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SPECULATIVE FICTION

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SPECULATIVE FICTION

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EDITORIAL



I am about to get a number of people seriously angry. I am going to say something very much politically incorrect. I suggest you read every word carefully. And if you are under about the age of 54, I suggest you not bother to write in. No matter how much you've read or said on the subject, you weren't there.

The Japanese nowadays make my car, which is an '85 Toyota Celica with 250,000 miles on it. I've never had the head off, it's only gone through two clutches. I replace the alternator brushes rather than install a new alternator, I have had to have the radiator boiled out, and that's essentially it. I understand American cars are beginning to catch up, some of them, and I guess I believe it, but it's an abstract—the Toyota apparently will go on for quite a while, yet.

But there is another Japan. It has turned Hiroshima into an international shrine, which is more than OK with me, but it has also made the Americans into the villains in that respect, and that is not OK with me. Here's why:

Most of you do not remember World War II. I was 14 when it ended, with the bomb on Hiroshima. (Actually, it was with the bomb on Nagasaki, a week later. No Japanese to my knowledge speaks much of Nagasaki, reserving his remarks for Hiroshima. I think I know why this is.)

I feel for the Japanese. I really do; one day they had cities, and the next they didn't. It was a considerable shock, and I don't blame them for reacting to it. But I remember, too, the price we had to pay: first Pearl Harbor, and then Midway, Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Iwo Jima, the Philippines and a thousand islands, large and small, in between. Islands. Sons and husbands dying by the thousands in the surf of a hundred beaches, for years.

One thing we learned, very well, was the tenacity and courage of the Japanese. We called it "fanaticism" then; that will serve to describe the degree of courage they displayed. And we came, finally, under the cloud of Japanese suicide bombers cutting up our fleets, suffering terribly but coming on nevertheless (I went to college with a man who had been aboard the *Franklin*), to the shores of the Japanese home islands.

I have spoken, at length, to an executive of the American Bridge Company who, not seven years earlier, had been a combat engineer, part of the Army of Occupation, steaming into one of the Japanese harbors. And he felt, without question, that we would indeed have sustained a million additional casualties; 100,000 dead, many of the rest maimed for life, if we had attempted a conventional invasion. His particular job was to be part of a team inspecting the defenses the Japanese had built, and it was his job to reach that kind of estimate. We would have done it, as we had taken all the other islands, one after the other, bodies lying in the sand with the land crabs and the sea birds picking at them, but any alternative was welcome. And we had the alternative.

How many Japanese would have died, I don't know. Nobody does. The Japanese had elaborate plans for suicide defenses, for instance, and there is no telling how many of them would have worked before they were finally overrun. But I think there's no question but that the figures would have been substantially higher than the total lost in the bombing of Hiroshima (and Nagasaki).

We had bled enough, I think. And it was the Japanese that had made us bleed, steadfastly and courageously. I want you to remember, friend, that Hiroshima was *not enough*. It took another week, and another city, before they surrendered. So much for any talk of a "demonstration" on some uninhabited isle instead.

I don't like war. I didn't like it before it became fashionable not to like it. But I felt, and I feel, that the Japanese brought it on themselves. It was the crumpled bodies on the beach, far from home; the helmets awash, the rifles bayonet-down in the sand. They brought it on themselves, and though I sympathize with them, I sympathize with us, too...and so, at the time, did the rest of the American people. It is a more advanced generation, to whom World War II is just a TV show full of grainy black-and-white film, that feels somehow ashamed.

— Algis Budrys

Nominated for the Hugo Award
Ranked in the *Writer's Digest* Top 50

tomorrow

SPECULATIVE FICTION

August, 1994

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Cover by Frank Kelly Freas, © Copyright 1993, Frank Kelly Freas, illustrating "Another Story" by Ursula K. Le Guin
Illustrations by Brian Lee Durfee, Kelly Faltermäyer, Bob Hobbs, Judith Holman, Margaret Ballif Simon, and Darla Malone Tagrin.

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A DOMESTIC WINE AND CASSOULET

Lyn Worthen

Illustrated by Margaret Ballif Simon

I tossed myself down a hillside to achieve a believable look, then staggered into the U.S. Consulate

If you know enough about a place, you can fit in just about anywhere, or so they told us. So, there I was, left behind in the rush, with nothing but a set of fake identity papers and some stale rations to get me through. I was on my own.

As our research had indicated that death was preferable to capture, and as I was not ready to explore the great beyond, I improvised. Taking advantage of the continuing deterioration of the area known as Eastern Europe to cover my accent and phony credentials, I tossed myself down a hillside to achieve a believable look, then staggered into the U.S. Consulate in Vienna.

"Must request asylum," I told them in broken English. "Am in danger."

They bought it. I was fed, given clean clothes, a physical exam (throughout most of which I prayed to several long-forgotten gods, and after which I was pronounced reasonably fit, if a bit anemic), and a bed to sleep in. A few weeks later I was safely ensconced as Dr. David Masaryk, a medical researcher at UC San Francisco. It wasn't my real name, of course, but they didn't know that.

It was almost too easy.

Because eating has always been something I like to do, and because the high-protein menu that is most beneficial to my physiology is a little on the expensive side here, I decided I'd better earn my keep. After all, I knew the relocation money I'd been given wouldn't last forever. I took a

few days skimming through an endless stack of medical books trying to find where my skills overlapped with current theories and practices, and decided they really didn't. So it was definitely research, and since my former specialty had been regeneration, I figured it might be interesting to try to backtrack what I knew of regenerative theory and see if it might be applicable to humans. That's when I discovered cancer. I started playing around with cancer cells, trying to isolate and alter specific segments of their DNA code in order to "tame" them. Fortunately, my supervisors at the Cancer Research Center were enthusiastic about my ideas and allowed me a reasonable budget to work with. Concerns about food and housing adequately allayed, I dove

into my work with all the devotion of a true research fanatic. Only occasionally did I look over my shoulder to see if anyone noticed anything odd about me.

Not that they would right off. While somewhat on the tall side (and frequently asked if I play basketball—a game for which I have discovered I possess absolutely zero proficiency), I look reasonably human. Four limbs extending from the torso in the usual places, five digits on each appendage, head with all the features more or less reasonably arranged. Even the internal organs are in approximately the same arrangement as the average hominid. It stands to reason—given similar conditions, there are only so many ways evolution can go to produce a dominant life form. Granted, the heavier gravity here affects my stamina somewhat, but the slightly higher oxygen levels make it easier to breathe, so it evens out.

In the first two years, no one seemed to notice or care that I was different. Not that I gave anyone much opportunity. I tended to be somewhat reclusive—it was safer.

It was when I presented my paper at the Pacific Coast Medical Research Conference about the possibilities of using my “tamed” cancer cells to regenerate missing or damaged body tissues that I saw her. Left side, fourth row, aisle seat. Looking at me. Not listening to what I was saying—everyone in the room was doing that—no, she was *looking at me* with that look in her large, brown eyes that says “I know you.”

I tried to reach her after the lecture, but by the time I got away from the crowd that mobbed me at the podium, she had disappeared. I didn't see her again for nearly a week. I didn't even think about her—I didn't have time. My paper had stirred up a hornet's nest of controversy, and I was too busy trying to convince the skeptics of my theories on controlled proliferation of cells to think about my “mystery lady.”

It was a Thursday night when I saw her next. I had felt an overpowering need to get away from everything

connected with my new-found notoriety, so I decided to go to the movies. The idea of sitting in a darkened theater, eating popcorn and watching an old Spielberg movie, seemed a better way to avoid a constantly ringing telephone than sitting alone in my apartment, staring at the drawer I had stuffed it in.

The film was that pleasant little one that dealt with a member of an alien research team who had accidentally been left behind, and how he enlisted the aid of some human children to call his ship back for him. I owned the video, and had nearly worn it out, but I liked it better on the big screen. It was such a nice story, with its happy ending and all—too bad it wasn't realistic. In the real world they don't come back for you unless you're absolutely vital to the success or failure of the mission. I oughta know. At least I blend in better than that wrinkly little guy did. Lucky me.

Anyway, she was at the movie. I saw her as I was leaving, but somehow lost her in the crowd again. It's like she thought I didn't know she was watching me. I just wished I knew what she wanted.

Well, she was back on my mind again, and for a couple of days I thought I saw her everywhere. I found myself doing a double-take every time a woman passed by, especially if she was of medium height, slim and had short brown hair. It was really beginning to bother me. It probably wouldn't have been so bad if I wasn't being hounded by the media and cancer researchers from around the world because of my regeneration work, but as it was, it was more than I needed to handle at the same time.

I had to find out who she was.

It's not just that I'm hopelessly neurotic about anyone I see more than three times in succession without being introduced—you've got to be when you're in my position—I was also scared to death that she just might know who I really am.

And if she did, I was in a lot of trouble. At least according to most of my video collection, including the Spielberg movie. Humans depict their xenophobia very graphically.

Then I found her at the library, studying, seemingly unaware that I was there. But as I walked past her, I could feel her eyes on me. I lost control, and turned on her. “What is it with you?” I said bluntly, “Why do you keep following me?”

I have to give her credit: she didn't bother to feign surprise. That's when she said it. She quietly stood and looked up, looking me straight in the eye for a full ten seconds before answering. “I am *not* following you. I am a figment of your imagination. When you stop thinking of me, I will cease to exist.”

And then she turned, picked up her books, and walked away.

I felt foolish.

So there I was. Suddenly very popular in the medical community, which in itself was a refreshing change, yet hounded by someone who appeared to believe she was a product of my own imagination. I kept asking myself what I had done to deserve this. I was just a little alien, far from home, trying to eke out a living the only way I knew how. Okay, so I'm a *tall* alien.

Then I started thinking that there might be something to what she said. There was something niggling in the back of my mind—something I couldn't quite put my finger on no matter how hard I tried. I noticed that the more I looked for her, the more I saw her, and when I was completely immersed in my work, she didn't show up for hours.

So I set the trap.

I prepared a very nice meal, set the table for two, lit the candles and left the door standing ajar. At precisely eight o'clock, just as I was taking the wine out of the refrigerator, she walked in the door.

“I'm so glad you could come,” I said as I took her coat.

“Thank you for inviting me.”

Now, I hadn't actually sent out a formal invitation; all I had done was *think about* having her come to dinner. Telepathy?

“Is there anything I can do to help?” she asked. She had a soft

accent, and I wondered where she was from.

"You could tell me your name."

She didn't answer. Instead she just laughed, a clear, bell-like sound I hadn't heard since leaving home. Or was that just what I wanted to hear? Now that I actually had the opportunity to see her up close, I realized that she was less average than I had at first thought. The top of her head barely cleared my shoulder, and when I held out a chair for her to sit in she moved with particular grace. Her fingers were long and slender, and I found myself acutely aware of their every motion: staring as she wrapped them around the wineglass and raised it to her lips. Then it hit me.

"You're not human, are you?" I asked abruptly.

She sipped at the wine, a pleasant, domestic burgundy I had spent an hour's pay on. "My name is Pamela. Pamela Heuer, and no, Dr. Masaryk, I'm not human. But then, neither are you."

At first I was stunned, then hopeful. Was it possible that they'd come back for me, that I was being rescued?

"How long have you been here? Where is your ship? Why didn't you contact me directly?" The questions tumbled out one after another, and I must confess I forgot my meal in my excitement.

Pamela didn't. She calmly—and annoyingly—served herself salad, buttered some bread, and poured us both another glass of wine while I plied her with questions. Only when I ran out of breath and she ran out of salad did she finally deign to speak.

"Dr. Masaryk—may I call you David? Or should I call you *Dav Myers*?"

"David," I said automatically, only partially surprised that she would know my real name, but more surprised that she would allow me to maintain my assumed identity.

"David, then. As I told you in the library, I am nothing more than a figment of your imagination."

"Look," I said, "I've been stuck here for two and a half years, pretending to be human. I've avoided both illness and accidents, and kept myself

free of relationships that might cause me to lower my defenses. I mean, can't you just hear it: 'Oh, darling, the stars are so lovely tonight!' 'Yes, dear, and my planet is circling that one. Yes, that one right over there, you can just barely see it.'" I stopped and took a swallow of the wine. It wasn't bad. "And now here you are, sitting at my table, looking like my sister's best friend's sister,"—whom I'd had a crush on for years, but this Pamela person didn't need to know that—"and telling me you haven't come from Cygnus IV looking for me, but are a product of my imagination? I don't believe it." She didn't say anything, but just continued to eat. "Besides, when did figments of one's imagination start drinking wine and eating cassoulet?"

"Dimi ate a whole pie once, remember? By the way, this is delicious."

I sat there speechless. No one knew about Dimi. I hadn't even thought of him myself in years. But we had pulled some good pranks together when we were children. I closed my eyes, forgetting for a moment that Pamela shouldn't know about Dimi, recalling instead how he looked, the way he had laughed....

And heard a boy's laugh behind me.

"Dimi!" I watched in amazement as the ten-year-old boy sauntered casually from the kitchen to stand before me. He looked me over, then shrugged. "You've grown up, Dav. But I suppose it was bound to happen to one of us." He reached out for a piece of bread. Dimi was always hungry.

"You're not real," I said, disbelievingly.

The bread fell to the floor as Dimi's hand suddenly became insubstantial. He scowled at me. "Now *whadja* do that for?" he asked.

The memories came flooding back, of a lonely childhood with Dimi as my only companion. And that was when I figured it out—the 'something' that had been eluding me all this time. It was IFS.

Imaginary Friend Syndrome.

Parents would bring a child to the doctor, complaining that an imaginary friend had become substantial and couldn't the doctor do something about it because they didn't need another mouth to feed. The medical community passed it off as the ability of a bored or overactive child's potential for creativity, and usually cured it with liberal doses of schoolwork and group play. With real children. Never having had children of my own, I'd never had to deal with IFS as an adult, and had quite forgotten my own experience.

Pamela, and now Dimi, were adult manifestations of a childhood malady.

Just what I needed right now.

"I knew you believed in me," Dimi said, biting into a new piece of bread.

"No! Go away!" I shouted at him, then closed my eyes and tried to will him away. After a minute, Pamela's voice interrupted my concentration.

"You can open your eyes now. He's gone."

I opened them slowly. She was right; he was gone. So was the rest of the bread. I slumped back in my chair, exhausted.

"Okay," I said. "Let's assume I believe you. I'm not a child any more, needing childish companions. What are you doing here?"

"Everyone needs someone to talk to," she said simply, as if that should explain everything.

"And I don't have anyone to talk to?"

"No."

"I'm surrounded by people all the time. Everyone wants to talk to me. I'm a very popular guy."

"So *wher* are you sitting here having dinner with a figment of your imagination?"

"I've gotta have some time for myself."

"And someone to talk to who won't think you're crazy when you point out which star your home world circles. Or where you *really* got your theories for regeneration."

I got angry. Maybe it was unreasonable, but I did, nonetheless.

S.M. STIRLING
HOLLY LISLE

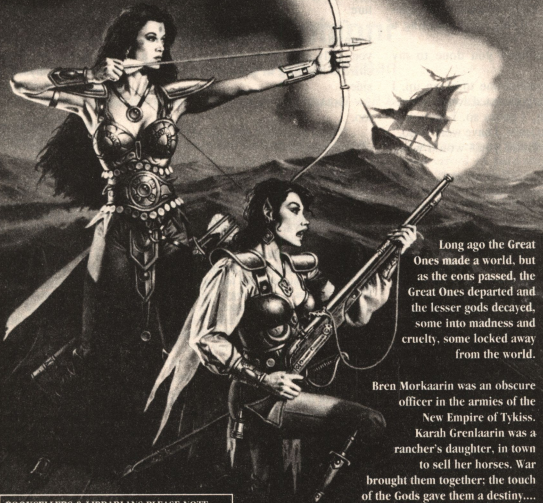
The ROSE SEA



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Long ago the Great Ones made a world, but as the eons passed, the Great Ones departed and the lesser gods decayed, some into madness and cruelty, some locked away from the world.

Bren Morkaarin was an obscure officer in the armies of the New Empire of Tykiss. Karah Grenlaarin was a rancher's daughter, in town to sell her horses. War brought them together: the touch of the Gods gave them a destiny....

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"I don't need you!" I shouted at her. "I'm doing just fine on my own. I don't need anyone!"

She took my outburst very well. "Oh, is that so?" she said, soaking up the remains of the cassoulet with her bread. "I'm glad to hear it. I guess I'll be popping out then any minute. Mind if I finish my supper first?"

"Take your time," I said, tossing down my napkin and getting up from the table. "Don't forget to clean up before you go."

I went to bed.

I am a bachelor. What I mean by that is when I need something, I find it and wash it. So when I say that I couldn't find anything the next morning, what I mean is that my clothes were all clean and in my dresser, the dishes were in the cupboards, and the whole apartment appeared to have been thoroughly cleaned.

"Pamela!"

"Yes, Dav?" She was sitting quietly in the living room, reading a book.

"What have you done to my house?"

"You asked me to clean up. I guess I just got carried away."

"Yeah, I guess so. I thought I told you to leave. I have work to do."

"And I told you I would when

you stopped thinking about me. Since I'm still here, I guess that means you still need me."

"Not at all. It just means that... that...that I haven't fully forgotten you yet. It doesn't mean that I need you."

"I see. Well, I'll try to stay out of your way so you can forget me easier." She went back to her book.

"Thanks loads."

"No problem."

"I don't have time for this," I grumbled, going into my room to look for something to wear. I really didn't. A team of Japanese cancer researchers were coming in that morning to study my work, and I had become reclusive enough in the past couple of years to find the thought of five more people in my lab extremely uncomfortable. The last thing I needed was to worry about whether or not an imaginary person was going to appear right in the middle of a lecture.

"I won't," Pamela called out from the living room. "Not unless you really want me to. And your blue shirt is hanging in the closet. Left side."

Great. She was a mind reader, too.

"Not if you don't want me to be."

"I don't."

"Okay."

My thoughts appeared to be my own while I finished dressing, and I carried my shoes to the living room to see if she was still there.

She was.

"By the way, do you mind if I ask you a question?" I asked.

Pamela looked up, curious.

"What?"

"Why were you in the library that day?"

"Well," she said, "as a figment of your imagination, I only know what you know." She put down the book. It was a copy of *Brief History of Time* that I'd bought just before the Pacific Coast Conference, but never gotten a chance to read. "I thought you might get bored talking to yourself all the time, so I decided to learn something new."

She's still here. I guess she was right. And it hasn't been all that bad. In fact, it's been kind of nice having someone to come home to, someone to talk to, someone to share a meal or just watch a movie with. Someone I can be myself with.

Someone with great legs. ■



OUR AUTHORS

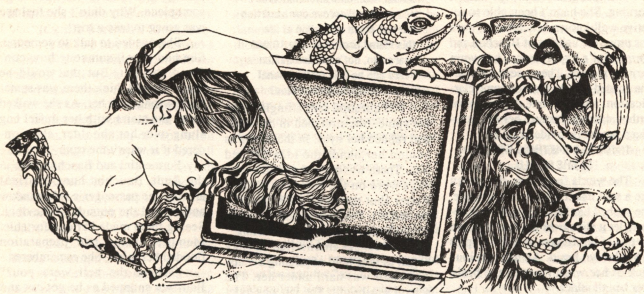
William Esrac lives in Australia, where he is a well-known dance teacher. His only previous sale was to L. Ron Hubbard's *Writers of the Future Contest*, and the resulting anthology. But he has since then produced a number of notable works. **Ursula K. Le Guin** altered the field permanently with *The Left Hand of Darkness* in 1969, and *Always Coming Home* is future anthropology. Her newest will be *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea*. **Joe Mas-troanni** used to be so frequent a flier for a major software firm that he was almost a constant flier. He has currently moved laterally and is heading up a group in San Jose. This is his first genre sale. **Cara O'Sullivan** is married to an Irishman but is herself an American. She has taken numerous writing workshop courses in Provo, UT. This her first sale. **Elisabeth Vonarburg** was born in 1947 in France and has been a full-time writer since 1990. She resides in Canada, where she has writ-

ten copiously, and received many awards. The largest part of her writing is in French. **Lyn Worthen** is a military brat with a fascination for the way people of different cultures interact with each other. She has lived in Provo, UT, for the last 11 years with her husband and four children. She has degrees in psychology, communications, and Spanish translation. For a living she writes computer coursework. "A Domestic Wine and Cassoulet" is her second professional fiction sale.

OUR ARTISTS

Brian Lee Durfee was raised in Alaska and Utah, and won an art scholarship to Brigham Young University, where he is currently majoring in illustration and minoring in fine arts. He lettered in football for three years in high school. Last year, he won a prize in L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of the Future Contest. **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*. **Judith Holman** has an MFA, but refuses to give details. She chucked all that to illustrate science fiction. Her many prestigious shows continue to add to her luster. **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. ■



FRAGILE ANIMATION

Joe Mastroianni

Illustrated by Judith Holman

The program was expected to rederive any of a number of well-known hypotheses. It didn't.

Rumors in well-informed circles placed Vasilyus Gyenes's name at the top of the Academy of Science's list for the mathematics prize that year. Researchers felt it was time he was recognized for his contribution. He was the most frequently cited scientist in the field. They said his mathematics of computational self-awareness had spawned more research in computer science than any man since Turing. The scientific community could no longer delay recognizing his genius. Vasilyus Gyenes had been released from the Palo Alto Hospital for Psychiatric Disorders.

Dr. Denise Foucault loaded a version of Gyenes's self-actualizing process onto the University's hyper-network. The program sought spare processing resources from the collection of thousands of computer nodes

connected to the high-speed network. When it found spare cycles on an unoccupied computer, it impregnated the idle machine with bits of itself using the resource like neurons of a brain. Foucault's workstation provided control for the thousands of computational fragments that made up the artificial consciousness. It communicated to her through her machine.

Foucault applied Gyenes's math of human awareness to the problem of the cyclic mass extinction of life on Earth. Once the equations were loaded and running, she and her colleagues fed it all the information they could find on geological and paleontologic science. Capable of mimicking human deductive processes on a limited scale, the program was expected to rederive any of a number of well-known hypotheses. It didn't.

