that, I don't know. Dad saw something, did something. The



machine they left—it must think to survive so long.”

“Thinks like what?” I wonder. I think of Proteus, the shape changer. What Randi proposed to do to herself seems appropriate, in a macabre sort of way. But to understand the ways of the troglodytes’ machine, their avatar, one would have to change more than physical shape. One would have to change the shape of one’s mind, one’s instincts, one’s assumptions.

“A billion-year-old race,” Randi says, “that still used physical bodies and lived in caves.”

“What does that mean?”

“Insecure?” Randi says in wonder. “Conservative? Pathologically cautious? But they travel through space.”

I imagine a troglodyte spaceship, and think I understand. “The ships travel through space, but they stay inside—just another kind of cave to them. Maybe their ships don’t even have windows, treat space as an irrelevant abstraction, or a place too terrible to contemplate. Randi, what is security for a cave dweller?”

She shakes her head. “Going deep? Lots of rock around? Controls on who gets in? Sure! Entrance controls with them inside and the threat outside.”

I nod to her. “Randi, a billion years is a lot of experience. That microwave array up there—if it’s active, I think it’s been listening as it soaks up power. It must have learned our languages; that’s how your dad could talk to it. But silence is a protective barrier too, one that your dad overcame, somehow. It has to be programmed for self-preservation, long term—with a cave dweller’s weighting on risk.” Then I knew. “We’re exposing it to risk.”

“Risk?”

“The people chasing us. It’s been listening and understands the differences in motives. Or maybe your dad told it. But we’ve left the back door open and perhaps it doesn’t want to risk its last line of defense while they can get here. If so, we need to separate us from them as a troglodyte would. We need to

show that it can trust us by shutting the door behind us.”

She nods slowly. “Door. The geyser tube and the crack we came through? Collapse the crack with explosives. Secure the cavern from invasion. Then it talks to us?”

“I hope so. But...Randi, if not, we play Radames and Aida, sealed in this tomb.” I shiver. “Maybe we should just surrender, take our chances.”

“No way! Remember Dad. Look, I can still break a bone to get through the hole. Two chances to win.” She shakes her head. “Damn you, I was ready for it. Hard to work myself up to....”

She trembles, shakes her head and I hug her.

“Okay, okay.” She recovers, and grins. “First, let’s bury ourselves. Lots of strain where the crack we followed enters the tunnel.”

“Yes, it twists to almost sideways there.” I grab equipment pallets.

Randi looks at the sonograph. “Cut the crack ceiling laterally. Vertical pressure. No support. Might slam down. Let’s go.”

We skim up the tunnel to the crack mouth. I start a line of holes. Randi stuffs rolled-up sheets of metastable excited-lattice-diamond explosive in each.

Randi puts her head to the ice. “They’re almost here.”

I want two more charges and compromise with one. Done, I look down the crack and see a light moving.

“Get the hell out of here, you claim-jumping asshole,” I transmit in the clear. “This place is going to blow.”

I push Randi down the corridor, and jump after her. The explosive sheets have integral detonator circuits with a proximity safe. We have to get out of range, and so does my friend on the other end of the crack, or it wouldn’t blow.

Hopefully, he doesn’t know that.

We get around the second bend of the tunnel, lock our claws to the clathrate, and I tell the detonator to do it.

The whole place jumps and fills with vapor, and for a moment there is enough gas pressure to hear. A kilometer of clathrate overhead groans like a tortured giant, adjusting itself *down*. Yes, it only weighs one percent of Earth weight. But one percent of billions of tons is still tens of millions of tons, and we’d just pulled out the props.

A slam knocks us loose and we bounce against the opposite wall, but the tunnel holds up.

After things settle down, I listen for pursuit. None.

I take Randi’s hand. She is hard, tight, concentrating, getting ready to be broken again. She’s going to pretend it’s no big deal, goad me into it, then laugh, or scream, as I push her ruined shoulder through the crack by the door.

My sacrifice, I decide, will be that if I do this to the wife I love beyond anything, I will go insane and never look reality in the face again.

But I dare hope. I dare hope that around the next bend, we will find that we have successfully shaped our minds to the troglodyte reference frame. I am sure their machine will understand us. It must. All logic demands this. I prepare to plead to the alien machine for our lives, for Randi’s body and my sanity. I prepare to plead humanity’s case and I dare hope it will give us the key to the universe.

More, I dare hope it will help us escape and call the patrol.

But as we round the bend, I see that all my pleading, all my preparations for argument are futile. Randi lands in front of the door, speechless, reshaping her mind again, but this time to handle a welcome.

For the door already stands open and the lights beyond it are full on, bright as a new day. ■



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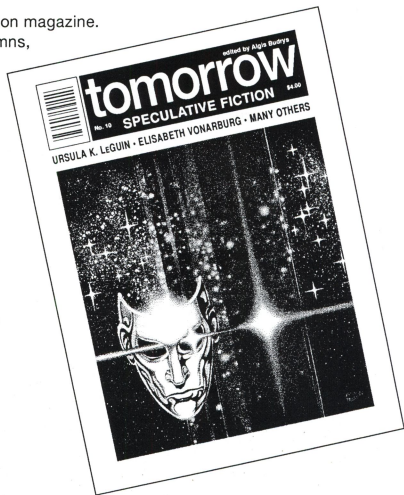
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