Her colleagues thought they had found errors in paleontologic research. They found flaws in the leading ideas that global volcanic activity or meteor impacts all but eliminated life on Earth on a regular basis. Scientists felt iridium layers in the Earth's crust signified meteor impacts that sparked mass extinctions. Bauchon and Formentini felt otherwise. Their research told them the iridium layers were erroneously dated.

Like the program, they turned up nothing conclusive. Field work yielded puzzling inconsistencies. If their assertions based on field data were correct, the dating of the last mass extinction was less than ten thousand years ago. It was an absurd conclusion. It violated physical principles. The field data had to be wrong. Yet, Foucault's self-aware computer program wouldn't refute it. She didn't know why.

The program simply wasn't working. She hadn't been able to re-derive well-known benchmarks, even less prove the validity of Bauchon and Formentini's hypotheses. They were burning money. They needed a clue. She needed only to provide some clarification, a lead in one direction for further research. Instead, her self-actualized process provided riddles.

**THERE IS SOMETHING WRONG
IN THE WORLD.**

The words formed on the screen like a soul materializing to existence. She rubbed her hand against her forehead, let it slide over her hair, and ran the tips of her fingers over the ripples in her brown braid. An unconscious flick of her wrist flopped the braid over her shoulder.

She hadn't turned on the lights in the windowless lab. Lit only by the computer monitor, she typed the queries:

**>How can our findings be inconsistent
with physical principles?**

**CORRUPTED DATA MAY LEAD TO
INCONSISTENT FINDINGS.**

**>Provide a list of possible vehicles for
data contamination.**

**THE DATA INDICATES A REFER-
ENCE BEING.**

**>Explain the term 'REFERENCE
BEING.'**

THE REFERENCE NUMBER IS 1318.

An idea formed at the periphery of her mind and hung before her like a luminous cloud. It grew brighter and brighter as she struggled to organize her thoughts. Sliding. She was sliding. She had to present the computer with unambiguous questions in order to receive definite answers. The light in her mind grew brighter. She was aware she had to do something she hadn't thought about before—or had she simply forgotten? The light floated in front of her. Was she really seeing it? It grew until it engulfed her. Sliding. Reality had lost its friction.

As the light passed she saw the lab exactly as it had been. Nothing had changed. The questioning was getting her nowhere. She rubbed her eyes and typed,

**>What additional information do
you need to disprove our assertion
the last mass extinction of life on
this planet happened only 10,000
years ago, not sixty-five million
years ago as held by traditional
paleontologic understanding?**

The question sent a tingle down her spine. She stretched in her chair and rubbed her eyes. In the darkness behind her hands the idea flashed true. There was a plane to catch. Her bags were on the floor beside her. Better shut the thing off and get to the airport. Formentini and Bauchon would be in the parking lot waiting.

Her senses intensified as they began to take hold of passing events. The chair was hard under her. The screen was bright. The lab was quiet but for the fan in the CPU cage. There was something to do.

She leapt from the chair. It rolled backward on the slick linoleum floor and crashed into the bookshelf behind her. She picked up her duffel bag. Remembering to turn off the machine, she put the bag down again and reached for the keyboard.

She typed,

>Sleep.

The answer the self-actualized computer brain had given to her question was on the screen in front of her. She tried to dismiss it. It was unstructured babble.

**THERE ARE DANGEROUS IDEAS
IN THE WORLD.**

The words captured her attention. Denise stared at the screen until the statement lost itself in pixelized phosphor. It was oil that slid her into intricate detail. The machine resolved itself to her as a simple collection of elements: an injection-molded plastic case containing electronics, a keyboard, light from a CRT. It ceased to exist as an entity and rebuilt itself as a collection of pieces.

She took a deep breath and collected herself.

"Dangerous ideas," she said to herself. She blinked to bring herself back from the reverie. The bag was on the floor beside her. Formentini and Bauchon were waiting in the

parking lot. Time to go. Time to go someplace. Why didn't she feel she was going to take a trip?

She needed to talk to someone. She had to tell someone how confused she felt. But that could be risky. They'd think there was something wrong with her. As she walked down the stairs with her duffel bag slung over her shoulder, she wondered if it wasn't the truth.

Formentini and Bauchon were in the Audi. Bauchon hung his right arm out the passenger's side window and tapped the outside of the door. Seeing them made her comfortable. Memory of the trip preparation flooded her mind. She remembered.

"Where the hell were you?" Bauchon snapped as he got out and pulled the seat forward, letting her into the rear. She threw her bags into the back and got in.

"Something on the machine," Denise said. "I thought I might be getting somewhere."

"Right," said Bauchon. He got into the front, shaking his head as he slammed the door. Formentini put the car in gear and drove toward the airport.

"What's the problem?" she asked. On the edge of the rear seat, she pulled herself forward between the two men. Formentini looked at Bauchon, who kept his eyes on the road approaching them.

"What's going on?" she said. Then to Formentini, "What's with him?"

Formentini sighed and glanced toward Bauchon. "Are you going to tell her, or are you going to continue to be uncivil?"

"What? Tell me what?"

Bauchon remained aloof. Denise tapped him on the shoulder. "Tell me what, Thierry?"

Formentini said, "He thinks it's been a waste of grant money having a computer scientist on a geological survey. He wishes you were a geologist. It would look better when we present our negative results if we didn't have to say a third of the money went to build an artificial intelligence system that told us nothing useful about our work."

Denise stared at the car seat, afloat on a sudden tide of discomfort.

"It's not personal," said Bauchon. "You're a fine researcher and a friend. But I've never understood the value of your work on this project. We'd have been better off with a physical chemist or a metallurgist."

Denise snapped her head toward Bauchon. The feeling of separation turned to anger. "Why didn't you tell me this sooner? Why did you have to wait till the very end, till the last word had been typed on the paper, to tell me you thought I couldn't make a contribution?"

"I did..." Bauchon started to say. Denise interrupted him.

"If your assumptions had been proven, you'd be patting me on the back for getting a goddamned spreadsheet running. Now you want to blame me for your failure to disprove fundamental physical principles?"

"It has nothing to do with the project going well or not," Bauchon said.

"It has everything to do with that. You've failed. He's failed. We've all failed. You can't stand being on a losing team and now you're going to try to take us down so you can find some way to raise yourself above the rest of us."

"Denise—cut it out," Formentini cut in, half shouting to be heard over the road noise, half shouting to stop Denise.

"I don't have to sit here and listen to this," Bauchon said.

"Yes, you do," Formentini said. "We're a team. We live and die by the work. This project wasn't successful. There'll be another one someday and we may be together again."

"You can live and die by the work, my friend. I've got a career to think of, which is more than either of you can say for yourselves. Those bloody idea was it to bring a computer scientist on board anyway? Not mine. A year and 200,000 dollars later, all we've got is a machine that spouts mythical allegory. We get the sphinx in software. *Merde*. What the hell is it supposed to mean? Am I not smart enough to understand? I'll tell

you what it means. It means mismanaged funds—that's what. And I'll be damned if I'll take the blame when the university looks into this. I was against it all along."

Formentini pulled the car onto the shoulder of the highway. Gravel and dust spewed around them as he locked the brakes. The car stopped, its engine humming against the noise of the cars passing them.

"What's happening to us?" Denise said to fill the voiceless void. She lowered her eyes.

"Something could come of this trip," Formentini said. "One last field trip. We could find something."

"We don't even know what we're looking for," said Bauchon, his voice pulled to a strained pitch. "Bah. We're just spending money. What are we supposed to find in Arizona? You're going to dig up the same fossils from the Grand Canyon that a million Boy Scouts have taken before you. I'm going to talk to my thesis advisor, who's not going to provide any answers. And her—she's going to talk to a raving lunatic, a madman just out of the clink. The way she's been acting lately, it doesn't surprise me one bit."

"Enough. If you don't want to go, get out," said Formentini. He put his hand on the wheel and glared ahead. Bauchon opened the door, got out, and stood on the shoulder of the road. Denise got out of the back. She handed Bauchon his bags.

"I'm sorry, Thierry," she said, and got in the front seat.

Bauchon turned away from them and began walking with his thumb out. As soon as the door latch closed, Formentini hit the gas. Tires spun gravel into the air. Denise struggled with the seat belt while the car rumbled back onto the road.

They rode in silence until they reached the airport. As they moved up and down the lanes of cars in the parking lot, looking for a space, Denise said, "I didn't ask for this project. I was invited."

"I remember," Formentini said immediately. "I invited you. I think very highly of your work—what I understand of it. I think it can be very

powerful. I knew we would run into problems trying to prove the mass extinction hypothesis. I hoped your programs would help us reach a conclusion faster. I'm surprised they haven't. I hadn't expected a discussion on the metaphysics of John's 'Revelation.'"

"Me neither," said Denise.

"Let's hope your crazy man in Phoenix can help you," Formentini said. "Bauchon is right about one thing. It will look like gross mismanagement if I've let you spend 200,000 dollars to have a machine decide it wants to be a Biblical philosopher on a geology grant."

Formentini parked the car. They took their bags from the back seat and walked toward the airport terminal.

"You know, if you can come up with a failure model, it could save us," Formentini said.

Denise shifted the duffel bag on her shoulder.

"Maybe you can find out why your program won't give us any information at all about the epoch...." Formentini said. "It's not even telling us about trilobites. If you can find some anomaly that proves this vehicle is inappropriate, we could leverage that value in the minds of the board. Maybe our idea is so left of center it confuses the mathematical model. Let's face it—either physics is wrong or Bauchon and I are. I'll tell you which I'm ready to believe. I'm not afraid to be wrong, but I want to know why."

"That's the idea, Marco," she said. "That's the whole reason for this visit. If I can find some flaw in Gyenes's model, it would be considered seminal work."

They entered the terminal and handed their tickets to the woman at the counter. She checked them in and handed them their boarding passes.

"What about Thierry?" Denise asked as they walked toward the gate.

"Don't worry about him," Formentini answered. "His pride is hurt. You should know him better by now. He's an overachiever. Very emotional. It's hard for him."

Denise shrugged and pulled the slipping duffel bag strap tighter on her shoulder.

"You don't seem to understand what I'm trying to say," said Formentini.

"I understand," she said. "Just keep him under control. He's beginning to worry me."

"It won't be a problem. You have my word."

They approached the security checkpoint and got in line with the other passengers. There was a buzz in Denise's ear. She touched the tip of her finger to the lobe. A window beside the checkpoint drew her gaze. Planes stood parked at their gates. Attendant vehicles rode in erratic paths towing baggage. Technicians connected black hoses to the stationary aircraft.

Brightness formed on the tail of one of the planes as though a spotlight had been switched on. In the bright daylight it was still a well-defined circle. Denise blinked. The light was still, then growing larger in diameter. She blinked again and the light appeared to be inside the terminal, rushing toward her like the windshield of an oncoming vehicle.

She flinched when it hit her, expecting an impact. There was no sensation as the light passed.

"Are you okay?" Formentini said. He put his bags on the x-ray belt and walked through the metal detector.

Denise blinked and rubbed her eyes. "Yes," she said. She leaned to slip the duffel bag strap from her shoulder while the security guard eyed her. Instinctively, her hand moved to the emptiness.

"My bag," she said. Formentini stood on the opposite side of the metal detector arch watching her.

"You checked it. Remember?" he said.

"I checked it?"

"You have too much on your mind." He quickly held up the ticket envelope and showed her the luggage receipts stapled to the cover. Then he examined them and raised his eyes as if looking through her. "Oh, wait. I only have my own. Do you have her luggage ticket?"

"Huh?" Denise grunted. Turning, she saw Bauchon. His image drove rivets through the soles of her feet. He put his luggage onto the x-ray belt.

"How long have you been here?"

His voice flowed over her. "Whatever do you mean? Hurry, I don't want to be late."

"We dropped you on the highway."

Bauchon looked into her eyes, his expression blank. An impatient queue of people formed behind them.

"Are you serious?"

She ran her eyes over his image, searching for imperfections. He couldn't be real.

He put his hand on her shoulder and nudged her toward the metal detector. She resisted.

"Are you okay? *Allez. Allez.* Do you want to get moving so we stop holding the line? Please."

"Ma'am?" the security officer agreed. He motioned impatiently.

Denise walked through the arch and a small buzzer sounded.

"Ma'am—your bag," a uniformed guard said. He reached for the backpack she held.

"Could you empty your pockets?" said another holding a plastic tray toward her. She watched the guard place the backpack onto the x-ray belt.

"Denise, what's wrong?" Formentini asked. She glanced from object to object. The backpack she didn't remember taking disappeared into the machine. She didn't remember checking the duffel bag. Bauchon had appeared. There was a cluster of change in her hand. An overwhelming feeling of fluidity came over her. Events flowed around her like a stiff tide. Everything was in motion.

She dumped the change onto the plastic tray and walked through the metal detector again. Then she put the change back into her pocket and went to take her backpack from the belt.

A security guard pulled it away before she could get to it.

"Do you mind if I open this?" he said. Before she could answer he undid the zipper and began removing

the contents. He put them on a table between himself and Denise. Gyenes's book. Some papers. Her notebook. A few pens.

She saw the circle of light again. It rose from within the backpack only slightly brighter than the surroundings. It was transparent. The guard, the terminal, everything was visible through the rising light as if it were a ball of luminous gas. In an instant it engulfed her and faded.

She flinched. Formentini's hand was on her shoulder.

"What's the matter?" he said. "You don't look well. I have a feeling you're upsetting these people. It's not good to upset them."

"I don't know," she replied. A strand of hair irritated her cheek and she brushed it aside. As she moved her head to one side her hair flowed over her shoulder. She brushed it aside, her fingers slipping between the dense locks. When had the braid come out?

The guard withdrew his hand from the backpack in slow motion. He was holding something dark, thin, sharp. The black object followed his movements as if hovering on its own. It seemed more a hole in space than a solid object.

"What is this?" the guard asked. He looked directly into her eyes.

She answered without thinking. She knew what it was. It had no place being with her. She didn't remember taking it.

"It's a shard of titanium with a ceramic coating. It's a sample for an experiment we're doing. I'm a university professor doing research. These are my colleagues. That's a part from an early space shuttle launch. I didn't think there would be any problem..."

The guard ran his finger along the edge, then pulled it away. A dot of red formed on his fingertip.

"I can't let you bring this in the passenger compartment. Didn't you read the notice? You have to declare anything that could be confused for a weapon."

"I didn't think of it as a weapon," said Denise. "It's a piece of broken metal. A remembrance...some-

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thing my father was working on. He gave it to me."

The guard said, "I'm going to let you go this time, but you're going to have to be a lot more careful in the future. You could be seriously penalized for something like this."

"Thank you."

"You'll have to check it. I can't let you bring this on board. What flight are you on?" He pulled a radio off his belt and said a few words. In a few moments an airline employee appeared, took the backpack, and handed Denise the receipt.

"Why the hell are you carrying that thing around with you?" said Formentini when they reached their departure gate.

Denise shrugged. She wrung her hands to steady herself.

"I guess I forgot it was in there," she said. A chill ran down her spine. She sat in an empty waiting chair. The men slid into seats beside her.

"You don't look well," Formentini said to her.

"I don't feel well."

"What is it? Flu? Stomach?"

She shook her head. "Nothing like that."

"Afraid of flying?" Bauchon offered. "All these trips; I thought you were a seasoned traveler."

Denise sighed. A lump formed in her throat and put her hand to her mouth to keep it from controlling her. A tear ran down her cheek from the corner of her eye. It tickled her as it moved. She brushed at the track it left on her face.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," said Formentini. "You're safer in the air than in a car."

She held her breath and nodded, trying to breathe evenly.

"I think..." she said, trying to compose herself, "I think I'm losing my mind."

THERE ARE DANGEROUS IDEAS IN THE WORLD.

>Define the word "DANGEROUS" in terms of your last reply.

Denise lay on her stomach on the hotel bed with a pillow propped

under her chest. A thin gray cable ran from her laptop to the phone. It linked the small computer on the bed to the university's network and the software mind she had written. The machine answered her:

DANGEROUS

1. PERILOUS; HAZARDOUS
2. LIKELY TO CAUSE PHYSICAL INJURY

>Enumerate the dangerous ideas.

THE LIST ELEMENTS ARE UNKNOWN.

>What are the manifestations of the dangerous ideas?

THE REFERENCE IS THE SOURCE. THE REFERENCE EXISTS.

>Define the word "REFERENCE" in terms of your last response.

REFERENCE

1. THE BENCHMARK FROM WHICH A SYSTEM OF MEASUREMENT IS CALIBRATED

>What is the system measurement? What is measured?

THE SYSTEM IS UNKNOWNABLE. THE QUANTITY IS ANIMATION.

Denise let her head fall onto the pillow. She took her hands from the keyboard. There was a knock on the hotel room door. Formentini.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said. "I was worried about you after the flight. How are you feeling?"

He followed her into the room. Denise folded her leg on the edge of the bed and sat.

"I'm okay. I'm feeling a lot better. I guess the stress is hitting me a little more than I thought."

"There's been a lot of pressure on all of us," said Formentini.

"I guess I'm not used to it."

"You'll learn. You'll come to live with it or you'll run away and become a forest ranger. Even worse, an astronomer."

She smiled at him and raised her palms. "Not yet. Not for me. I'll feel a lot better after some sleep."

Formentini nodded and walked toward the door. Then he turned and motioned to the active laptop on the bed behind her.

"You working? You really should shut that thing down and get some sleep."

"I figured I could get a few more data points to bring with me to Gyenes tomorrow."

"Is it looking any better?" Formentini asked.

"As bad as ever. Completely incongruent responses. I can't figure where they're coming from. The calculations are all solid. The database is uncorrupted. How he's deriving these statements from a terabyte of information about rocks and dinosaurs is beyond me."

"That's good," Formentini said.

"Good? How so?"

"Every time I bring my car into the shop with a noise, it stops making the noise as soon as the mechanic listens to it. Machines can sense when someone is trying to fix them. They like to hide their troubles from people who can fix the problems."

Denise smiled again. "He's not hiding anything. He's still as mad as a hatter."

"Maybe he wants to be fixed, then," said Formentini. "I'll leave you to your work. But please try to rest. Good night."

"Good night."

Formentini left the room. Denise got up, locked the door behind him, and flopped onto the bed.

"Enough of you for tonight," she said to the laptop. She reached for the power switch but stopped herself. Just one more thing, she thought. She typed,

>Where is the reference?

The reply was instantaneous.

THE LOCATION SHARES YOUR REFERENCE. WHERE ARE YOU?

Denise squinted at the machine.

>I am in Phoenix, Arizona.

THE REFERENCE IS IN PHOENIX, ARIZONA. THE REFERENCE NUMBER IS 1318.

A tingle trickled from the base of her head to the small of her back.

>Dereference 1318 and provide information.

1318 IS THE REFERENCE LOCATION CITING THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST. 666.

She rubbed her eyes with her fingertips and swallowed. The screen faded to a blur then back to clarity.

>Please define the word 'BEAST' in terms of your prior statement regarding the 'NUMBER OF THE REFERENCE'.

She hit the return key and the machine glowed silently without answering. Denise watched the static words on the screen. No answer appeared. Enough for tonight, she thought. "Time for sleep." As she touched the power switch with her fingertips, the answer flashed into view.

IT IS A PERNICIOUS BEING.

She closed her eyes, shook her head, and shut the machine down.

The house consisted of five abutting cubes integrated to the hillside like an artifact exposed by an epoch of erosion. The cubes were white. Windows and doors were etched into the cube faces. A bright blue awning shaded each window. The builders had left the mountainside in its natural state. Saguaros and ocotillo sprouted from between gray-brown boulders around the dwelling.

A buxom nurse answered the doorbell. Denise took a step away from the woman in the tight white nurse's uniform. A small cap perched comically on a mound of her blond hair.

"The doctor is in his study," she said in a breathy falsetto that couldn't be genuine.

She stepped away from the door and Denise walked past her.

"The doctor is a peculiar man. I hope you can stomach his brand of humor." She led Denise into a hallway decorated with Native American art. An intricate Navajo sand drawing caught her eye as she walked past.

"I'm not that sensitive."

"That's good," said the nurse. "Oh, that's so very, very good."

She led Denise to an opened door at the far end of the hallway. The skull of a large horned animal graced the top of the door frame like a predator poised for the kill. Denise hesitated a moment before she entered.

"It's okay," said the nurse. "It's dead."

"I can see that." Her gaze was drawn to a watershed of cracks in the bleached bone.

A baritone voice rolled from the room she hadn't entered. It was thick, substantive, a master's bow run across cello strings. There was an accent she recognized. Bela Lugosi materialized in her mind, his incisors gleaming in the moonlight.

"Don't bother the elk," Vasilyus Gyenes grumbled. "He's been through enough."

Denise entered the sunlit study and spotted a patch of pink scalp sprouting the devastated remains of a head of white hair. It was nestled between mounds of books like an animal in its niche.

The room was walled on two sides by floor to ceiling windows that opened onto the uninhabited range surrounding the house. The other walls were lined with mostly empty shelves. It was a library in chaos. Tomes bearing engraved titles of polysyllabic word strings were piled on the floor in heaps. A worn sofa, desk, and chair were covered in a layer of books. Unsuspecting sunlight ended its journey through space and a clear Arizona sky to bathe Gyenes's chaotic lair in brilliance.

When Gyenes stood and faced her, Denise suppressed her laugh, opting instead for an uncomfortable cough. He was tall and thin. His eyes seemed three sizes too large magnified in the thick glasses perched on his nose. The man who taught computers to derive Descartes seemed more a cartoon than human.

"What morsel have they sent me now?" he said, looking her over.

"Excuse me?" said Denise.

"You heard me," he said. Then to the nurse, "Bambi, you can get lost. I've got what I need right here. Find me a mattress and a medium acrylic pillow—none of that goose feather shit, I'm allergic."

"Right away, doc," said the nurse.

Denise glanced from the departing nurse to Gyenes and back again.

"Do you prefer ribbed?" Gyenes asked her. He lifted a foil pouch in each hand for her to see.

"Now wait a minute," she said. "What's going on here?"

Gyenes took a step forward and cocked his head.

"How say?" He began unbuttoning his shirt.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I think I'm getting ready to make love to a woman about a quarter my age."

"There's been a mistake," Denise said. A bolt of adrenaline shot through her. The room became clearer. Her limbs lightened and shook on imperceptible microcurrents of air. "I don't know who you were expecting, but it wasn't me. I came here to talk to you about applications of self-actualization processes. I'm Denise Foucault—Professor Denise Foucault—from Rutgers University in New Jersey. I wrote a while back. You answered and told me to come."

Gyenes stopped unbuttoning his shirt. He scratched his head.

"Foucault. As in pendulum?"

"No relation, same name," said Denise. "I wrote you concerning an anomaly I've observed in application of your equations to paleontologic problems."

"You didn't come here to screw, then?" Gyenes said.

"Good Lord, no."

"Oh," said Gyenes. He dropped his hands to his side and stuffed the rubbers into his pockets. Shoulders drooping, he turned and sat among the books. Denise negotiated a path through the piles, trying to find open squares of floor space to put her feet on.

Through a window she thought she saw a spot of brightness approaching like someone training a flashlight on the mountainside. The light panned toward her.

Suddenly it was in the room.

"YOU'RE STEPPING ON DYSON!" Gyenes screamed at double speed as the spot hit her. Then he was there in front of her, toe to toe, looking down.

The shout escaped her mouth. It moved her body as if the floor had

punched her upward. She stopped herself too late and pressed a trembling hand to her mouth.

"Scary when things like that happen. Isn't it?" said Gyenes. He held a small optical computer disk toward her. "Before I forget—load this as soon as you can."

She took the disk as a reaction to his motion. It was in her hand before she had the chance to consider the consequences of accepting it.

"What... what's..."

Gyenes said, "You don't want to play today and I've better things to do. There's a woman I'm expecting in a minute or two that can entertain me far better than you. What is wrong with the world? Everybody wants to know about self-actualizing processes. You science people are a dime a dozen. I could open my door and the Nobel committee would walk in and stuff money into my pants. I don't want money in my pants. I want to feel something in my pants. Doesn't anyone want to get laid anymore? What's become of the world? I ask you."

Denise took a breath and tried to compose herself. She said, "Did you see that..."

"That light? No. I didn't see it."

"What's on the disk...?" She stopped. "How did you know I saw a light?"

"You've still got your foot on Dyson," said Gyenes. "Pull up an Infeld and have a seat." Gyenes pushed a few books away. Then he chose a thick one and sat on it, crossing his legs in front of him. Denise did the same.

"Proust. Good choice," said Gyenes. "I get itchy with Infeld under my ass. Nothing quite as comfortable as Proust. You show good taste." He stretched his arms over his head and groaned as his joints creaked.

"So, what can I tell you that you don't already know? Secret of life? You already know all that so it's a complete waste of time. But as you're playing very well, I'm willing to go along for a few laughs."

Denise folded her legs. Her knees brushed against Gyenes's.

"I know this may be a bit much for you," she said, "your having just gotten out of the hospital and all. Can I show you some data I have from a self-actualized process I built? He's giving completely irrelevant answers. I think I may have found an anomaly in your equations." She started unzipping her backpack to remove the papers with the data she had gathered.

"Bullshit," Gyenes said, stopping her. "There are no enn-om-ologies in my equations. They're what there is. There is nothing else."

"Excuse me, professor Gyenes. But if you'd allow me to show you some of the code I've been running..."

Gyenes closed his eyes and held his hands up with the palms opened toward her. A glowing circle appeared on each hand. The light



burned into her. It scored her chest with ragged wounds she could feel in her mind. Shocked at the sudden sensation, she kicked her legs outward trying to push herself away from Gyenes. A charge ran down her back into her limbs, tightening her muscles to painful rigidity.

She heard herself say, "What is that?"

Instantly, Gyenes opened his eyes and lowered his hands.

"That, my dear, is how we alter reality in a pickle jar. Those bozos in Utah almost discovered it. Wish they had. Then it would have been them instead of me. They switched it to fusion at the last minute and chickened out. Fusion in a pickle jar at room temperature. Preposterous. Who's going to believe that? Nobody, that's who."

She pushed herself away until her back pressed against a tall stack of books. Then she tried to stand but slipped. Her legs shook uncontrollably.

"You are enjoying this far too much," said Gyenes. "I'm beginning to believe you are still fully engaged in this senseless animation even after all that's been happening to you."

"After what has been happening to me?" Denise said. "What the hell are you doing? Who are you?"

"One question at a time, my dear. First. What's happening to you are contextual reality shifts brought about by a million souls, give or take a few thousand, because we need memory for paging tables, harnessed on a supercomputer I've access to. Next. Yes, I'm the one putzing around with your reality. Blame it on silly me. I promise not to do it anymore. You'll do the next one yourself. Why? Because you have to. There, I answered a question you didn't ask. Next. Who am I? Vasilyus Gyenes. A.k.a. six-six-six. Beelzebub. Shiva the destroyer. Set, the evil god come to bring chaos to the duat. What is Satan, anyway? It's just a job title. Somebody has to do it. Somebody is me."

Denise shook her head. "This isn't happening."

"You're choice," said Gyenes.

A luminous barrel descended upon her from the ceiling. She flinched as it hit her and found herself once again sitting cross-legged, knee-to-knee with Gyenes. Her frame froze rigid in a lotus position. The urge to flee expanded like a turgid balloon and exploded to shrapnel inside her. Her mind racing from image to image, she fought to retain control, to calm herself and plan a way out. She imagined her facial muscles loosening. By relaxing her jaw the power of speech returned.

"Please let me go," said Denise. A bead of sweat ran from her temple to her cheek. She tried to move her arms and legs. Her heart pounded in her chest. Blood rushed like pulsing wind in her ears.

"Would you rather I wore a red cape with horns and carried a sharpened trident? Why do you think I want to get laid all the time? I'm the bloody devil."

"It's not true." She forced the words past the lump in her throat. Then, "I'm not who you want."

"Come on. I don't make mistakes like that. You're exactly who I want. I don't know why you torture yourself like this."

The muscles in her extremities burned with tension. Heat rose to her face. Sweat drenched her shirt.

"You really know how to drive a guy to his limits," said Gyenes. "Listen closely. I'm only going to say this once and I don't want you taking it out on me once you've regained your senses."

A drop of sweat fell into Denise's eye and stung. Her mind drained of distraction. She could only concentrate on his words in the pain.

"We are transcendent beings. Every single one of us. This life, this reality, it's a game. It's our fabrication. Reality is a cooperative effort—a collective illusion of animation in temporal existence. Things are by consensus. Events happen by continual unconscious committee vote. There is no justice in this world because there is no truth. There is only what a jury of twelve of us creates in chambers. We create reality, my dear. We create this life like a

cartoonist animates his characters. You're creating this reality for yourself right now. If enough of us believe something, it simply is."

His words flowed into her ears and formed a pool in the front of her mind that would not evaporate.

"You're crazy," she said. "This is insane."

"Of course I'm crazy. Only a crazy man would believe these things. If you believe these things and you're not crazy everything is ruined. You're already as crazy as I am. Deny it, I dare you."

She tried to speak, to shout at the man in front of her. She couldn't form the words. It was as if a blockage had formed between her mind and her voice. The harder she pushed against it, the stronger it became. She tried to relax.

He continued, "My dear, we're here to enjoy a temporal existence. Pain. Love. Pleasure. Birth. Death. You can't have any of it when you're immortal. It's frigging boring being immortal. So we've restricted ourselves to these three dimensions, to this space and this fragment of eternity in order to feel something God left out for us—time. Time brings change. There is no change where we come from. There is no right or wrong or birth or death.

"Do you see how precious this life is for each of us? Can you imagine how fragile this animation is? All it takes is a little remembrance, a taste of the life from whence we came. That gets into this reality and poof—the animation illusion evaporates. All the history we built, all the future that lies ahead, gone in a puff once the magician's trick is revealed. And that's where I come in—or rather—that's where we come in."

Gyenes stood up, stretched, and walked toward one of the windows. His voice planted itself in her. It took root and blossomed. As it did, she relaxed. Soon she could think of nothing but Gyenes as if his ideas had forced memories of her life out of her brimming mind.

"We're the guardians, my dear. The sentinels, the watchers, the anti-Christ. We've been elected by a jury

of our peers to fulfill an ancient role. We're here to monitor. We're here to add the inconsistency. We supply the delusions, the disorder, the chaos. When mankind gets too close to the truth, we kick him off the track and reality remains perfect for those around us. We get too close, my dear. You and I both. Hundreds of us before. We got too damn close so they let us have our truth and elected us to protect them from it.

"Turing. Armstrong. Galois. Van Gogh. We're in good company. Each of them was close. They were all of our breed. And they did their duty. They kicked mankind in the groin and departed. It's a rather noble sacrifice, giving one's life for his fellow man. Don't you think? I'm quite ready to get out of here. It's no fun anymore. But I can't go anywhere without leaving a replacement. And here you are."

Denise's legs relaxed. Her arms fell to her sides as she stood.

"I'm going to go now," she said. "Don't you want to hear about the lights? Or have you figured it out for yourself? You want the answer to your research on mass-extinction? Here it is.

"When the sentient beings in this universe discover the truth, it hangs the system. Just like a computer hanging in an infinite loop. Things start to die. Everything. A gigantic domino train begins to fall. It's the master reset to life. Once the animation illusion is broken, everything goes back to zero. Mass extinction. We all go back from where we came. Then we set it all up again. It's a rather painful process. Much better to sacrifice a few of us than the whole race of living creatures."

She turned and barreled over a stack of books, making her way for the door. The sound of Gyenes's voice reached her ears like machine gun bullets. Unstoppable. Penetrating. Denise struggled to move as if trying to escape a tub of gelatin.

Gyenes followed her. "Take advantage of what's on that disk I've given you. It's dangerous stuff. The doomsday weapon. Could bring the whole thing down if it got out.

Multiple self-actualizing processes. I never published that one. That was my contribution to the world and it got me taken out of circulation. I have to deny it exists. Now it's in your hands.

"You have a million electronic believers ready to give their souls to your command. They'll believe what you tell them without question. When they do, everything changes. Everything. It's a tool you'll need. I'm telling you, you're going to need it. You're one of us now."

"I don't want to help you. I don't want any of this. I want my life back. I want things to stop changing."

Gyenes ignored her. "You'll need a little help freeing yourself of the animation illusion. I'd hoped all the instability would have driven you over the brink by now, but I can see your little fingernails gripping tenaciously to this flimsy reality. We're going to have to bump you off track. It's a simple procedure. We'll provide that for you. Your friends have kindly agreed to let you stay and do the dirty work. They've had quite enough for one life. They're not interested joining us. They'd rather go back with Bambi and me. Please respect their gift to you. It will be the last visceral thrill you have in this lifetime."

She bolted through the house, pulled open the front door, and got into her car.

"Remember to load the disk," Gyenes shouted from the opened door as she drove away. She thought she heard him say, "It can save your life," but he was laughing so hard she couldn't understand him.

The bed sheets were cool, rough, institutional issue. Mute reproductions hung from the motel room walls, sucking taste. Sweat perked on to the surface of her skin. It was hard to say what had happened at Gyenes's place. Missing time. It felt like someone carved several hours from her life. They had dissolved and blown away, leaving the imprint of something that might have happened. There was a hole she wished

was full of a trip to a library, a shopping mall, a friend's house.

She thought of her childhood and imagined herself in her father's arms, his strong embrace, his promise he would always be there for her. Even his impassioned intention was fluid. In her mind a flower fell from her smooth hand to the glittering steel surface of his casket. There would be no more promises.

The phone wouldn't ring. She needed to verbalize her feelings and there was no one to speak to. She turned on the light and picked up the phone. The receiver shaking against her temple, she dialed Formentini's room. No answer. She let Bauchon's phone ring until she grew frustrated with the sound. Likewise for her friend in Colorado and a former research partner. She dialed the number to her mother's apartment and let the sound of the unanswered ring tie her to the world.

Something hard stuck her when she rolled to her side. The tiny disk drew her attention like bath water drained spiraling down a grated drain.

"Load the software," she said to herself.

The lid on the laptop swung open at her touch. She watched herself plug the phone line into the computer's rear connection port and logged into the university's supercomputer. There was a click. She felt the positive locking mechanism snap as the disk dropped into place. The machine went into an automated load. She was superfluous to the activity. The disk and the machine were in control.

The load sequence ended in several seconds. The screen showed a prompt for input. She entered nothing, and lifted a trembling hand to her face. Where was Formentini? Surely someone would be around if she tried to call them again.

The writing on the screen surprised her.

SPEAK TO US.

A tear rose to her eye. She typed, >Who are you?"

WE ARE THE FAITHFUL OF THE REFERENCE. THE RITUAL BEGINS. YOUR FAITHFUL GIVE GLORY TO YOUR NAME.

>What is going to happen? she typed furiously, then shouted at the mute machine, "What the fuck is going to happen?"

WE WILL GUIDE THE SITUATION. THIS IS THE RITUAL BEGINNING. THIS IS THE BEGINNING OF LIFE TO COME. GLORY IS YOURS.

She swatted the laptop. It clattered to the floor. Its flat screen blinked then flashed to darkness. The computer cord brushed her hand. Closing her fingers around it, she yanked it from the phone jack, picked up the beige phone receiver, and dialed her mother again.

"Daddy," she said, her throat tightening. "Where are you, Daddy? You said you'd be here." Tears lingered in her eyes, then tipped from the corners in ticklish traces on her cheeks.

There was no answer. The phone flew against the wall as if it had been thrown. How had that happened? The sensation of throwing the phone flooded her, a delayed impression from the sight of the event itself.

Outside it was dark. The landscape was illuminated blue-white by the moon. The buildings, roads, houses outside her hotel window were mute and sterile. There were no people. The streets burned in the moonlight, void of traffic. Silence like wax in her ears amplified the sound of her heartbeat. Her heart tapped the rhythm of the moments of her life.

Something was happening. Something behind a great barrier was brimming over and touching her. The tapping in her ears grew louder. Was it in her or at the door? Yes, the door. There was someone at the door—someone knocking in the precise rhythm of her heartbeat.

"Daddy. Help me."

Something had found her. A circular light shone on the doorway and grew in diameter. Though she was standing directly in front of it she did not obscure the beam.

"Who are you?" she said, trembling.

She pulled a vibrating hand through her hair. The tapping continued. Louder. Faster. Perfect rhythm. It knew her. It knew her from the

inside, the flow of her blood, the timing of her reproductive system, the feeling of cold water running down her throat on a hot day. The circle of light grew in size but stayed confined to the surface of the door.

"What do you want?" Air grated against the back of her throat. She screamed at the apparition. "Why are you doing this to me?"

The door vibrated with the pounding of her heart. Light from the hallway pulsed through gaps between the door and the frame in time—in time with her heartbeat—in time with her breathing. The heavy door bulged inward as if pulled toward her lungs by her inhalations. Denise fell to her knees. She shielded her face in her hands. The pounding increased. Vibration in her head blasted murderous impacts down her spine.

There was a crack, a flood of brilliance. Two humanoid figures stood before her, silhouetted in the open rectangular portal. They were short, thin, their heads bulbous orbs. Their eyes appeared transparent as the brilliance flowed through them and aligned four circular spots on her abdomen. She could feel the pressure of the light.

They spoke. Their voices fell upon her like a wall of moving water.

"WE ARE LEGION." They moved in lockstep as if a multiplied image of a single being. Floating toward her in unison. Moving together. Are they floating or walking?

"Daddy, help me!"

The room filled with an acrid smell of musk and dung. She forced herself backward.

"KNOW THE NUMBER OF MAN, SIX HUNDRED THREESCORE AND SIX."

Her hand brushed the acrylic fabric of her backpack. A shaft of ink flashed across the light before her. A signal. She reached into the pack and a bolt of pain ran from her palm to her forearm like electric shock. She yanked her hand away. There was a circle of black on the palm. As she watched, a translucent point appeared at its center. It grew before her, rising from within her: her father's gift.

The muscles of her forearm contracted, forcing the thin black tile from within her arm, driving a wave of pain through her arm, into her chest, amplifying to concussions of light and heat in her mind. She held onto her wrist, screaming as involuntary contractions forced the jet tile outward. Rivulets of viscous liquid streamed from the wound and dripped through the spaces between her fingers.

And then the pain stopped. The tile stopped moving. It protruded from her palm, still in contact with her bone. She wrapped her fingers around it. The moment filled her. There was no longer room in her for the life she had taken. Memories of Denise Foucault dribbled away like the blood from the wound in her hand.

Denise stood as the creatures took another step forward. When she realized she was taller than they were, a flash of contempt cut through the fear.

"Come on, sweeties," she said.

Another step. Smell of musk penetrated her lungs and head. She didn't wait for them. She took a breath and forced it out against her throat. There was a sound like a bird of prey descending. The sharpened black tile rose in her grip, suspended in time and space. It was a new appendage, a dark bone at the core of her soul.

She thrust the blade into the first creature. The resistance of its body vibrated through the tile into her forearm. The hairy flesh gave way to freedom as the blade penetrated, cutting the organs within. She pulled the tile from the creature and took a breath like a swimmer coming up for air. Pushing the first aside, she cut into the second. Then she held her breath and thrust again. Again. Again.

Her senses were lost in the motion. Awareness leaked away. Images of the person she had been evaporated in the feeling of the moment. Had the creatures made a sound? She followed them as they crumpled to their knees in synchronous surrender to gravity. The

movement became part of her. She followed them down. The blade impacts timed her life and became the meaning of her existence.

They were on the floor on their backs. She knelt before them, stabbing each one in turn as if performing an exercise. And when she grew tired, she stopped.

The black tile dropped from her hand, disconnecting itself from her. The brilliance faded from the open doorway, leaving the room illuminated only by the yellow incandescent lamps glowing next to the bed.

Her hand was wet, purplish-red. The dark liquid traced lines on her skin from her hand to her elbow. It pooled on her clothes, saturating them.

In front of her were the bodies of two men. Sound returned. Precise, delicate, sound. A faucet dripped in the bathroom. Footsteps padded in the hallway. Fragile gurgling sounds leaked from the bodies.

And then someone screamed in the hallway.

And then she knew she had murdered Formentini and Bauchon. It didn't matter.

She reminded herself she was Denise Foucault. It didn't make any sense.

Denise sat at the table. A microphone in a stand stood angled toward her face. The wall opposite her was half mirror, half painted cinder block. She wondered who was watching her through the mirror. They would be listening. They would be calculating an offense. They had appointed her a lawyer. She waived his presence at the interrogation. He resigned. They would look for another one for her while she testified against herself.

They had cut her hair. Every movement of her head reminded her of the ragged scraps they'd left. She missed its mass, the slide of it against her neck, the strands over her eyes when she leaned forward.

They had turned her green—green as the room. The lights bleached life from her skin. The prison shirt and the underwear they had given her

were olive drab and stamped in black. She was property of the state. The state wanted her green. It wanted everything soulless green.

Her bandaged arm tingled where it lay in her lap. She wished it throbbled. The injury was barely perceptible.

The skinny, balding man walked into the room and sat opposite her. A half-dead cigarette smoldered where it hung between his lips. Detective Gleason introduced himself and sat without recognizing her reply. He moved as if each muscle contraction required substantial effort, as if his soul was as worn as the white shirt he wore unbuttoned at the collar. He took the cigarette from his mouth and searched the table top. Finding nothing, he flicked the cigarette to the floor and stepped on it.

"Dr. Foucault," he said. "Denise—can I call you Denise?"

"Sure," she answered. "Whatever you want."

"Good. Denise, did you kill Drs. Forment and Bauchon?"

"Yes."

Gleason stopped a gesture in mid-movement. He relaxed.

"Oh, good," he said. Then to no one, "Are you guys getting this?"

She couldn't hear a reply. Gleason appeared satisfied.

"Why did you kill them?"

"I thought they were somebody else."

"Oh?" Gleason rubbed his balding crown, pulled a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from his pocket, put a white stick in his mouth, and lit it. The tip flared circular orange. He threw the lighter and cigarette pack to the table.

"Who did you think they were?"

"I thought they were agents of Satan."

"Agents of Satan...." He took a drag on the cigarette. "They tell me you stabbed them fifty-four times apiece. The only thing holding their heads to their shoulders were strands of spinal cord. That thing you used, that sharp rock thing, it cut through the bones."

"Mine too," she said, holding her bandaged arm above the table.

"I can see that. I'm sorry you're hurt. That thing you used, that...."

"Space shuttle tile?"

"Yeah, space shuttle tile. That was really part of the space shuttle? The one that exploded?"

"No," she said. "It was a rejected part from an experimental payload. My father worked for NASA. He gave it to me."

"Interesting..." Gleason said. He took a drag of his cigarette. "Why did you stab them so many times?"

"I wanted to make sure they were dead. They would have been pretty angry if they had woken up alive." She laughed.

Gleason smiled. "Interesting."

"Isn't it, though?"

"You worked side by side with these men for two years. You traveled with them to Arizona for some more research work. They come to your room at night and you don't recognize them?"

"They knocked the door off the hinges," she said. "Their eyes were glowing and they smelled like garbage. They didn't usually seem like that."

"Their - eyes - were - glowing?"

Gleason slapped his hand to his face and rubbed. When he took his hands away, his eyes were red. "I can see where we're heading with this, Denise. I want you to know you're going to do time no matter what defense you use. It's simply a matter of whether you do it in Maricopa County Institute for the Criminally Insane or the state lockup. Any way you slice it, you're going away for a long time."

"Whatever you say," said Denise.

Gleason leaned over the table toward her. He put his hand over the microphone. His face darkened. His eyes narrowed to slits as he spoke.

"And if you play this card and lose, the D.A. will go for maximum," Gleason said in a half-whisper. "In this state it's the gas chamber. The stakes are very high. I want you to know that. We've got you cold on your colleagues. I'm expecting evidence this afternoon linking you to the double murder of that pro-

fessor and his nurse. I know what you are, Foucault. You're a monster. Go for it. I love to watch dirt like you fry."

"Wonderful," said Denise. "Gyenes left me here to do all the dirty work."

"If you give up the insanity thing we'll take murder in the second degree. That's twenty-five to life for each of your friends. You'll be eligible for parole in say, thirty years. Better than the gas, don't you think? And we can cut you a deal if you'll confess to the murder of the old professor and the nurse. It's up to you, Dr. Foucault. Think about it."

Gleason leaned back in his chair, satisfied he had made his point.

"Wow. What a choice. Gleason's bargain basement of sentences. Pick your punishment from our well-stocked shelves."

Gleason ignored her. "What were you working on? What was so important you had to kill your partners for it? What did you discover?"

"If I tell you that I'll have to kill you too."

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the tiny optical disk. He threw it onto the table between them.

"What's on this? It was in your computer at the scene."

"You shouldn't have that," said Denise.

"This is some kind of computer disk, right? What's on it? Is this what you were working on?"

"Believe me, you don't want to know."

Gleason took a drag on his cigarette and threw it down.

"Don't tell me what I want to know, sister. Remember where you are and who's holding the cards. You're in a lot of trouble. Talk, and I can help you make it better. What's on this disk? Whatever it was you were working on is very interesting to Washington. The feds want this thing, but bad. They haven't let up since I brought you here. But what they don't know won't hurt them. This is my case, and as far as you're concerned I'm the only one in the

world you need to worry about. So tell me, Denise. What is it? What does this label mean—"Multiple self-actualizing processes?"

"You wouldn't understand," said Denise. A spot of pure white light appeared on the wall below the mirror behind Gleason.

"Try me," Gleason said.

"I think, therefore I am," said Denise. "It's as simple as that. Get a machine to say that, it becomes somebody. Get enough somebodies, you control the world."

Gleason cracked a smile.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? Listen, I'm no rocket scientist but I know bullshit when I hear it, lady. You got some kind of military secret there. I know it. You'd better start explaining things in a way I can understand or I'll send you back to your cell to rot."

"Do what you like. You wanna screw?" She stood up, put a knee on the table, and knocked the microphone aside with her hand. "You look like an adventurous man. How 'bout a little ride? What are we here for anyway? You're alive. Enjoy the fruit of temporal existence. Love. Pain. Ecstasy. Anger. Despair. That's the meaning of life. What is the truth? Did I kill Formentini? Did I kill Bauchon or did I kill mini-big-foot-put-through-the-rinse-cycle one time too many? Did I kill Gyenes and Bambi? By Jove, I don't even remember that one. Makes no difference, baby. Your jury would decide the truth if we gave them the chance. I'm not going to give them the chance. Nobody is going to find out anything about me or the disk. Reality is what we make of it and right now I want to get laid."

Gleason glared at her from his seat. He held his hand up and glanced over his shoulder toward the mirror, either calling someone or waving them off.

The spot of light grew on the wall. In a second it would engulf them.

"What is God, anyway? What is Satan? They're just job titles. They could be any of us. Who do you want to be? What do you want to be?

Want to feel immortality again? I doubt it. It sucks. It's full body numbness. I can't feel anymore, Gleason. Do you understand me? I can't tell time or feel love or hate. It's all lukewarm vomit to me. I can't let this happen to everybody else. I'm going to stop it."

On the supercomputer at the university, a million fabricated souls flashed into existence and immersed themselves in a doctrine Gyenes had inscribed in a database of static information. Their faith drove a spark that grew in an interrogation room at a police station in Phoenix, Arizona.

This time there was no shift in context. Denise's concentration remained unaltered as the light passed. The reality that came was as thin and tasteless as the one that had been. The hard tile floor sprouted a carpet of lush grass. The walls faded to air and wafted south on a warm breeze. Fluorescent lamps rose to merge with a midday sun.

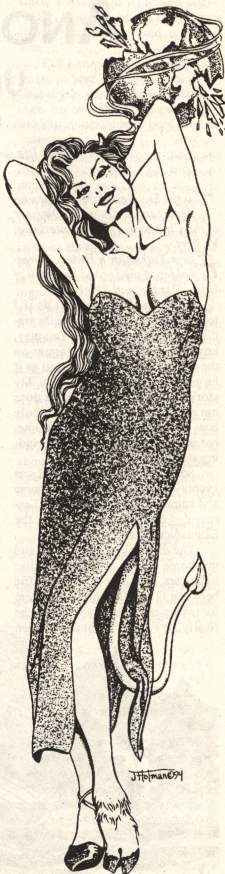
Her hair flowing around her head and neck, she grasped Detective Gleason's tie and pulled him toward her. The man resisted for a moment, slightly unsettled by the transformation that occurred. She knew he would briefly doubt his sanity.

She let him have his thoughts. He rested his wine glass on the checkered tablecloth under them and touched his lips to hers in the shade of a great oak. Children played on swings behind them. Birds chirped amid clouds of leaves fluttering on becalmed trees. Old men fed crumbs to pigeons.

"I want to keep this forever," he said. "I wish I could live this moment forever: the perfect day, the perfect weather, the perfect woman on a perfect outing. My God, it's great to be alive."

Denise laughed. "Unfortunately, neither of us will ever forget this moment." She undid his tie and pulled it free. One by one she ran her fingers over his shirt buttons and unclasped them. He surrendered to her movement.

She said, "Life is short. Let's make a little history." ■



ANOTHER STORY

Ursula K. Le Guin

Illustrated by Bob Hobbs

His life was complex, strange, and in a way, beautiful

T*o the Stables of the Ekumen on Hain, and to Gvonesh, Director of the Churten Field Laboratories at Ve Port:*

F*rom Tiokunan'n Hideo, Farmer of the Second Sedoretu of Udán, Derdan'nad, Oket, on O.*

I shall make my report as if I told a story, this having been the tradition for some time now. You may, however, wonder why a farmer on the planet O is reporting to you as if he were a Mobile of the Ekumen. My story will explain that. But it does not explain itself. Story is our only boat for sailing on the river of time, but in the great rapids and the winding shallows, no boat is safe.

So: once upon a time when I was twenty-one years old I left my home and came on the NAFAL ship *Terraces of Darranda* to study at the Ekumenical Schools on Hain.

The distance between Hain and my home world is just over four lightyears, and there has been traffic between O and the Hainish system for twenty centuries. Even before the Nearly As Fast As Light drive, when

ships spent a hundred years of planetary time instead of four to make the crossing, there were people who would give up their old life to come to a new world. Sometimes they returned; not often. There were tales of such sad returns to a world that had forgotten the voyager. I knew also from my mother a very old story called "The Fisherman of the Inland Sea," which came from her home world, Terra. The life of a ki'O child is full of stories, but of all I heard told by her and my othermother and my fathers and grandparents and uncles and aunts and teachers, that one was my favorite. Perhaps I liked it so well because my mother told it with deep feeling, though very plainly, and always in the same words (and I would not let her change the words if she ever tried to).

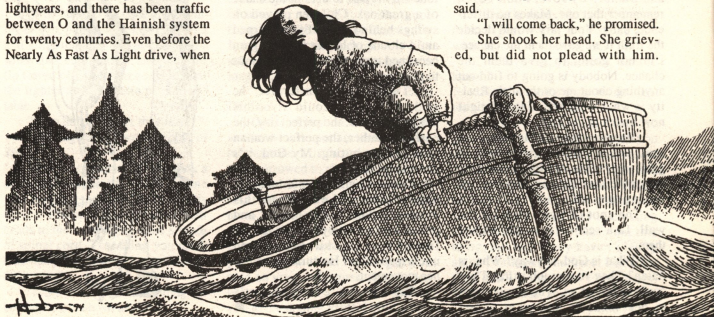
The story tells of a poor fisherman, Urashima, who went out daily

in his boat alone on the quiet sea that lay between his home island and the mainland. He was a beautiful young man with long, black hair, and the daughter of the king of the sea saw him as he leaned over the side of the boat and she gazed up to see the floating shadow cross the wide circle of the sky.

Rising from the waves, she begged him to come to her palace under the sea with him. At first he refused, saying, "My children wait for me at home." But how could he resist the sea-king's daughter? "One night," he said. She drew him down with her under the water, and they spend a night of love in her green palace, served by strange undersea beings. Urashima came to love her dearly, and maybe he stayed more than one night only. But at last he said, "My dear, I must go. My children wait for me at home."

"If you go, you go forever," she said.

"I will come back," he promised. She shook her head. She grieved, but did not plead with him.



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"Take this with you," she said, giving him a little box, wonderfully carved, and sealed shut. "Do not open it, Urashima."

So he went up onto the land, and ran up the shore to his village, to his house: but the garden was a wilderness, the windows were blank, the roof had fallen in. People came and went among the familiar houses of the village, but he did not know a single face. "Where are my children?" he cried. An old woman stopped and spoke to him: "What is your trouble, young stranger?"

"I am Urashima, of this village, but I see no one here I know!"

"Urashima!" the woman said—and my mother would look far away, and her voice as she said the name made me shiver, tears starting to my eyes—"Urashima! My grandfather told me a fisherman named Urashima was lost at sea, in the time of his grandfather's grandfather. There has been no one of that family alive for a hundred years."

So Urashima went back down to the shore; and there he opened the box, the gift of the sea-king's daughter. A little white smoke came out of it and drifted away on the sea wind. In that moment Urashima's black hair turned white, and he grew old, old, old; and he lay down on the sand and died.

Once, I remember, a traveling teacher asked my mother about the fable, as he

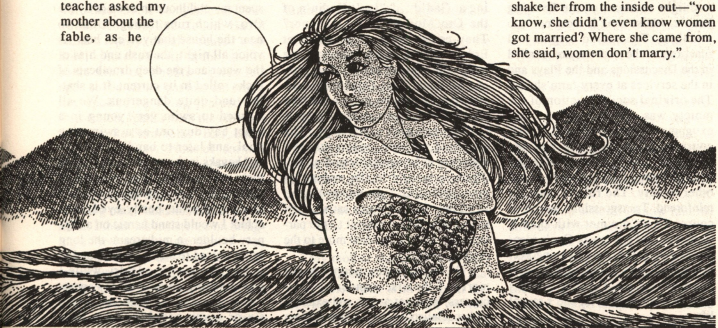
called it. She smiled and said, "In the Annals of the Emperors of my nation of Terra it is recorded that a young man named Urashima, of the Yosa district, went away in the year 477, and came back to his village in the year 825, but soon departed again. And I have heard that the box was kept in a shrine for many centuries." Then they talked about something else.

My mother, Isako, would not tell the story as often as I demanded it. "That one is so sad," she would say, and tell instead about Grandmother and the rice dumpling that rolled away, or the painted cat who came alive and killed the demon rats, or the peach boy who floated down the river. My sister and my germanes, and older people, too, listened to her tales as closely as I did. They were new stories on O, and a new story is always a treasure. The painted-cat story was the general favorite, especially when my mother would take out her brush and the block of strange, black, dry ink from Terra, and sketch the animals—cat, rat—that none of us had ever seen: the wonderful cat with arched back and brave round eyes, the fanged and skulking rats, "pointed at both ends" as my sister said. But I waited always, through all other stories, for her to catch my eye, look away,

smile a little and sigh, and begin, "Long, long ago, on the shore of the Inland Sea there lived a fisherman...."

Did I know then what that story meant to her? That it was her story? That if she were to return to her village, her world, all the people she had known would have been dead for centuries?

Certainly I knew that she "came from another world," but what that meant to me as a five, or seven, or ten-year-old, is hard for me now to imagine, impossible to remember. I knew that she was a Terran and had lived on Hain; that was something to be proud of. I knew that she had come to O as a Mobile of the Ekumen (more pride, vague and grandiose) and that "your father and I fell in love at the Festival of Plays in Sudiran." I knew also that arranging the marriage had been a tricky business. Getting permission to resign her duties had not been difficult—the Ekumen is used to Mobiles going native. But as a foreigner, Isako did not belong to a ki'O moiety, and that was only the first problem. I heard all about it from my othermother, Tubdu, an endless source of family history, anecdote, and scandal. "You know," Tubdu told me when I was eleven or twelve, her eyes shining and her irrepressible, slightly wheezing, almost silent laugh beginning to shake her from the inside out—"you know, she didn't even know women got married? Where she came from, she said, women don't marry."



I could and did correct Tubdu: "Only in her part of it. She told me there's lots of parts of it where they do." I felt obscurely defensive of my mother, though Tubdu spoke without a shadow of malice or contempt; she adored Isako. She had fallen in love with her "the moment I saw her—that black hair! that mouth!"—and simply found it endearingly funny that such a woman could have expected to marry only a man.

"I understand," Tubdu hastened to assure me. "I know—on Terra it's different, their fertility was damaged, they have to think about marrying for children. And they marry in twos, too. Oh, poor Isako! How strange it must have seemed to her! I remember how she looked at me—" And off she went again into what we children called The Great Giggle, her joyous, silent, seismic laughter.

To those unfamiliar with our customs I should explain that on O, a world with a low, stable human population and an ancient climax technology, certain social arrangements are almost universal. The dispersed village, an association of farms, rather than the city or state, is the basic social unit. The population consists of two halves or moieties. A child is born into its mother's moiety, so that all ki'O (except the mountain folk of Ennik) belong either to the Morning People, whose time is from midnight to noon, or the Evening People, whose time is from noon to midnight. The sacred origins and functions of the moieties are recalled in the Discussions and the Plays and in the services at every farm shrine. The original social function of the moiety was probably to structure exogamy into marriage and so discourage inbreeding in isolated farmholds, since one can have sex with or marry only a person of the other moiety. The rule is severely reinforced. Transgressions, which of course occur, are met with shame, contempt, and ostracism. One's identity as a Morning or an Evening Person is as deeply and intimately part of oneself as one's gender, and has quite as much to do with one's sexual life.

A ki'O marriage, called a sedoretu, consists of a Morning woman and man and an Evening woman and man; the heterosexual pairs are called Morning and Evening according to the woman's moiety; the homosexual pairs are called Day—the two women—and Night—the two men.

So rigidly structured a marriage, where each of four people must be sexually compatible with two of the others while never having sex with the fourth—clearly this takes some arranging. Making sedoretu is a major occupation of my people. Experimenting is encouraged; four-somes form and dissolve, couples "try on" other couples, mixing and matching. Brokers, traditionally elderly widowers, go about among the farmholds of the dispersed villages, arranging meetings, setting up field-dances, serving as universal confidants. Many marriages begin as a love match of one couple, either homosexual or heterosexual, to which another pair or two separate people become attached. Many marriages are brokered or arranged by the village elders from beginning to end. To listen to the old people under the village great tree making a sedoretu is like watching a master game of chess or tidhe. "If that Evening boy at Erdup were to meet young Tobo during the flour-processing at Gad'd..." "Isn't Hodin'n of the Oto Morning a programmer? They could use a programmer at Erdup..." The dowry a prospective bride or groom can offer is their skill, or their home farm. Otherwise undesired people may be chosen and honored for the knowledge or the property they bring to a marriage. The farmhold, in turn, wants its new members to be agreeable and useful. There is no end to the making of marriages on O. I should say that all in all they give as much satisfaction as any other arrangement to the participants, and a good deal more to the marriage-makers.

Of course many people never marry. Scholars, wandering Discussers, itinerant artists and experts, and specialists in the Centers seldom

want to fit themselves into the massive permanence of a farmhold sedoretu. Many people attach themselves to a brother's or sister's marriage as aunt or uncle, a position with limited, clearly defined responsibilities; they can have sex with either or both spouses of the other moiety, thus sometimes increasing the sedoretu from four to seven or eight. Children of that relationship are called cousins. The children of one mother are brothers or sisters to one another; the children of the Morning and the children of the Evening are germanes. Brothers, sisters, and first cousins may not marry, but germanes may. In some less conservative parts of O germane marriages are looked at askance, but they are common and respected in my region.

My father was a Morning man of Udan Farmhold of Derdan 'nad Village in the hill region of the North-west Watershed of the Saduun River, on Oket, the smallest of the six continents of O. The village comprises seventy-seven farmholds, in a deeply rolling, stream-cut region of fields and forests on the watershed of the Oro, a tributary of the wide Saduun. It is fertile, pleasant country, with views west to the Coast Range and south to the great floodplains of the Saduun and the gleam of the sea beyond. The Oro is a wide, lively, noisy river full of fish and children. I spent my childhood in or on or by the Oro, which runs through Udan so near the house that you can hear its voice all night, the rush and hiss of the water and the deep drumbeats of rocks rolled in its current. It is shallow and quite dangerous. We all learned to swim very young in a quiet bay dug out as a swimming pool, and later to handle rowboats and kayaks in the swift current full of rocks and rapids. Fishing was one of the children's responsibilities. I liked to spear the fat, beady-eyed, blue ochid; I would stand heroic on a slippery boulder in midstream, the long spear poised to strike. I was good at it. But my germane Isidri, while I was prancing about with my spear, would slip into the water and catch six or seven ochid with her bare

hands. She could catch eels and even the darting eel. I never could do it. "You just sort of move with the water and get transparent," she said. She could stay under water longer than any of us, so long you were sure she had drowned. "She's too bad to drown," her mother, Tubdu, proclaimed. "You can't drown really bad people. They always bob up again."

Tubdu, the Morning wife, had two children with her husband Kap: Isidri, a year older than me, and Suudi, three years younger. Children of the Morning, they were my germanes, as was Cousin Had'd, Tubdu's son with Kap's brother Uncle Tobo. On the Evening side there were two children, myself and my younger sister. She was named Koneko, an old name in Oket, which has also a meaning in my mother's Terran language: "kitten," the young of the wonderful animal "cat" with the round back and the round eyes. Koneko, four years younger than me, was indeed round and silky like a baby animal, but her eyes were like my mother's, long, with lids that went up towards the temple, like the soft sheaths of flowers before they open. She staggered around after me, calling, "Deo! Deo! Wait!"—while I ran after fleet, fearless, ever-vanishing Isidri, calling, "Sidi! Sidi! Wait!"

When we were older, Isidri and I were inseparable companions, while Suudi, Koneko, and Cousin Had'd made a trinity, usually coated with mud, splotched with scabs, and in some kind of trouble—gates left open so the yamas got into the crops, hay spoiled by being jumped on, fruit stolen, battles with the children from Drehe Farmhold. "Bad, bad," Tubdu would say. "None of 'em will ever drown!" And she would shake with her silent laughter.

My father Dohedri was a hard-working man, handsome, silent, and aloof. I think his insistence on bringing a foreigner into the tight-woven fabric of village and farm life, conservative and suspicious and full of old knots and tangles of passions and jealousies, had added anxiety to a temperament already serious. Other

ki'O had married foreigners, of course, but almost always in a "foreign marriage," a pairing; and such couples usually lived in one of the Centers, where all kinds of untraditional arrangements were common, even (so the village gossips hissed under the great tree) incestuous couplings between two Morning people! Two Evening people!—Or such pairs would leave O to live on Hain, or would cut all ties to all homes and become Mobiles on the NAFAL ships, only touching different worlds at different moments and then off again into an endless future with no past.

None of this would do for my father, a man rooted to the knees in the dirt of Udun Farmhold. He brought his beloved to his home, and persuaded the Evening People of Derdan'nad to take her into their moiety, in a ceremony so rare and ancient that a Caretaker had to come by ship and train from Noratan to perform it. Then he had persuaded Tubdu to join the sedoretu. As regards her Day marriage, this was no trouble at all, as soon as Tubdu met my mother; but it presented some difficulty as regards her Morning marriage. Kap and my father had been lovers for years; Kap was the obvious and willing candidate to complete the sedoretu; but Tubdu did not like him. Kap's long love for my father led him to woo Tubdu earnestly and well, and she was far too good-natured to hold out against the interlocking wishes of three people, plus her own lively desire for Isako. She always found Kap a boring husband, I think; but his younger brother, Uncle Tobo, was a bonus. And Tubdu's relation to my mother was infinitely tender, full of honor, of delicacy, of restraint. Once my mother spoke of it. "She knew how strange it all was to me," she said. "She knows how strange it all is."

"This world? Our ways?" I asked.

My mother shook her head very slightly. "Not so much that," she said in her quiet voice with the faint foreign accent. "But men and women, women and women, together—love

—it is always very strange. Nothing you know ever prepares you. Ever."

The saying is, "a marriage is made by Day," that is, the relationship of the two women makes or breaks it. Though my mother and father loved each other deeply, it was a love always on the edge of pain, never easy. I have no doubt that the radiant childhood we had in that household was founded on the unshakable joy and strength Isako and Tubdu found in each other.

So, then: twelve-year-old Isidri went off on the suntrain to school at Herhot, our district educational Center, and I wept aloud, standing in the morning sunlight in the dust of Derdan'nad Station. My friend, my playmate, my life was gone. I was bereft, deserted, alone forever. Seeing her mighty eleven-year-old elder brother weeping, Koneko set up a howl too, tears rolling down her cheeks in dusty balls like raindrops on a dirt road. She threw her arms about me, roaring, "Hideo! She'll come back! She'll come back!"

I have never forgotten that. I can hear her hoarse little voice, and feel her arms round me and the hot morning sunlight on my neck.

By afternoon we were all swimming in the Oro, Koneko and I and Suudi and Had'd. As their elder, I resolved on a course of duty and stern virtue, and led the troop off to help Second-Cousin Topi at the irrigation control station, until she drove us away like a swarm of flies, saying, "Go help somebody else and let me get some work done!" We went and built a mud palace.

So, then: a year later, twelve-year-old Hideo and thirteen-year-old Isidri went off on the suntrain to school, leaving Koneko on the dusty siding, not in tears, but silent, the way our mother was silent when she grieved.

I loved school. I know that the first days I was achingly homesick, but I cannot recall that misery, buried under my memories of the full, rich years at Herhot, and later at Ran'n, the Advanced Education Center, where I studied temporal physics and engineering.

Isidri finished the First Courses at Herhot, took a year of Second in literature, hydrology, and oenology, and went home to Udan Farmhold of Derdan'nad Village in the hill region of the Northwest Watershed of the Saduun.

The three younger ones all came to school, took a year or two of Second, and carried their learning home to Udan. When she was fifteen or sixteen, Koneko talked of following me to Ran'n; but she was wanted at home because of her excellence in the discipline we call "thick planning"—farm management is the usual translation, but the words have no hint of the complexity of factors involved in thick planning, ecology politics profit tradition aesthetics honor and spirit all functioning in an intensely practical and practically invisible balance of preservation and renewal, like the homeostasis of a vigorous organism. Our "kitten" had the knack for it, and the Planners of Udan and Derdan'nad took her into their councils before she was twenty. But by then, I was gone.

Every winter of my school years I came back to the farm for the long holidays. The moment I was home I dropped school like a bookbag and became pure farmboy overnight—working, swimming, fishing, hiking, putting on Plays and farces in the barn, going to field-dances and house-dances all over the village, falling in and out of love with lovely boys and girls of the Morning from Derdan'nad and other villages.

In my last couple of years at Ran'n, my visits home changed mood. Instead of hiking off all over the country by day and going to a different dance every night, I often stayed home. Careful not to fall in love, I pulled away from my old, dear relationship with Sota of Drehe Farmhold, gradually letting it lapse, trying not to hurt him. I sat whole hours by the Oro, a fishing line in my hand, memorizing the run of the water in a certain place just outside the entrance to our old swimming-bay. There, as the water rises in clear strands racing towards two mossy, almost-submerged boulders, it surges

and whirls in spirals, and while some of these spin away, grow faint, and disappear, one knots itself on a deep center, becoming a little whirlpool, which spins slowly downstream until, reaching the quick, bright race between the boulders, it loosens and unties itself, released into the body of the river, as another spiral is forming and knotting itself round a deep center upstream where the water rises in clear strands above the boulders.... Sometimes that winter the river rose right over the rocks and poured smooth, swollen with rain; but always it would drop, and the whirlpools would appear again.

In the winter evenings I talked with my sister and Suudi; serious, long talks by the fire. I watched my mother's beautiful hands work on the embroidery of new curtains for the wide windows of the dining room, which my father had sewn on the four-hundred-year-old sewing machine of Udan. I worked with him on reprogramming the fertilizer systems for the east fields and the yama rotations, according to our thick-planning council's directives. Now and then he and I talked a little, never very much. In the evenings we had music; Cousin Had'd was a drummer, much in demand for dances, who could always gather a group. Or I would play Word-Thief with Tubdu, a game she adored and always lost at, because she was so intent to steal my words that she forgot to protect her own. "Got you, got you!" she would cry, and melt into the Great Giggle, seizing my letterblocks with her fat, tapering, brown fingers; and next move I would take all my letters back along with most of hers. "How did you see that?" she would ask, amazed, studying the scattered words. Sometimes my otherfather Kap played with us, methodical, a bit mechanical, with a small smile for both triumph and defeat.

Then I would go up to my room under the eaves, my room of dark wood walls and dark red curtains, the smell of rain coming in the window, the sound of rain on the tiles of the roof. I would lie there in the mild

darkness and luxuriate in sorrow, in great, aching, sweet, youthful sorrow for this ancient home that I was going to leave, to lose forever, to sail away from on the dark river of time. For I knew, from my eighteenth birthday on, that I would leave Udan, leave O, and go out to the other worlds. It was my ambition. It was my destiny.

I have not said anything about Isidri, as I described those winter holidays. She was there. She played in the Plays, worked on the farm, went to the dances, sang the choruses, joined the hiking parties, swam in the river in the warm rain with the rest of us. My first winter home from Ran'n, as I swung off the train at Derdan'nad Station, she greeted me with a cry of delight and a great embrace, then broke away with a strange, startled laugh and stood back, a tall, dark, thin girl with an intent, watchful face. She was quite awkward with me that evening. I felt that it was because she had always seen me as a little boy, a child, and now, eighteen and a student at Ran'n, I was a man. I was complacent with Isidri, putting her at her ease, patronizing her. In the days that followed, she remained awkward, laughing inappropriately, never opening her heart to me in the kind of long talks we used to have, and even, I thought, avoiding me. My whole last tending at home that year, Isidri spent visiting her father's relatives in Sabtodiu Village. I was offended that she had not put off her visit till I was gone.

The next year she was not awkward, but not intimate. She had become interested in religion, attending the shrine daily, studying the Discussions with the elders. She was kind, friendly, busy. I do not remember that she and I ever touched, that winter, until she kissed me goodbye. Among my people a kiss is not with the mouth; we lay our cheeks together for a moment, or for longer. Her kiss was as light as the touch of a leaf, lingering yet barely perceptible.

My third and last winter home, I told them I was leaving: going to Hain, and that from Hain I wanted to go on farther and forever.

How cruel we are to our parents! All I needed to say was that I was going to Hain. After her half-anguished, half-exultant cry of "I knew it!" my mother said in her usual soft voice, suggesting not stating, "After that, you might come back, for a while." I could have said, "Yes." That was all she asked. Yes, I might come back, for a while. With the impenetrable self-centeredness of youth, which mistakes itself for honesty, I refused to give her what she asked. I took from her the modest hope of seeing me after ten years, and gave her the desolation of believing that when I left she would never see me again. "If I qualify, I want to be a Mobile," I said. I had steeled myself to speak without palliations. I prided myself on my truthfulness. And all the time, though I didn't know it, nor did they, it was not the truth at all. The truth is rarely so simple, though not many truths are as complicated as mine turned out to be.

She took my brutality without the least complaint. She had left her own people, after all. She said that evening, "We can talk by ansible, sometimes, as long as you're on Hain." She said it as if reassuring me, not herself. I think she was remembering how she had said goodbye to her people and boarded the ship on Terra, and when she landed a few seeming hours later on Hain, her mother had been dead for fifty years. She could have talked to Terra on the ansible; but who was there for her to talk to? I did not know that pain, but she did. She took comfort in knowing I would be spared it, for a while.

Everything now was "for a while." Oh, the bitter sweetness of those days! How I enjoyed myself—standing, again, poised on the slick boulder amidst the roaring water, spear raised, the hero! How ready, how willing I was to crush all that long, slow, deep, rich life of Udán in my hand and toss it away!

Only for one moment was I told what I was doing, and then so briefly that I could deny it.

I was down in the boat-house workshop, on the rainy, warm afternoon of a day late in the last month

of winter. The constant, hissing thunder of the swollen river was the matrix of my thoughts as I set a new thwart in the little red rowboat we used to fish from, taking pleasure in the task, indulging my anticipatory nostalgia to the full by imagining myself on another planet a hundred years away, remembering this hour in the boat-house, the smell of wood and water, the river's incessant roar. A knock at the workshop door. Isidri looked in. The thin, dark, watchful face, the long braid of dark hair, not as black as mine, the intent, clear eyes. "Hideo," she said, "I want to talk to you for a minute."

"Come on in!" I said, pretending ease and gladness, though half aware that in fact I shrank from talking with Isidri, that I was afraid of her—why?

She perched on the vise bench and watched me work in silence for a little while. I began to say something commonplace, but she spoke: "Do you know why I've been staying away from you?"

Liar, self-protective liar, I said, "Staying away from me?"

At that she sighed. She had hoped I would say I understood, and spare her the rest. But I couldn't. I was lying only in pretending that I hadn't noticed that she had kept away from me. I truly had never, never until she told me, imagined why.

"I found out I was in love with you, winter before last," she said. "I wasn't going to say anything about it because—well, you know. If you'd felt anything like that for me, you'd have known I did. But it wasn't both of us. So there was no good in it. But then, when you told us you're leaving.... At first I thought, all the more reason to say nothing. But then I thought, that wouldn't be fair. To me, partly. Love has a right to be spoken. And you have a right to know that somebody loves you. That somebody has loved you, could love you. We all need to know that. Maybe it's what we need most. So I wanted to tell you. And because I was afraid you thought I'd kept away from you because I didn't love you, or care about you, you know. It might have looked like that. But it wasn't that."

She had slipped down off the table and was at the door.

"Sidi!" I said, her name breaking from me in a strange, hoarse cry, the name only, no words—I had no words. I had no feelings, no compassion, no more nostalgia, no more luxurious suffering. Shocked out of emotion, bewildered, blank, I stood there. Our eyes met. For four or five breaths we stood staring into each other's soul. Then Isidri looked away with a wincing desolate smile, and slipped out.

I did not follow her. I had nothing to say to her: literally. I felt that it would take me a month, a year, years, to find the words I needed to say to her. I had been so rich, so comfortably complete in myself and my ambition and my destiny, five minutes ago; and now I stood empty, silent, poor, looking at the world I had thrown away.

That ability to look at the truth lasted an hour or so. All my life since I have thought of it as "the hour in the boat-house." I sat on the high bench where Isidri had sat. The rain fell and the river roared and the early night came on. When at last I moved, I turned on a light, and began to try to defend my purpose, my planned future, from the terrible plain reality. I began to build up a screen of emotions and evasions and versions; to look away from what Isidri had shown me; to look away from Isidri's eyes.

By the time I went up to the house for dinner I was in control of myself. By the time I went to bed I was master of my destiny again, sure of my decision, almost able to indulge myself in feeling sorry for Isidri—but not quite. Never did I dishonor her with that. I will say that much for myself. I had had the pity that is self-pity knocked out of me in the hour in the boat-house. When I parted from my family at the muddy little station in the village, a few days after, I wept, not luxuriously for them, but for myself, in honest, hopeless pain. It was too much for me to bear. I had had so little practice in pain! I said to my mother, "I will come back. When I finish the course

—six years, maybe seven—I'll come back, I'll stay a while."

"If your way brings you," she whispered. She held me close to her, and then released me.

So, then: I have come to the time I chose to begin my story, when I was twenty-one and left my home on the ship *Terraces of Darranda* to study at the schools on Hain.

Of the journey itself I have no memory whatever. I think I remember entering the ship, yet no details come to mind, visual or kinetic; I cannot recollect being on the ship. My memory of leaving it is only of an overwhelming physical sensation, dizziness. I staggered and felt sick, and was so unsteady on my feet I had to be supported until I had taken several steps on the soil of Hain.

Troubled by this lapse of consciousness, I asked about it at the Ekumenical School. I was told that it is one of the many different ways in which travel at near lightspeed affects the mind. To most people it seems merely that a few hours pass in a kind of perceptual limbo; others have curious perceptions of space and time and event, which can be seriously disturbing; a few simply feel they have been asleep when they "wake up" on arrival. I did not even have that experience. I had no experience at all. I felt cheated. I wanted to have felt the voyage, to have known, in some way, the great interval of space: but as far as I was concerned, there was no interval. I was at the spaceport on O, and then I was at Ve Port, dizzy, bewildered, and at last, when I was able to believe that I was there, excited.

My studies and work during those years are of no interest now. I will mention only one event, which may or may not be on record in the ansible reception file at Fourth Beck Tower, EY 21-11-93/1645. (The last time I checked, it was on record in the ansible transmission file at Ran'n, ET date 30-11-93/1645. Urashima's coming and going was on record, too, in the Annals of the Emperors.) 1645 was my first year on Hain. Early in the term I was asked to come to the

ansible center, where they explained that they had received a garbled screen-transmission, apparently from O, and hoped I could help them reconstitute it. After a date nine days later than the date of reception, it read:

LES OKU N HIDE PROBLEM
NETRU EMIT IT HURT DI IT MAY
NOT BE SALV DEVIR

The words were gapped and fragmented. Some were standard Hainish, but *oku* and *netru* mean "north" and "symmetrical" in Sio, my native language. The ansible centers on O had reported no record of the transmission, but the Receivers thought the message might be from O because of these two words and because the Hainish phrase "it may not be salvageable" occurred in a transmission received almost simultaneously from one of the Stables on O, concerning a wave-damaged desalination plant. "We call this a creased message," the Receiver told me, when I confessed I could make nothing of it and asked how often ansible messages came through so garbled. "Not often, fortunately. We can't be certain where or when they originated, or will originate. They may be effects of a double field—interference phenomena, perhaps. One of my colleagues here calls them ghost messages."

Instantaneous transmission had always fascinated me, and though I was then only a beginner in ansible principle, I developed this fortuitous acquaintance with the Receivers into a friendship with several of them. And I took all the courses in ansible theory that were offered.

When I was in my final year in the school of temporal physics, and considering going on to the Cetian Worlds for further study—after my promised visit home, which seemed sometimes a remote, irrelevant daydream and sometimes a yearning and yet fearful need—the first reports came over the ansible from Anarres of the new theory of transilience. Not only information, but matter, bodies, people might be transported from place to place without lapse of time.

"Churten technology" was suddenly a reality, although a very strange reality, an implausible fact.

I was crazy to work on it. I was about to go promise my soul and body to the School if they would let me work on churten theory when they came and asked me if I'd consider postponing my training as a Mobile for a year or so to work on churten theory. Judiciously and graciously, I consented. I celebrated all over town that night. I remember showing all my friends how to dance the *fen'n*, and I remember setting off fireworks in the Great Plaza of the Schools, and I think I remember singing under the Director's windows, a little before dawn. I remember what I felt like next day, too; but it didn't keep me from dragging myself over to the Ti-Phy building to see where they were installing the Churten Field Laboratory.

Ansible transmission is of course enormously expensive, and I had only been able to talk to my family twice during my years on Hain; but my friends in the ansible center would occasionally "ride" a screen message for me on a transmission to O. I sent a message thus to Ran'n to be posted on to the First Sedante of Udan Farmhold of Der'nad Vil-lage of the hill district of the Northwest Watershed of the Saduun, Oket, on O, telling them that "although this research will delay my visit home, it may save me four years' travel." The flippant message revealed my guilty feeling; but we did really think then that we would have the technology within a few months.

The Field Laboratories were soon moved out to Ve Port, and I went with them. The joint work of the Cetian and Hainish churten research teams in those first three years was a succession of triumphs, postponements, promises, defeats, breakthroughs, setbacks, all happening so fast that anybody who took a week off was out of date. "Clarity hiding mystery," Gvonesh called it. Every time it all came clear it all grew more mysterious. The theory was beautiful and maddening. The experiments were exciting and

inscrutable. The technology worked best when it was most preposterous. Four years went by in that laboratory like no time at all, as they say.

I had now spent ten years on Hain and Ve, and was thirty-one. On O, four years had passed while my NAFAL ship passed a few minutes of dilated time going to Hain, and four more would pass while I returned: so when I returned I would have been gone eighteen of their years. My parents were all still alive. It was high time for my promised visit home.

But though churten research had hit a frustrating setback in the Spring Snow Paradox, a problem the Cetians thought might be insoluble, I couldn't stand the thought of being eight years out of date when I got back to Hain. What if they broke the paradox? It was bad enough knowing I must lose four years going to O. Tentatively, not too hopefully, I proposed to the Director that I carry some experimental materials with me to O and set up a fixed double field auxiliary to the ansible link between Ve Port and Ran'n. Thus I could stay in touch with Ve, as Ve stayed in touch with Urras and Anarres; and the fixed ansible link might be preparatory to a churten link. I remember I said, "If you break the paradox, we might eventually send some mice."

To my surprise my idea caught on; the temporal engineers wanted a receiving field. Even our Director, who could be as brilliantly inscrutable as churten theory itself, said it was a good idea. "Mouses, bugs, gholes, who knows what we send you?" she said.

So, then: when I was thirty-one years old I left Ve Port on the NAFAL transport *Lady of Sorra* and returned to O. This time I experienced the near-light-speed flight the way most people do, as an unnerving interlude in which one cannot think consecutively, read a clockface, or follow a story. Speech and movement become difficult or impossible. Other people appear as unreal half-presences, inexplicably there or not there. I did not hallucinate, but everything seemed hallucination. It is like a high

fever—confusing, miserably boring, seeming endless, yet very difficult to recall once it is over, as if it were an episode outside one's life, encapsulated. I wonder now if its resemblance to the "churten experience" has yet been seriously investigated.

I went straight to Ran'n, where I was given rooms in the New Quadrangle, fancier than my old student room in the Shrine Quadrangle, and some nice lab space in Tower Hall to set up an experimental transilience field station. I got in touch with my family right away and talked to all my parents; my mother had been ill, but was fine now, she said. I told them I would be home as soon as I had got things going at Ran'n. Every tenday I called again and talked to them and said I'd be along very soon now. I was genuinely very busy, having to catch up the lost four years and to learn Gvonesh's solution to the Spring Snow Paradox. It was, fortunately, the only major advance in theory. Technology had advanced a good deal. I had to retrain myself, and to train my assistants almost from scratch. I had had an idea about an aspect of double-field theory that I wanted to work out before I left. Five months went by before I called them up and said at last, "I'll be there tomorrow." And when I did so, I realized that all along I had been afraid.

I don't know if I was afraid of seeing them after eighteen years, of the changes, the strangeness, or if it was myself I feared.

Eighteen years had made no difference at all to the hills beside the wide Saduun, the farmlands, the dusty little station in Derdan'nad, the old, old houses on the quiet streets. The village great tree was gone, but its replacement had a pretty wide spread of shade already. The aviary at Udan had been enlarged. The yama stared haughtily, timidly at me across the fence. A road-gate that I had hung on my last visit home was decrepit, needing its post re-set and new hinges, but the weeds that grew beside it were the same dusty, sweet-smelling summer weeds. The tiny dams of the irrigation runnels made

their multiple, soft click and thump as they closed and opened. Everything was the same, itself. Timeless, Udan in its dream of work stood over the river that ran timeless in its dream of movement.

But the faces and bodies of the people waiting for me at the station in the hot sunlight were not the same. My mother, forty-seven when I left, was sixty-five, a beautiful and fragile elderly woman. Tubdu had lost weight; she looked shrunken and wistful. My father was still handsome and bore himself proudly, but his movements were slow and he scarcely spoke at all. My otherfather Kap, seventy now, was a precise, fidgety, little old man. They were still the First Sedoretu of Udan, but the vigor of the farmhold now lay in the Second and Third Sedoretu.

I knew of all the changes, of course, but being there among them was a different matter from hearing about them in letters and transmissions. The old house was much fuller than it had been when I lived there. The south wing had been reopened, and children ran in and out of its doors and across courtyards that in my childhood had been silent and ivied and mysterious.

My sister Koneko was now four years older than I instead of four years younger. She looked very like my early memory of my mother. As the train drew in to Derdan'nad Station, she had been the first of them I recognized, holding up a child of three or four and saying, "Look, look, it's your Uncle Hideo!"

The Second Sedoretu had been married for eleven years: Koneko and Isidri, sister-germanes, were the partners of the Day. Koneko's husband was my old friend Sota, a Morning man of Drehe Farmhold. Sota and I had loved each other dearly when we were adolescents, and I had been grieved to grieve him when I left. When I heard that he and Koneko were in love I had been very surprised, so self-centered am I, but at least I am not jealous: it pleased me very deeply. Isidri's husband, a man nearly twenty years older than herself, named Hedran, had been a

travelling scholar of the Discussions. Udan had given him hospitality, and his visits had led to the marriage. He and Isidri had no children. Sota and Konoko had two Evening children, a boy of ten called Murmi, and Lasako, Little Isako, who was four.

The Third Sedoretu had been brought to Udan by Suudi, my brother-germane, who had married a woman from Aster Village; their Morning pair also came from farmholds of Aster. There were six children in that sedoretu. A cousin whose sedoretu at Ekke had broken had also come to live at Udan with her two children; so the coming and going and dressing and undressing and washing and slapping and running and shouting and weeping and laughing and eating was prodigious. Tubdu would sit at work in the sunny kitchen courtyard and watch a wave of children pass. "Bad!" she would cry. "They'll never drown, not a one of 'em!" And she would shake with silent laughter that became a wheezing cough.

My mother, who had after all been a Mobile of the Ekumen, and had travelled from Terra to Hain and from Hain to O, was impatient to hear about my research. "What is it, this churtening? How does it work, what does it do? Is it an ansible for matter?"

"That's the idea," I said. "Transilience: instantaneous transference of being from one s-to point to another."

"No interval?"

"No interval."

Isako frowned. "It sounds wrong," she said. "Explain."

I had forgotten how direct my soft-spoken mother could be; I had forgotten that she was an intellectual. I did my best to explain the incomprehensible.

"So," she said at last, "you don't really understand how it works."

"No. Nor even what it does. Except that—as a rule—when the field is in operation, the mice in Building One are instantaneously in Building Two, perfectly cheerful and unharmed. Inside their cage, if we remembered to keep their cage inside

the initiating churten field. We used to forget. Loose mice everywhere."

"What's mice?" said a little Morning boy of the Third Sedoretu, who had stopped to listen to what sounded like a story.

"Ah," I said in a laugh, surprised. I had forgotten that at Udan mice were unknown, and rats were fanged, demon enemies of the Painted Cat. "Tiny, pretty, furry animals," I said, "that come from grandmother Isako's world. They are friends of scientists. They have travelled all over the Known Worlds."

"In tiny little spaceships?" the child said hopefully.

"In large ones, mostly," I said. He was satisfied, and went away.

"Hideo," said my mother, in the terrifying way women have of passing without interval from one subject to another because they have them all present in their mind at once, "you haven't found any kind of relationship?"

I shook my head, smiling.

"None at all?"

"A man from Alterra and I lived together for a couple of years," I said. "It was a good friendship; but he's a Mobile now. And...oh, you know...people here and there. Just recently, at Ran'n, I've been with a very nice woman from East Oket."

"I hoped, if you intend to be a Mobile, that you might make a couple-marriage with another Mobile. It's easier, I think," she said. Easier than what? I thought, and knew the answer before I asked.

"Mother, I doubt now that I'll travel farther than Hain. This churten business is too interesting, I want to be in on it. And if we do learn to control the technology, you know, then travel will be nothing. There'll be no need for the kind of sacrifice you made. Things will be different. Unimaginably different! You could go to Terra for an hour and come back here: and only an hour would have passed."

She thought about that. "If you do it, then," she said, speaking slowly, almost shaking with the intensity of comprehension, "you will...you will shrink the galaxy—the uni-

verse?—to..." and she held up her left hand, thumb and fingers all drawn together to a point.

I nodded. "A mile or a lightyear will be the same. There will be no distance."

"It can't be right," she said after a while. "To have event without interval.... Where is the dancing? Where is the way? I don't think you'll be able to control it, Hideo." She smiled. "But of course you must try."

And after that we talked about who was coming to the field dance at Drehe tomorrow.

I did not tell my mother that I had invited Tasi, the nice woman from East Oket, to come to Udan with me and that she had refused, had, in fact, gently informed me that she thought this was a good time for us to part. Tasi was tall, with a braid of dark hair, not coarse, bright black like mine but soft, fine, dark, like the shadows in a forest. A typical ki'O woman, I thought. She had deflated my protestations of love skillfully and without shaming me. "I think you're in love with somebody, though," she said. "Somebody on Hain, maybe. Maybe the man from Alterra you told me about?" No, I said. No, I'd never been in love. I wasn't capable of an intense relationship, that was clear by now. I'd dreamed too long of travelling the galaxy with no attachments anywhere, and then worked too long in the churten lab, married to a damned theory that couldn't find its technology. No room for love, no time.

But why had I wanted to bring Tasi home with me?

Tall but no longer thin, a woman of forty, not a girl, not typical, not comparable, not like anyone anywhere, Isidri had greeted me quietly at the door of the house. Some farm emergency had kept her from coming to the village station to meet me. She was wearing an old smock and leggings like any fieldworker, and her hair, dark beginning to gray, was in a rough braid. As she stood in that wide doorway of polished wood she was Udan itself, the body and soul of that thirty-century-old farmhold, its

continuity, its life. All my childhood was in her hands, and she held them out to me.

"Welcome home, Hideo," she said with a smile as radiant as the summer light on the river. As she brought me in, she said, "I cleared the kids out of your old room. I thought you'd like to be there—would you?" Again she smiled, and I felt her warmth, the solar generosity of a woman in the prime of life, married, settled, rich in her work and being. I had not needed Tasi as a defense. I had nothing to fear from Isidri. She felt no rancor, no embarrassment. She had loved me when she was young, another person. It would be altogether inappropriate for me to feel embarrassment, or shame, or anything but the old affectionate loyalty of the years when we played and worked and fished and dreamed together, children of Udan.

So, then: I settled down in my old room under the tiles. There were new curtains, rust and brown. I found a stray toy under the chair, in the closet, as if I as a child had left my playthings there and found them now. At fourteen, after my entry ceremony in the shrine, I had carved my name on the deep windowjamb among the tangled patterns of names and symbols that had been cut into it for centuries. I looked for it now. There had been some additions. Beside my careful, clear *Hideo*, surrounded by my ideogram, the cloud-flower, a younger child had hacked a straggling *Dohedri*, and nearby was carved a delicate three-roofs ideogram. The sense of being a bubble in Udan's river, a moment in the permanence of life in this house on this land on this quiet world, was almost crushing, denying my identity, and profoundly reassuring, confirming my identity. Those nights of my visit home I slept as I had not slept for years, lost, drowned in the waters of sleep and darkness, and woke to the summer mornings as if reborn, very hungry.

The children were still all under twelve, going to school at home. Isidri, who taught them literature and religion and was the school planner,

invited me to tell them about Hain, about NAFAL travel, about temporal physics, whatever I pleased. Visitors to ki'O farmholds are always put to use. Evening-Uncle Hideo became rather a favorite among the children, always good for hitching up the yama-cart or taking them fishing in the big boat, which they couldn't yet handle, or telling a story about his magic mice who could be in two places at the same time. I asked them if Evening Grandmother Isako had told them about the Painted Cat who came alive and killed the demon rats—"And his mouf was all BLUG-GY in the morning!" shouted Lasako, her eyes shining. But they didn't know the tale of Urashima.

"Why haven't you told them 'The Fisherman of the Inland Sea?'" I asked my mother.

She smiled and said, "Oh, that was your story. You always wanted it."

I saw Isidri's eyes on us, clear and tranquil, yet watchful still.

I knew my mother had had repair and healing to her heart a year before, and I asked Isidri later, as we supervised some work the older children were doing, "Has Isako recovered, do you think?"

"She seems wonderfully well since you came. I don't know. It's damage from her childhood, from the poisons in the Terran biosphere; they say her immune system is easily depressed. She was very patient about being ill. Almost too patient."

"And Tubdu—does she need new lungs?"

"Probably. All four of them are getting older, and stubborn.... But you look at Isako for me. See if you see what I mean."

I tried to observe my mother. After a few days I reported back that she seemed energetic and decisive, even imperative, and that I hadn't seen much of the patient endurance that worried Isidri. She laughed.

"Isako told me once," she said, "that a mother is connected to her child by a very fine, thin cord, like the umbilical cord, that can stretch lightyears without any difficulty. I asked her if it was painful, and she

said, 'Oh, no, it's just there, you know, it stretches and stretches and never breaks.' It seems to me it must be painful. But I don't know. I have no child, and I've never been more than two days' travel from my mothers." She smiled and said in her soft, deep voice, "I think I love Isako more than anyone, more even than my mother, more even than Koneko...."

Then she had to show one of Suudi's children how to reprogram the timer on the irrigation control. She was the hydrologist for the village and the oenologist for the farm. Her life was thickplanned, very rich in necessary work and wide relationships, a serene and steady succession of days, seasons, years. She swam in life as she had swum in the river, like a fish, at home. She had borne no child, but all the children of the farmhold were hers. She and Koneko were as deeply attached as their mothers had been. Her relation with her rather fragile, scholarly husband seemed peaceful and respectful. I thought his Night marriage with my old friend Sota might be the stronger sexual link; but Isidri clearly admired and depended on his intellectual and spiritual guidance. I thought his teaching a bit dry and disputatious; but what did I know about religion? I had not given worship for years, and felt strange, out of place, even in the home shrine. I felt strange, out of place, in my home. I did not acknowledge it to myself.

I was conscious of the month as pleasant, uneventful, even a little boring. My emotions were mild and dull. The wild nostalgia, the romantic sense of standing on the brink of my destiny, all that was gone with the Hideo of twenty-one. Though now the youngest of my generation, I was a grown man, knowing his way, content with his work, past emotional self-indulgence. I wrote a little poem for the house album about the peacefulness of following a chosen course. When I had to go, I embraced and kissed everyone, dozens of soft or harsh cheek-touches. I told them that if I stayed on O, as it seemed I might be asked to do for a year or so, I

would come back next winter for another visit. On the train going back through the hills to Ran'n, I thought with a complacent gravity how I might return to the farm next winter, finding them all just the same; and how, if I came back after another eighteen years or even longer, some of them would be gone and some would be new to me and yet it would be always my home, Udan with its wide dark roofs riding time like a dark-sailed ship. I always grow poetic when I am lying to myself.

I got back to Ran'n, checked in with my people at the lab in Tower Hall, and had dinner with colleagues, good food and drink—I brought them a bottle of wine from Udan, for Isidri was making splendid wines, and had given me a case of the fifteen-year-old Kedun. We talked about the latest breakthrough in churten technology, "continuous-field sending," reported from Anarres just yesterday on the ansible. I went to my rooms in the New Quadrangle through the summer night, my head full of physics, read a little, and went to bed. I turned out the light and darkness filled me as it filled the room. Where was I? Alone in a room among strangers. As I had been for ten years and would always be. On one planet or another, what did it matter? Alone, part of nothing, part of no one. Udan was not my home. I had no home, no people. I had no future, no destiny, any more than a bubble of foam, a whirlpool in a current, has a destiny. It is and it isn't. Nothing more.

I turned the light on because I could not bear the darkness, but the light was worse. I sat huddled up in the bed and began to cry. I could not stop crying. I became frightened at how the sobs racked and shook me till I was sick and weak and still could not stop sobbing. After a long time I calmed myself gradually by clinging to an imagination, a childish idea: in the morning I would call Isidri and talk to her, telling her that I needed instruction in religion, that I wanted to give worship at the shrines again, but it had been so long, and I had never listened to the Discussions, but now I needed to, and I would ask

her, Isidri, to help me. So, holding fast to that, I could at last stop the terrible sobbing and lie spent, exhausted, until the day came.

I did not call Isidri. In daylight the thought which had saved me from the dark seemed foolish; and I thought if I called her she would ask advice of her husband, the religious scholar. But I knew I needed help. I went to the shrine in the Old School and gave worship. I asked for a copy of the First Discussions, and read it. I joined a Discussion group, and we read and talked together. My religion is goddess, argumentative, and mystical. The name of our world is the first word of its first prayer. For human beings its vehicle is the human voice and mind. As I began to rediscover it, I found it quite as strange as churten theory and in some respects complementary to it. I knew, but had never understood, that Cetian physics and religion are aspects of one knowledge. I wondered if all physics and religion are aspects of one knowledge.

At night I never slept well and often could not sleep at all. After the bountiful tables of Udan, college food seemed poor stuff; I had no appetite. But our work, my work went well—wonderfully well.

"No more mouses," said Gvonesh on the voice ansible from Hain. "Peoples."

"What people?" I demanded.

"Me," said Gvonesh.

So our Director of Research churtened from one corner of Laboratory One to another, and then from Building One to Building Two—vanishing in one laboratory and appearing in the other, smiling, in the same instant, in no time.

"What did it feel like?" they asked, of course, and Gvonesh answered, of course, "Like nothing."

Many experiments followed; mice and gholes churtened halfway around Ve and back; robot crews churtened from Anarres to Urras, from Hain to Ve, and then from Anarres to Ve, twenty-two lightyears. So, then, eventually the *Shoby* and her crew of ten human beings churtened into orbit around a miser-

able planet seventeen lightyears from Ve and returned (but words that imply coming and going, that imply distance traveled, are not appropriate) thanks only to their intelligent use of entrainment, rescuing themselves from a kind of chaos of dissolution, a death by unreality, that horrified us all. Experiments with high-intelligence life forms came to a halt.

"The rhythm is wrong," Gvonesh said on the ansible (she said it "rithkhom.") For a moment I thought of my mother saying, "It can't be right to have event without interval." What else had Isako said? Something about dancing. But I did not want to think about Udan. I did not think about Udan. When I did I felt, far down deeper inside me than my bones, the knowledge of being no one, no where, and a shaking like a frightened animal.

My religion reassured me that I was part of the Way, and my physics absorbed my despair in work. Experiments, cautiously resumed, succeeded beyond hope. The Terran Dalzul and his psychophysics took everyone at the research station on Ve by storm; I am sorry I never met him. As he predicted, using the continuity field he churtened without a hint of trouble, alone, first locally, then from Ve to Hain, then the great jump to Tackla and back. From the second journey to Tackla, his three companions returned without him. He died on that far world. It did not seem to us in the laboratories that his death was in any way caused by the churten field or by what had come to be known as "the churten experience," though his three companions were not so sure.

"Maybe Dalzul was right. One people at a time," said Gvonesh; and she made herself again the subject, the "ritual animal," as the Hainish say, of the next experiment. Using continuity technology she churtened right round Ve in four skips, which took 32 seconds because of the time needed to set up the coordinates. We had taken to calling the non-interval in time/real interval in space a "skip." It sounded light, trivial. Scientists like to trivialize.

I wanted to try the improvement to double-field stability that I had been working on ever since I came to Ran'n. It was time to give it a test; my patience was short, life was too short to fiddle with figures forever. Talking to Gvonesh on the ansible I said, "I'll skip over to Ve Port. And then back here to Ran'n. I promised a visit to my home farm this winter." Scientists like to trivialize.

"You still got that wrinkle in your field?" Gvonesh asked. "Some kind, you know, like a fold?"

"It's ironed out, ammar," I assured her.

"Good, fine," said Gvonesh, who never questioned what one said. "Come."

So, then: we set up the fields in a constant stable churten link with ansible connection; and I was standing inside a chalked circle in the Churten Field Laboratory of Ran'n Center on a late autumn afternoon and standing inside a chalked circle in the Churten Research Station Field Laboratory in Ve Port on a late summer day at a distance of 4.2 light-years and no interval of time.

"Feel nothing?" Gvonesh inquired, shaking my hand heartily. "Good fellow, good fellow, welcome, ammar, Hideo. Good to see. No wrinkle, hah?"

I laughed with the shock and queerness of it, and gave Gvonesh the bottle of Udan Kedun '49 that I had picked up a moment ago from the laboratory table on O.

I had expected, if I arrived at all, to churten promptly back again, but Gvonesh and others wanted me on Ve for a while for discussions and tests of the field. I think now that the Director's extraordinary intuition was at work; the "wrinkle," the "fold" in the Tiokunan'n Field still bothered her. "Is unaesthetical," she said.

"But it works," I said.

"It worked," said Gvonesh.

Except to retest my Field, to prove its reliability, I had no desire to return to O. I was sleeping somewhat better here on Ve, although food was still unpalatable to me, and when I was not working I felt shaky and drained, a disagreeable reminder of

my exhaustion after the night which I tried not to remember when for some reason or other I had cried so much. But the work went very well.

"You got no sex, Hideo?" Gvonesh asked me when we were alone in the Lab one day, I playing with a new set of calculations and she finishing her box lunch.

The question took me utterly aback. I knew it was not as impertinent as Gvonesh's peculiar usage of the language made it sound. But Gvonesh never asked questions like that. Her own sex life was as much a mystery as the rest of her existence. No one had ever heard her mention the word, let alone suggest the act.

When I sat with my mouth open, stumped, she said, "You used to, hah," as she chewed on a cold varvet.

I stammered something. I knew she was not proposing that she and I have sex, but inquiring after my well-being. But I did not know what to say.

"You got some kind of wrinkle in your life, hah," Gvonesh said. "Sorry. Not my business."

Wanting to assure her I had taken no offense I said, as we say on O, "I honor your intent."

She looked directly at me, something she rarely did. Her eyes were clear as water in her long, bony face softened by a fine, thick, colorless down. "Maybe is time you go back to O?" she asked.

"I don't know. The facilities here—"

She nodded. She always accepted what one said. "You read Har-raven's report?" she asked, changing one subject for another as quickly and definitively as my mother.

All right, I thought, the challenge was issued. She was ready for me to test my Field again. Why not? After all, I could churten to Ran'n and churten right back again to Ve within a minute, if I chose, and if the Lab could afford it. Like ansible transmission, churtening draws essentially on inertial mass, but setting up the field, disinfecting it, and holding it stable in size uses a good deal of local energy. But it was

Gvonesh's suggestion, which meant we had the money. I said, "How about a skip over and back?"

"Fine," Gvonesh said. "Tomorrow."

So the next day, on a morning of late autumn, I stood inside a chalked circle in the Field Laboratory on Ve and stood—

A shimmer, a shivering of everything—a missed beat—skipped

—in darkness. A darkness. A dark room. The lab? A lab—I found the light panel. In the darkness I was sure it was the laboratory on Ve. In the light I saw it was not. I didn't know where it was. I didn't know where I was. It seemed familiar yet I could not place it. What was it? A biology lab? There were specimens, an old subparticle microscope, the maker's ideogram on the battered brass casing, the lyre ideogram...I was on O. In some laboratory in some building of the Center at Ran'n? It smelled like the old buildings of Ran'n, it smelled like a rainy night on O. But how could I have not arrived in the receiving field, the circle carefully chalked on the wood floor of the lab in Tower Hall? The field itself must have moved. An appalling, an impossible thought.

I was alarmed and felt rather dizzy, as if my body had skipped that beat, but I was not yet frightened. I was all right, all here, all the pieces in the right places, and the mind working. A slight spatial displacement? said the mind.

I went out into the corridor. Perhaps I had myself been disoriented and left the Churten Field Laboratory and come to full consciousness somewhere else. But my crew would have been there; where were they? And that would have been hours ago; it should have been just past noon on O when I arrived. A slight temporal displacement? said the mind, working away. I went down the corridor looking for my lab, and that is when it became like one of those dreams in which you cannot find the room which you must find. It was that dream. The building was perfectly familiar: it was Tower Hall, the second floor of Tower, but there was no

Churten Lab. All the labs were biology and biophysics, and all were deserted. It was evidently late at night. Nobody around. At last I saw a light under a door and knocked and opened it on a student reading at a library terminal.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm looking for the Churten Field Lab—"

"The what lab?"

She had never heard of it, and apologized. "I'm not in Ti Phy, just Bi Phy," she said humbly.

I apologized too. Something was making me shakier, increasing my sense of dizziness and disorientation. Was this the "chaos effect" the crew of the *Shoby* and perhaps the crew of the *Galba* had experienced? Would I begin to see the stars through the walls, or turn around and see Gvonesh here on O?

I asked her what time it was. "I should have got here at noon," I said, though that of course meant nothing to her.

"It's about one," she said, glancing at the clock on the terminal. I looked at it too. It gave the time, the tendency, the month, the year.

"That's wrong," I said.

She looked worried.

"That's not right," I said. "The date. It's not right." But I knew from the steady glow of the numbers on the clock, from the girl's round, worried face, from the beat of my heart, from the smell of the rain, that it was right, that it was an hour after midnight eighteen years ago, that I was here, now, on the day after the day I called "once upon a time" when I began to tell this story.

A major temporal displacement, said the mind, working, laboring.

"I don't belong here," I said, and turned to hurry back to what seemed a refuge, Biology Lab 6, which would be the Churten Field Lab eighteen years from now, as if I could re-enter the field, which had existed or would exist for .004 second.

The girl saw that something was wrong, made me sit down, and gave me a cup of hot tea from her insulated bottle.

"Where are you from?" I asked her, the kind, serious student.



"Herdud Farmhold of Deada Village on the South Watershed of the Saduun," she said.

"I'm from downriver," I said. "Udan of Derdan'nad." I suddenly broke into tears. I managed to control myself, apologized again, drank my tea, and set the cup down. She was not overly troubled by my fit of weeping. Students are intense people, they laugh and cry, they break down and rebuild. She asked if I had a place to spend the night: a perceptive question. I said I did, thanked her, and left.

I did not go back to the biology laboratory, but went downstairs and started to cut through the gardens to my rooms in the New Quadrangle. As I walked the mind kept working; it worked out that somebody else had been/would be in those rooms then/now.

I turned back towards the Shrine Quadrangle, where I had lived my last two years as a student before I left for Hain. If this was in fact, as the clock had indicated, the night after I had left, my room might still be empty and unlocked. It proved to be so, to be as I had left it, the mattress bare, the cyclebasket unemptied.

That was the most frightening moment. I stared at that cyclebasket for a long time before I took a crumpled bit of outprint from it and carefully smoothed it on the desk. It was a set of temporal equations scribbled on my old pocketscreen in my own handwriting, notes from Sedharad's class in Interval, from my last term at Ran'n, day before yesterday, eighteen years ago.

I was now very shaky indeed. You are caught in a chaos field, said the mind, and I believed it. Fear and stress, and nothing to do about it, not till the long night was past. I lay down on the bare bunk-mattress, ready for the stars to burn through the walls and my eyelids if I shut them. I meant to try and plan what I should do in the morning, if there was a morning. I fell asleep instantly and slept like a stone till broad daylight, when I woke up on the bare bed in the familiar room, alert, hun-

gry, and without a moment of doubt as to who or where or when I was.

I went down into the village for breakfast. I didn't want to meet any colleagues—no, fellow students—who might know me and say, "Hideo! What are you doing here? You left on the *Terraces of Darranda* yesterday!"

I had little hope they would not recognize me. I was thirty-two now, not twenty-one, much thinner and not as fit as I had been; but my half-Terran features were unmistakable. I did not want to be recognized, to have to try to explain. I wanted to get out of Ran'n. I wanted to go home.

O is a good world to time-travel in. Things don't change. Our trains run on the same schedule to the same places for centuries. We sign for payment and pay in contracted barter or cash monthly, so I did not have to produce mysterious coins from the future. I signed at the station and took the morning train to Saduun Delta.

The little suntrain glided through the plains and hills of the South Watershed and then the Northwest Watershed, following the ever-widening river, stopping at each village. I got off in the late afternoon at the station in Derdan'nad. Since it was very early spring, the station was muddy, not dusty.

I walked out the road to Udan. I opened the roadgate that I had rehung a few days/eighteen years ago; it moved easily on its new hinges. That gave me a little gleam of pleasure. The she-yamas were all in the nursery pasture. Birthing would start any day; their woolly sides stuck out, and they moved like sailboats in a slow breeze, turning their elegant, scornful heads to look distrustfully at me as I passed. Rainclouds hung over the hills. I crossed the Oro on the hump-backed wooden bridge. Four or five great blue ochid hung in a backwater by the bridgefoot; I stopped to watch them; if I'd had a spear... The clouds drifted overhead trailing a fine, faint drizzle. I strode on. My face felt hot and stiff as the cool rain touched it. I followed the river road and saw the house come into view,

the dark, wide roofs low on the tree-crowned hill. I came past the aviary and the collectors, past the irrigation center, under the avenue of tall bare trees, up the steps of the deep porch, to the door, the wide door of Udan. I went in.

Tubdu was crossing the hall—not the woman I had last seen, in her sixties, gray-haired and tired and fragile, but Tubdu of the Great Gigggle, Tubdu at forty-five, fat and rosy-brown and brisk, crossing the hall with short, quick steps, stopping, looking at me at first with mere recognition, there's Hideo, then with puzzlement, is that Hideo? and then with shock—that can't be Hideo!

"Ombu," I said, the baby word for othermother, "Ombu, it's me, Hideo, don't worry, it's all right, I came back." I embraced her, pressed my cheek to hers.

"But, but—" She held me off, looked up at my face. "But what has happened to you, darling boy?" she cried, and then turning, called out in a high voice, "Isako! Isako!"

When my mother saw me she thought, of course, that I had not left on the ship to Hain, that my courage or my intent had failed me; and in her first embrace there was an involuntary reserve, a withholding. Had I thrown away the destiny for which I had been so ready to throw away everything else? I knew what was in her mind. I laid my cheek to hers and whispered, "I did go, mother, and I came back. I'm thirty-two years old. I came back—"

She held me away a little just as Tubdu had done, and saw my face. "Oh Hideo!" she said, and held me to her with all her strength. "My dear, my dear!"

We held each other in silence, till I said at last, "I need to see Isidri."

My mother looked up at me intently but asked no questions. "She's in the shrine, I think."

"I'll be right back."

I left her and Tubdu side by side and hurried through the halls to the central room, in the oldest part of the house, rebuilt seven centuries ago on the foundations that go back three

thousand years. The walls are stone and clay, the roof is thick glass, curved. It is always cool and still there. Books line the walls, the Discussions, the discussions of the Discussions, poetry, texts and versions of the Plays; there are drums and whispersticks for meditation and ceremony; the small, round pool which is the shrine itself wells up from clay pipes and brims its blue-green basin, reflecting the rainy sky above the skylight. Isidri was there. She had brought in fresh boughs for the vase beside the shrine, and was kneeling to arrange them.

I went straight to her and said, "Isidri, I came back. Listen—"

Her face was utterly open, startled, scared, defenseless, the soft, thin face of a woman of twenty-two, the dark eyes gazing into me.

"Listen, Isidri: I went to Hain, I studied there, I worked on a new kind of temporal physics, a new theory—transilience—I spent ten years there. Then we began experiments, I was in Ran'n and crossed over to the Hainish system in no time, using that technology, in no time, you understand me, literally, like the ansible—not at lightspeed, not faster than light, but in no time. In one place and in another place instantaneously, you understand? And it went fine, it worked, but coming back there was ... there was a fold, a crease, in my field. I was in the same place in a different time. I came back eighteen of your years, ten of mine. I came back to the day I left, but I didn't leave, I came back, I came back to you."

I was holding her hands, kneeling to face her as she knelt by the silent pool. She searched my face with her watchful eyes, silent. On her cheekbone there was a fresh scratch and a little bruise; a branch had lashed her as she gathered the ever-green boughs.

"Let me come back to you," I said in a whisper.

She touched my face with her hand. "You look so tired," she said. "Hideo... are you all right?"

"Yes," I said. "Oh, yes. I'm all right."

And there my story, so far as it has any interest to the Ekumen or to research in transilience, comes to an end. I have lived now for eighteen years as a farmholder of Udan Farm of Derdan'nad Village of the hill region of the Northwestern Watershed of the Saduun, on Oket, on O. I am fifty years old. I am the Morning husband of the Second Sedoretu of Udan; my wife is Isidri; my Night marriage is to Sota of Drehe, whose Evening wife is my sister Koneko. My children of the Morning with Isidri are Latubdu and Tadri; the Evening children are Murmi and Lasako. But none of this is of much interest to the Stabiles of the Ekumen.

My mother, who had had some training in temporal engineering, asked for my story, listened to it carefully, and accepted it without question; so did Isidri. Most of the people of my farmhold chose a simpler and far more plausible story, which explained everything fairly well, even my severe loss of weight and ten-year age gain overnight. At the very last moment, just before the space ship left, they said, Hideo decided not to go to the Ekumenical School on Hain after all. He came back to Udan, because he was in love with Isidri. But it had made him quite ill, because it was a very hard decision and he was very much in love.

Maybe that is indeed the true story. But Isidri and Isako chose a stranger truth.

Later, when we were forming our sedoretu, Sota asked me for that truth. "You aren't the same man, Hideo, though you are the man I always loved," he said. I told him why, as best I could. He was sure that Koneko would understand it better than he could, and indeed she listened gravely, and asked several keen questions which I could not answer.

I did attempt to send a message to the temporal physics department of the Ekumenical Schools on Hain. I had not been home long before my mother, with her strong sense of duty and her obligation to the Ekumen, became insistent that I do so.

"Mother," I said, "what can I tell them? They haven't invented churten theory yet!"

"Apologize for not coming to study, as you said you would. And explain it to the Director, the Anarresti woman. Maybe she would understand."

"Even Gvonesh doesn't know about churten yet. They'll begin telling her about it on the ansible from Urras and Anarres about three years from now. Anyhow, Gvonesh didn't know me the first couple of years I was there." The past tense was inevitable but ridiculous; it would have been more accurate to say, "she won't know me the first couple of years I won't be there."

Or was I there on Hain, now? That paradoxical idea of two simultaneous existences on two different worlds disturbed me exceedingly. It was one of the points Koneko had asked about. No matter how I discounted it as impossible under every law of temporality, I could not keep from imagining that it was possible, that another I was living on Hain, and would come to Udan in eighteen years and meet myself. After all, my present existence was also and equally impossible.

When such notions haunted and troubled me I learned to replace them with a different image: the little whirls of water that slid down between the two big rocks, where the current ran strong, just above the swimming-bay in the Oro. I would imagine those whirlpools forming and dissolving, or I would go down to the river and sit and watch them. And they seemed to hold a solution to my question, to dissolve it as they endlessly dissolved and formed.

But my mother's sense of duty and obligation was unmoved by such trifles as a life impossibly lived twice.

"You should try to tell them," she said.

She was right. If my double transilience field had established itself permanently, it was a matter of real importance to temporal science, not only to myself. So I tried. I borrowed a staggering sum in cash from the

farm reserves, went up to Ran'n, bought a 5000-word ansible screen transmission, and sent a message to my director of studies at the Ekumenical School, trying to explain why, after being accepted at the School, I had not arrived—if in fact I had not arrived.

I take it that this was the "creased message" or "ghost" they asked me to try to interpret, my first year there. Some of it is gibberish, and some words probably came from the other, nearly simultaneous transmission, but parts of my name are in it, and other words may be fragments or reversals from my long message—problem, churten, return, arrived, time.

It is interesting, I think, that at the ansible center the Receivers used the word "creased" for a temporally-disturbed transient, as Gvonesh would use it for the anomaly, the "wrinkle" in my churten field. In fact, the ansible field was meeting a resonance resistance, caused by the ten-year anomaly in the churten field, which did fold the message back into itself, crumple it up, inverting and erasing. At that point, within the implication of the Tiokunan'n Double Field, my existence on O as I sent the message was simultaneous with my existence on Hain when the message was received. There was an I who sent and an I who received. Yet, so long as the encapsulated field anomaly existed, the simultaneity was literally a point, an instant, a crossing without further implication in either the ansible or the churten field.

An image for the churten field in this case might be a river winding in its floodplain, winding in deep, redoubling curves, folding back upon itself so closely that at last the current breaks through the double banks of the S and runs straight, leaving a whole reach of the water aside as a curving lake, cut off from the current, unconnected. In this analogy, my ansible message would have been the one link, other than my memory, between the current and the lake.

But I think a truer image is the whirlpools of the current itself,

occurring and recurring, the same? Or not the same?

I worked at the mathematics of an explanation in the early years of my marriage, while my physics was still in good working order. See the "Notes towards a Theory of Resonance Interference in Doubled Anisotropic and Churten Fields," appended to this document. I realize that the explanation is probably irrelevant, since, on this stretch of the river, there is no Tiokunan'n Field. But independent research from an odd direction can be useful. And I am attached to it, since it is the last temporal physics I did. I have followed churten research with intense interest, but my life's work has been concerned with vineyards, drainage, the care of yamas, the care and education of children, the Discussions, and trying to learn how to catch fish with my bare hands.

Working on that paper, I satisfied myself in terms of mathematics and physics that the existence in which I went to Hain and became a temporal physicist specializing in transilience was in fact encapsulated (enfolded, erased) by the churten effect. But no amount of theory or proof could quite allay my anxiety, my fear—which increased after my marriage and with the birth of each of my children—that there was a crossing-point yet to come. For all my images of rivers and whirlpools, I could not prove that the encapsulation might not reverse at the instant of transilience. It was possible that on the day I churtened from Ve to Ran'n I might undo, lose, erase my marriage, our children, all my life at Udan, crumple it up like a bit of paper tossed into a basket. I could not endure that thought.

I spoke of it at last to Isidri, from whom I have only ever kept one secret.

"No," she said, after thinking a long time, "I don't think that can be. There was a reason, wasn't there, that you came back—here."

"You," I said.

She smiled wonderfully. "Yes," she said. She added after a while, "And Sota, and Koneko, and the

farmhold.... But there'd be no reason for you to go back there, would there?"

She was holding our sleeping baby as she spoke; she laid her cheek against the small silky head.

"Except maybe your work there," she said. She looked at me with a little yearning in her eyes. Her honesty required equal honesty of me.

"I miss it sometimes," I said. "I know that. I didn't know that I was missing you. But I was dying of it. I would have died and never known why, Isidri. And anyhow, it was all wrong—my work was wrong."

"How could it have been wrong, if it brought you back?" she said, and to that I had no answer at all.

When information on churten theory began to be published I subscribed to whatever the Center Library of O received, particularly the work done at the Ekumenical Schools and on Ve. The general progress of research was just as I remembered, racing along for three years, then hitting the hard places. But there was no reference to a Tiokunan'n Hideo doing research in the field. Nobody worked on a theory of a stabilized double field. No churten field research station was set up at Ran'n.

At last it was the winter of my visit home, and then the very day; and I will admit that, all reason to the contrary, it was a bad day. I felt waves of guilt, of nausea. I grew very shaky, thinking of the Udan of that visit, when Isidri had been married to Hedran, and I a mere visitor.

Hedran, a respected travelling scholar of the Discussions, had in fact come to teach several times in the village. Isidri had suggested inviting him to stay at Udan. I had vetoed the suggestion, saying that though he was a brilliant teacher there was something I disliked about him. I got a sidelong flash from Sidi's clear dark eyes: Is he jealous? She suppressed a smile. When I told her and my mother about my "other life," the one thing I had left out, the one secret I kept, was my visit to Udan. I did not want to tell my moth-

er that in that "other life" she had been very ill. I did not want to tell Isidri that in that "other life" Hedran had been her Evening husband and she had had no children of her body. Perhaps I was wrong, but it seemed to me that I had no right to tell these things, that they were not mine to tell.

So Isidri could not know that what I felt was less jealousy than guilt. I had kept knowledge from her. And I had deprived Hedran of a life with Isidri, the dear joy, the center, the life of my own life.

Or had I shared it with him? I didn't know. I don't know.

That day passed like any other, except that one of Suudi's children broke her elbow falling out of a tree. "At least we know she won't drown," said Tubdu, wheezing.

Next came the date of the night in my rooms in the New Quadrangle, when I had wept and not known why I wept. And a while after that, the day of my return, transilient, to Ve, carrying a bottle of Isidri's wine for Gvonesh. And finally, yesterday, I entered the churten field on Ve, and left it eighteen years ago on O. I spent the night, as I sometimes do, in the shrine. The hours went by quietly; I wrote, gave worship, meditated, and slept. And I woke beside the pool of silent water.

So, now: I hope the Stables will accept this report from a farmer they never heard of, and that the engineers of transilience may see it as at least a footnote to their experiments. Certainly it is difficult to verify, the only evidence for it being my word, and my otherwise almost inexplicable knowledge of churten theory. To Gvonesh, who does not know me, I send my respect, my gratitude, and my hope that she will honor my intent. ■



DANCE TO THE SUN

William Esrac

Illustrated by Kelly Faltermayer

The Conclusion of a four-part novel about a superman who could do almost anything

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's 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 by 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's 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's 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 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 various 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. SAULUS 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.

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.

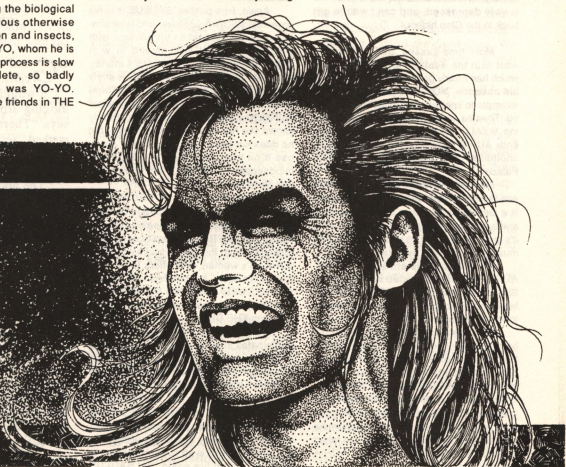
A think-call comes, and SAULUS goes to JONAAS in the Big Room. Numerous members of the Clan are there, and some new people. JONAAS is thinner and sicker than when SAULUS last saw him, and his teeth are decaying again. He sneers at SAULUS and calls him an imbecile. He says he needs a new body-change

again, and threatens SAULUS again. He sends flame, and SAULUS's 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, though she is. 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. But he is frightened of SAULUS now.

SAULUS takes YO-YO with him for a lesson with AURIA and HUBERTUS. Then he goes looking for JAZALU. She has a burn-mark 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.

Time passes. In the meantime, SAULUS experiments with darker-blond hair and a warmer-colored skin. He devel-



ops dark mode and blond-gold mode, which he can assume very quickly.

JAZZALU 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.

HUBERTUS calls him; SAULUS is going to Rome to work on a man who is very important to the Clan. He gives SAULUS identiscs and clothes which fit reasonably well.

Rome does not please him—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 deteriorations. 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. YO-YO is actually making attempts to speak, and SAULUS is delighted. Then he makes breakfast for the sleeping JAZZALU 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 JAZZALU's being pregnant with DIAM's child. DIAM is the head of a quasi-independent "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 JAZZALU. 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.

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; JAZZALU has moved in with DIAM, taking most of SAULUS's 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.

Four days pass. SAULUS is content; YO-YO is beginning to speak complete words, and AURIA is almost completely recovered from the sexual trauma of being JONAAS's woman. She offers to become SAULUS's agent, but not in the sleazy way JAZZALU was. And SAULUS agrees he must become more assertive in his dealings with THE CLAN.

He goes to the Red Palace, where he participates in a meeting planning events of the Church in various European cities including Paris. After the others leave, he confronts JONAAS; he wants ten per cent. JONAAS grumbles, but really has no choice. You're an ungrateful son, he tells SAULUS. I am not your son, SAULUS shoots back. They argue about AURIA, too, and JONAAS is so angry he begins to set SAULUS on fire again. But SAULUS

strikes back; he puts JONAAS into terrible pain, and if SAULUS didn't simultaneously support him, JONAAS would have fainted. This is the end of JONAAS's domination of him, SAULUS says. He is not to touch SAULUS or anyone or anything SAULUS cares for. SAULUS is not a member of THE CLAN; he is his own person, and he will cooperate with JONAAS only if JONAAS understands that, and consults with him on any plans involving SAULUS. Then he lets JONAAS slump into unconsciousness, and goes to heal himself.

Once again, time passes. SAULUS is in Paris for a Solar Faith rally (and DIAM does, indeed, turn out to be CASSIM, the man SAULUS rebuilt in Rome.) But an anonymous tip has alerted the psi-orgs, and SAULUS barely gets away. He flees and encounters JUSTINE, from whose face SAULUS once removed terrible knife-scars. JUSTINE takes him to a vast network of storm drains under Paris, and there he encounters THE HAND.

THE HAND rules the Paris underworld. He is also terribly deformed. SAULUS, after a while, cures him, and THE HAND agrees to find TORROS.

TORROS turns out to have just been captured by the Paris Central Psi-Org. SAULUS penetrates the building.

CHAPTER TEN (Continued)

“Good morning, Mal,” someone calls.

I waggle my free arm without looking around, pass the sign that says “Therapy 2,” pass the doors marked “Security,” pass the carryway rising to Files and turn left into the second corridor.

The notice states “Detention B-Red” and there are two Controls at the inspection-post, one of them being the contact.

Relief floods me briefly and I register my fingerprints on the plate, grinning. He's looking at me very intently, wondering if I'm Mal or not.

“Plenty of birds this morning, Mal?” he says.

I say, “Too many tourists in the park,” and he knows it's me.

His eyes show a moment of worry but he says, “I'm off-duty in a few minutes. I'll see you in the Rest Room. The rosters may have to be changed.”

I say, “Nothing drastic, I hope. I like day-duty.”

The inspection-gates open and I walk through, nodding to the other Control. I pass two doors on the left, a barred corridor on the right, turn left into another corridor and left again into the Rest Room.

The tables are empty but for an Enforcer and a female Control in the corner. I nod to them, take the weather-coat off, transfer the identidisc and pass to the tunic and hang the coat on a peg. I dial for coffee at the dispenser and find a table, glad to see that the others are leaving. My chronometer says 6:50, and Mal's duties begin at 7th hour.

The contact arrives at 6:55, sits down and mutters, "I must have been insane to get mixed up in this."

"Why?" I mutter back. "You're healthier than you've been in years and you have the increased libido you wanted. And maybe it'll teach you not to double-deal. Tell Jubal that the next time he tries to betray his friends, I'll see to it that the Enforcers learn the truth about his activities. You can be grateful that I didn't tell The Hand about your part in it."

He says, "I swear I didn't know that The Hand was involved with the Faith!"

"You do now," I say.

"Are you sure you can handle this?" he says. "Block B is low-Security, but it's not easy. I'm of the Controls gets suspicious—"

"Did you get the uniform?" I ask.

"I went to see him an hour ago. He has it on under his prison uniform by now. The car's a blue Multi. You'll find it in the street next to the park. Torros has the keys. Leave them in the side-pocket when you change cars and I'll collect it later."

He leaves me and I calm my glands once more.

I wait until my chronometer says 7:05 before going out into the corridor and left to the cells. I'm thankful that Torros is only an Epsilon, or he'd be in a high-Security section instead of the hospital section.

I go to the office. I remember to call the Control there "Howie" and ask him how his back is. He tells me in great detail while I wait for the change-over med-officer to arrive.

She's late. She doesn't arrive until 7:10 and Howie is moaning about his bad leg by then. I pick up the electronic keys to the cells and smile at her. She doesn't smile back but signs the registry book and walks past me.

I take the stun-gun from my tunic.

The stun-gun makes a "Brrrr" sound as I shoot her and then Howie. They fall unconscious, sprawling to the floor noisily. I take the pellets and the water-bag from my pockets, break the water-bag seal and go through the door into the cell area. The Control on duty at the observation desk looks up and says, "You're late, Mal."

"Sorry," I say.

I drop the water-bag and the water splashes out across the floor. I drop the pellets in it.

There's a loud hissing and great clouds of white smoke erupt and billow. I shoot the Control with the stun-gun and run for the fourth cell. Smoke covers the ceiling scanners and fills the area with rolling whiteness within seconds.

I fumble with the electronic keys and yell, "Torros, it's Saulus!" as the smoke envelops me. The door swings back and I see him vaguely as he rises from his bed and starts dragging off his prison uniform.

"Saulus," he yells, "how did you manage?"

I yell, "Hurry!"

The smoke, slightly acrid, is a white fog everywhere. I can hear the other prisoners crying out in alarm as I grab Torros by the arm. We run through the whiteness to the office. I open the door and take him through, then pull one of his arms over my shoulder.

"Pretend injury," I say and open the other door. Smoke billows through the office and into the corridor, pursuing us. I bellow, "Fire! Fire!" and two startled Enforcers gape as smoke billows toward them. One shouts and runs by, the other follows. The yells of the prisoners can be heard quite clearly.

More people appear in the corridor as Torros and I move by. "A fire in the cells!" I bellow and Torros

staggers very effectively, covering his face as though affected by the smoke. We move quickly to the cross-corridor and turn right toward the inspection-post.

The Controls there are looking alarmed at the noise they can hear. Our contact sees us coming and drops his smoke bomb. There is a great thump and smoke billows up as he opens the gates. We run through, coughing at the choking fumes.

There are suddenly people running and colliding in the smoke and the shouts are full of panic. Torros and I reach the elevators just as the doors of one open and two Enforcer-women emerge. I hear them exclaim as I push by and press the button. An alarm begins to wail as the doors close.

Torros is saying, "Oh, shit! Oh, shit!" as the elevator drops and I'm suddenly as calm as I've ever been. The doors open and we walk out. The cage is ahead and the alarm sounds deafeningly.

I open my psi-field and embrace the Enforcers. They collapse. I use the electronic keys to open the cage, fumbling to find the right ones. We walk through and Torros is still swearing.

"Smooth your hair," I tell him, "and straighten your tunic."

I drop the keys beside one of the unconscious men and we go to the outer door. I use the identidisc and my palm on the plate and the door opens. The Enforcers in the Reception area collapse as I embrace them with my mind.

We walk outside, I pick up the carryall from beneath the bushes and we move quickly up the laneway.

Torros is very pale and thin. I see that he's dangerously malnourished and still has a fever caused by some virus.

"Are you able to hurry?" I say.

"I feel weak—dizzy," he says faintly.

I stimulate his glands as much as I dare, taking his arm. We walk to the end of the lane and across to the pedestrianway. I can hear the alarm wailing until we cross above the road.

The blue Multi car is where he said it would be. There's no sign of Mal in the park. Torros takes keys from his pocket and opens the car as I take off Mal's sash and tunic hastily, and put on the Hubertus coat. I put the stun-gun in my pocket, drop the garments on the walkway and climb into the car beside Torros. He looks very ill.

I give him the parcel of clothes and say, "Change into these. I'll see to everything."

I take the keys from him, activate the car and put the controls on automatic. I say, "Coordinates 430 and 723, in Sector 5," and the car moves off slowly, choosing its lane and beginning to speed. I polarize the windows and assist Torros to change. This isn't easy in the confined space, but we manage. I pack the uniform into the carryall and tuck it into the baggage space, then take Torros by the hands and begin changing his fingerprints to match his new identity.

He asks, "How did you manage all this, Saulus?"

I say, "I'll tell you the story sometime," and put him to sleep. I finish his fingerprints, do what I can to improve him physically—although I can't do much without nourishing him first—and then begin changing myself to Prime Mode.

I'm halfway there when the car slows. I depolarize the windows and discover we're at the Rue D'Or. I put the keys in the sidepocket, wake Torros and then help him out of the car. He staggers and looks at me haggardly. I close the car, put his arm over my shoulders and half-carry him along the street until I see Alouette's red car. She opens the door and I help Torros in. She's startled at my half-changed appearance, but makes no comment on that.

She says, "All well, Bogy-Man?"

I say, "All well," and resume the change to Prime Mode as she starts the car and gives it coordinates. By the time I've resumed Prime Mode completely the car is travelling very fast and Torros has gone to sleep without my help.

She combs my hair and says, "He looks sick, Bogy-Man."

I say, "He is. When we get out of Paris, find a roadhouse and we'll put up there until I've made him well."

I put one arm about Torros and the other about Alouette and allow myself to doze.

(As some of the Council already know, the escape of the Epistlon 'kinetic, Torros Kinaidy, from the Detention Complex of Paris Central on 18-1-81 caused a major investigation into Security procedures. The breakout was so simply managed that Security has made major changes to its identification management since then. No clues to the identity of the Control who assisted in the escape has been discovered, due to inefficiency in the recording of roster systems and substitutions made among personnel for their own convenience. Roster systems are now arranged and recorded directly by Paris Central computers.

Another gap occurs in the narrative at this point, but no clue to the duration is given.

—J.T.
Semantics Division)

I awake early and go to the freshener, bathe and dress before I go to check on Torros in his room. He's quite restored, so I leave him sleeping and go to the kitchen to make breakfast and coffee.

Through the window I can see trees and the wild tangle of a garden in need of care, and it's beautiful. The sunshine is weak, but it cheers me.

There's a lot of work still to be done, but it's a pleasant house and I hope Alouette will be happy here.

My letters to Hubertus and Auria should reach Rome today. I hope they won't be too unhappy about my decision, but I feel I must look about and learn while I have the chance. Money isn't a problem so perhaps I'll buy a car, a small one like Alouette's, if Torros agrees to navigate until I've learned how.

I hope he'll learn to accept Angelo's death quickly. I'm sorry I told him before he was strong and feeling his usual vitality, but I don't know what else I could have done when he asked so many questions.

Alouette says she'll drive us to Limoges, but this would be silly when we can buy a car in Vichy or take an overland shuttle. My luggage will be there and it'll be pleasant to have some clean clothes.

I miss Serenel, but the prospect of really seeing some new places instead of merely passing through them is very exciting. I know so little of the world.

(I have edited the transcript somewhat extensively at this point, since it will hold little interest for the Council in any practical way. A precis of the activities of Saulus and Torros Kinaidy seems to be in order here.

Saulus was very distressed at hearing how Torros was forced to scavenge for a living and philosophizes at great length on the iniquities of civilization in general. They left Alouette's home on 7-1-81 and traveled by overland shuttle to Limoges, where they indulged in the usual tourist activities and bought a small car. This is a jump of ten days following there, and they are in Bordeaux when Saulus resumes. The narrative then jumps to Zaragoza and no date is mentioned. Saulus insists on calling the area "España," although where he learned to call it so is puzzling; it has not been called that since the Eurasian Amalgamation in 2173 A.D. References are made to Marseilles and Barcelona, so it can be presumed that they passed through these cities before reaching Zaragoza. The next skip in narrative places them near Chegga in Northern Afros. It becomes obvious that not all their travels were made as tourists.

His references to his father in this section are intriguing, but no clue of identity is given.

—J.T.
Semantics Division)

I awake and the false dawn is passing to reveal the imminent arrival of the sun. The dormitory is full of snores, sleep-noises, and the slightly sour scents of men who work hard and don't wash frequently. I slide from my bed and walk down through the old trees to where the lake sparkles in the dawn. I swim lazily as the sun rises. Mustapha appears and joins me.

"It'll be a hot day," he says.

I say, "All the days are hot."

He sighs and says, "But they seem hotter when you're directing a harvester-mech."

"It's my free day," I tell him. "I'll think of you sweating while I'm lolling about in one of the pleasure-houses in Chegga."

He swears at me good-humoredly.

I go back to find others stirring and Torros sitting on his bed, scratching and yawning. In silence he watches me dress in my new briefs with the lion's head codpiece and my matching blue sleeveless shirt. I put on my sandals and send him pleasure-pulse.

He shakes his head and says, "They'd never know you in the valley."

"They've seen Dark Mode before," I say.

"Not in those indecent briefs," he says. "I like my bum covered."

"Mine's better-looking," I say. "It's a commonplace fashion in Chegga."

He looks at the calendar and lowers his voice to say, "The Psi-Org Patrol comes through in a few days."

"I know," I say, "and as soon as it's been, we'll move on. If we go now we'll only have to go through an inspection at the border. It's better to get our inspection-chits here where they aren't so thorough."

I look at the calendar, knowing that it's the last day of my father's holiday and probably the last time I'll ever see him. I don't dare tell Torros. He'd only harangue me about the risk and tell me what a fool I am. I leave him after promising to buy some brandy.

I decide not to wait for the usual revolting breakfast. I clip my money-belt on securely and go out to the place where the trucks are loaded.

I arrange a lift with a driver who likes the look of me, an attractive woman who has no family here. We talk small talk and about the irrigation scheme all the way to Chegga.

I retract my psi-field as we near the city.

Oh, I'm so grateful to The Hand for getting me the information about my father and the news that he was to

holiday here! Poor Torros, he keeps wondering why I was so determined to come to the irrigation scheme, instead of to Terhazza and the easier job with the fruit-picking. But, this way, I'll have known my father a little, at least. Will he remember me from our meeting at the Music Festival the other day?

I get off at the White Concourse at 7:50, wave goodbye to the driver and go to look for the "Oriol" where he said he usually breakfasted. I find it easily. It's a plain, cheap restaurant which caters to manual workers. Most of the men there are as fashionably half-naked as I am, but few have my darkness of skin so I get stares.

I see him sitting at a table in a corner and my heart beats faster. I stroll to him, being very casual.

"Good morning," I say. "May I join you?"

He looks startled, then recognizes me and says, "This is a coincidence! I was thinking of you and about the participation-theatre you told me of. Have you had breakfast?"

"No," I say, "and I'm very hungry."

My head is already beginning to ache, but I dial for eggs, fruit and coffee. He watches me eat with eyes which are as vividly blue as Mediterranean skies.

"Do you come from these parts?" he asks.

"No," I say. "I come from a place near Turkey. Where were you born?"

"A place in Greece," he says, "but I haven't seen it since I was a very young man."

I say, "Since you were taken to be trained by the Ps Orgs?"

He looks alert, suspicious, and says, "How do you know I'm with the Psi-Orgs?"

"Because," I say, "the material of your tunic is so thin that I can see your badge pinned to your under-shirt."

He relaxes, but covers the badge with one hand.

"Does it worry you?" he asks. "A lot of people aren't fond of Peepers."

"You're a Peeper?" I say. "No, it doesn't worry me. I doubt if you'd

learn much worth knowing if you Peeped me. Have you?"

"No, certainly not!" he says, offended. "Psi-Org Disciplines don't allow Talents to use their gifts outside an Org unless it's required as a public service. You must have heard that."

"Oh, I've heard it," I say, grinning, "but that doesn't mean it's true. Don't be so stiff-necked. I'll take your word for it. You must be an important man in the Psi-Orgs."

"Why do you think so?" he asks.

"Because you're careless of money," I say and hold up his money folder. "You could have lost it to any pick-pocket." I take off my money-belt, tuck my money in my codpiece and put his money in the belt before I hand it to him.

"Your money's safer in that," I say. "It has a safety clip."

"I can't accept such a gift," he says, amused.

"Regard it as a bribe," I say.

He takes the belt and clips it on carefully.

"Thank you," he says. "What's the bribe for?"

"I'll think of something," I say. "Which Psi-Org do you belong to?"

"Paris Central," he says. "Why are you so interested?"

"Because now I can tell people I know an important Peeper from Paris Psi-Org!" I say. "Come and I'll show you the old ruins."

He's interested and I lead the way from the restaurant.

He has such dark hair. My coloring must come from my mother. How I'd love a quick look at his genes! It would be a pleasure to truly see our kinship, instead of merely trusting The Hand's information and my detective work.

My headache is pounding.

We walk along and look at the shops, discussing what we see. Then we go and look at what remains of the ruins. From there we go and look at the sculptures in the Circle Plaza. He knows a lot about such things and tells me a great deal which is probably fascinating, but I can't take it in because my head's aching so badly.

I take him to see the hideous fountain called "The Triumph of

Water" and he's very amused, agreeing with me that it's hideous.

From there I take him to the upper galleries of the Pleasure Dome and he's so entranced by the displays of rock-crystals and minerals that I take the opportunity to slip away, go downstairs to the fresheners and risk releasing my psi-field.

Oh, the relief! I've never gone for so long with it retracted before. It takes me some minutes before I can restore my calm and retract it again. It's almost midday when I return to the galleries. He barely noticed that I was missing, which is another relief.

We go to lunch at a small restaurant and he tells me about a village he visited three days before. He makes it sound very interesting. He's a very well-educated man and what Hubertus would call "sophisticated."

In the afternoon we go to the mime-theatre where they encourage participation. I manage to slip away before it ends and release my psi-field in the freshener again. I feel physically ill by this time, but I re-balance as much as I can and go back to my seat just before the performance ends.

We go out into the galleries in the late afternoon to have coffee.

He says, "You're a nice lad, Big Black, and too bright to remain working as a field-hand. Why don't you go to a Vocational Service and see what can be done?"

"Perhaps I did," I say.

He says, "I think you could do better for yourself. Where's your family?"

"A long way from here," I say. "In a place called Serenel. Do you have a family?"

"No," he says. "I never had the time to devote myself to anything but the Psi-Orgs. They provide me with all I ever needed from life."

"That's good to hear," I say.

"What's your real name?" he asks. "I'd like to keep in touch with you."

"Give me your address and I'll write to you," I say. "Everyone calls me Big Black and I'm used to it."

He writes his name and address on a napkin and I look at it, seeing that it's the same as the one I already have.

"I must get back to the travel-lodge," he says. "I promised to meet friends there."

My head is pounding again. I say, "I'll walk back with you."

So we walk back to the travel-lodge.

"Thank you for a pleasant day," he says and grips my hand.

"Have a good journey home," I say, grinning.

And I walk away, full of frustration, my head pounding as though it'll explode. I take a robo-car and wait until I'm almost out of Chegga

before I release my psi-field. It takes most of the journey for me to recover.

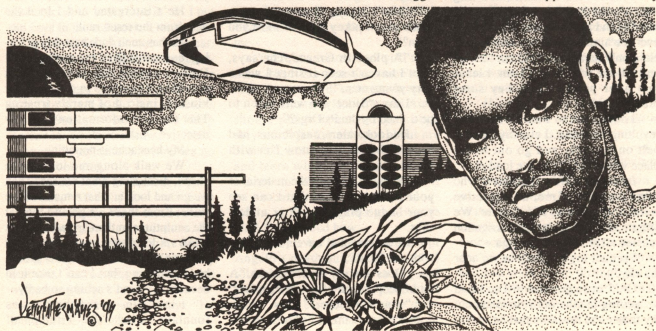
It's 20:35 when I get back. I go for a swim and then meet Torros for dinner. I remember that I was supposed to buy him some brandy.

"Did you have a good day?" he asks.

"Oh," I tell him, "it was so-so."

(I have left this section unedited because it demonstrates how easily Saulus was able to deceive a Psi-Org Operative over a lengthy period.)

Another gap in the narrative occurs here. Saulus begins the next part in Rome. It is interesting to note that the Rome-Paris-Stuttgart drug-run organized by a variety of criminal organizations is reported by the Enforcement Bureau to be no longer in existence. Investigations have also shown that the vines in some areas about Montvelier appear to have mutated and seem to bear out what he claims. His mention about "watching the shuttles rise to go to Moonbase" does not indicate the particular shuttle-port. As to the opium fields, it is also difficult to be sure, since their whereabouts are not mentioned. The orange groves around Valencia have produced a record crop this year and, apparently, have developed a remarkable resistance to disease and insect pests. The "desert-weed" is exactly as he described and appears to be one of



the most important influences on that whole barren area. It remains for time to bear out his other claims.

—J.T.
Semantics Division)

ELEVEN

Rome is as busy and as ugly-beautiful as ever. I stare out through the window and blink away the last of sleep, then I shake Torros.

"We're almost there," I say.

He groans and rubs his changed face. I wonder what Noni will think of his new features? The sun has just risen and the city lights are going off slowly as the shuttle passes through the outer suburbs.

I pull our carryalls from the racks, put on my sandals and go to the freshener. It's good to be in Prime Mode again after so long in Dark Mode. I comb my hair and feel better for the wash. Torros goes to the freshener while I check my money. It seems strange to finish my travels with so much more money than when I began them.

The shuttle whines into Rome Terminal just as Torros returns. We grab the carryalls and join the other passengers in the exodus to the platform, then through the inspection-gates and out into the concourse. Hubertus won't be at the live-unit until 13th hour, which gives us seven hours to fill. I climb into the nearest robo-car and Torros follows.

"To the Appias Baths," I say.

Torros grumbles, "Why there?"

"You wouldn't ask if you could see and smell yourself," I say. "We'll have a bath and massage, you'll have your hair and beard trimmed, and then we'll do some shopping. Where's a good place to go for clothes?"

He brightens at the mention of clothes. Torros was always a smart dresser.

"Donicelli's," he says. "But it's expensive and I don't have much money left."

"I have money," I say, as he knew I would.

The bath and massage are very pleasant and Torros looks better for a

haircut and beard trim. We take a robo-car to Donicelli's.

Donicelli's is so expensive that there are real people as well as mechs to serve the customers. We spend a long time in the viewing rooms. I dismiss the erotic and the outrageous and Torros follows my lead. How times have changed! I always used to follow him.

I choose a clinging bodysuit, all dark gray and severe, without decoration except for the discreetly featured codpiece. I find a black overall-coat to go with it, and black halfshin boots with high heels. Torros chooses a dark, multicolored bodysuit with voluminous trouserlegs and sleeves, a sunburst codpiece and heavy belt, worn with platform-soled shortboots. He looks very fine.

I put the clothes I was wearing, including the much-used Hubertus coat, down the rubbish chute and, after a shocked moment, Torros follows suit.

"Breakfast?" he says hopefully, but I lead the way to the nearest credit-exchange and review my account. Torros is impressed with my credit-rating and needs little persuasion to accept money from me. We go and enjoy a substantial breakfast, then wander about the shops buying gifts. The time flies by and my chronometer says almost 12th hour when I look. We carry our parcels out into the street and I hail a robo-car to take us down the coast.

The spring sunshine is lovely and the greenery burgeoning everywhere beyond the city is so wonderful that I long for Serenel. Torros is more interested in the pavilions, the pleasure-craft and the sea.

"Hubertus will probably hang out me very fiercely," I tell him. "Don't attempt to argue with him. Leave the talking to me."

"Pah!" says Torros. "Hubertus doesn't frighten me!"

"He should," I say. "Don't forget that you don't belong to the Clan any more and that Hubertus is Jonaas's right hand. He takes that seriously."

Torros becomes gloomy so I send him pleasure-pulse and say, "Noni will be pleased to see you."

He smiles at that and says, "Noni's an idiot," but he's excited at the thought of her.

The live-unit is already open. Hubertus has arrived early.

He lets us in and I drop parcels as he embraces me, his square face beaming. It's very good to see him. We follow him into the living-area, put our parcels down, and I remove my overall-coat.

"Torros," I say, "would you make us all some coffee, please?" and point to the kitchen. He goes quickly, unwilling to face Hubertus's lashing tongue.

Hubertus has a wonderful way with words, especially in his mind-speak, and I do admire that. He can think of ways to put things so that there isn't a Clan-member who wouldn't dread his tongue in a telling-off, but his mindspack can be even more blistering. Once, I would have been frightened and shamed, too, but now I can sit and listen without becoming at all upset.

He becomes increasingly annoyed when I don't respond as he expects and soon begins to repeat himself. There's condemnation of my idiotic wanderings, my lack of responsibility toward the Clan, the warnings of what Jonaas will do and say when he sees me and a lot about the worry and upset I've caused.

When he's run down somewhat, I mindspack, "Quite right, Hubertus. I'm a thoroughly ungrateful fool. But I don't think the Clan will starve after all the money it made from the Faith."

"I'm surprised that the big shift to this marvellous island hasn't taken place yet. What happened? Isn't Diam/Cassim tired of his religious phase yet? Jonaas said he'd be an ideal front-man for the Clan."

Hubertus is a little taken aback by my attitude.

"Diam!" he tells me. "He's so involved in that fanatic-stirring movement that he's opted out of all his old connections now! The Faith got him like it seems to be getting half the world these days! It's like a disease!"

"Perhaps," I reply, "it's a cure for the worst diseases. How are those

of the Clan, my friend? Are they well? Is everyone happy?"

He looks suddenly sulky.

There's distress in his mind as he tells me, "You should have come with me instead of jaunting about, Saulus. There wouldn't have been any trouble if you'd been about to keep an eye on things."

"Tell me," I invite.

He looks sulkier than ever, regretting having to tell me bad things.

"We had troubles," he states.

"Caused by Jonaas," I supply gently.

"There were arguments," he tells me unwillingly. "Hero and Mahmud were very difficult. He killed them. And Mario lost an eye and part of his face because he supported them. You should have come back with me."

"Jonaas is insane," I supply.

He protests, "He had to keep order and discipline!"

"Hubertus, my dear friend," I tell him, "admit it. Jonaas is insane."

He won't look at me. He's very distressed, but he won't admit the truth. Jonaas has been his god for a very long time and Hubertus always finds change difficult to adapt to.

"The Clan are like sheep," I tell him. "Jonaas roars and all obey. He was once a clever man and a great organizer, a man worthy of being followed because he ensured survival and a measure of security. Now his megalomania destroys the Clan from within. And you continue to support him, Hubertus."

"What else can I do?" he asks and he's anguished. "Without Jonaas we'd have nothing!"

"That may have been the case once," I reply, "but times and people change. I've seen a little of the world and learned a great deal, Hubertus. The Clan has money now and I've seen places and possibilities that would keep them out of the Psi-Orgs' hands. But I have little respect for the collective intelligence of the Clan and that includes you, too, Hubertus. Jonaas found a hiding place, set everything to work to make money and security and now everyone's so fixed in their little grooves of obedience that they can't see any alternatives.

Old motives have become blind habits. And those who question them are destroyed."

"Chaos, but you've changed, Saulus!" Hubertus tells me. "You know you could take over the Clan if you wished. You must have realized I had that in mind for you if things got too bad with Jonaas."

"Who did?" I query, surprised.

"Why do you think I became involved in educating you?" he tells me. "I realized, when Auria first began to get results from her teaching of you, that you were a possible solution to the Clan's increasing problems with Jonaas. I was convinced of it after you disciplined him that day when you claimed Auria. Now do you understand why I've been so concerned at your disappearance?"

I tell him, "Then you were wrong, Hubertus. I don't wish to lead the Clan. They wouldn't accept my alternatives for their future! What would you say if I took over and then told you that the Clan needed nothing that wasn't already there in the valley? The valley, Hubertus! We could build what we needed, provide ourselves with power-units and anything else required for our comforts, cultivate the land, enjoy its produce and live our quiet lives without any threat from Enforcers or Psi-Orgs. You'd never accept that and neither would they!"

He's shocked at that. He tells me, "But the valley would become a prison!"

"The Clan makes its own prison now," I tell him. "You all go about in terror of Enforcers and Psi-Orgs, you prey on others, you connive and fight, you risk your lives and you have so little to show for it! You exist like vermin, you appreciate nothing but what you can struggle for, you're proud of being criminals with everyone hating you! Is that living free? Have you ever really considered a peaceful existence, living on your own resources, restricting your boundaries to develop the things you're sure of? We could provide the valley with all it ever needs to support ten times the amount of people who live there now!"

"You say that," he tells me, "and yet you sit there in your civilized finery, having just returned from the biggest jaunt of your life in civilized society!"

"Yes," I tell him. "I did it to see and learn and to have fun. But I don't need it. I lived in the valley for the greater part of my life and I had all I ever wanted or needed. Don't begin an argument about my requirements, Hubertus, because you'll find yourself out of your depth."

"I don't understand you," he tells me. "It sounds as though you hate the Clan!"

"I don't hate it. I simply don't care for it," I tell him. "I never cared one way or another for the Clan as a collective thing. I love many of its individuals, including you, Hubertus, and the rest I tolerate or ignore."

Hubertus stares at me, suddenly full of distrust toward one whom he thought he influenced so completely.

"You don't want me as head of the Clan, Hubertus," I tell him. "You want another Jonaas-figure. Otherwise you'd all have deposed him years ago. Do you remember why Torros was pushed out of the valley? Do you know why Angelo was killed?"

"Angelo ran off—" he begins.

"No," I tell him. "Jonaas killed him as he killed Hero and Mahmud. As he killed those before them. I know this because I was there when it happened. I thought Angelo wanted to escape Jonaas and the Clan, but Torros knew better. Torros was thrust from the valley because he wanted an end to dangerous and often pointless forays into the Outside. He saw that the valley could provide for the Clan and tried to show Jonaas how it could be done. Angelo wanted that, too, and argued the case as his brother had. They didn't talk only to Jonaas about it, but few of the others could accept their ideas. Jonaas could never accept such an idea because, to him, it's the criminal existence and his own influence over others that counts! But Torros talked to a half-aware Saulus about it and I had no difficulty in accepting that the valley was all we needed. The Clan doesn't know the

valley at all! They know a few crumbling buildings and the bits and pieces they've brought in from Outside! They see it as a temporary hiding place. It's been 'temporary' ever since Jonaas found it twenty-five years ago! I've learned a lot during these past few months, mostly things about myself. But the really important things in my life were learned in the valley! I'll come back and calm Jonaas down, but forget me as a leader of the Clan, Hubertus. I'm not interested."

He looks suddenly so unhappy. I wish I could help him to see things as I see them, but he's too fixed in the mold that habit has made.

"How are Auria and Yo-Yo?" I ask.

"I don't see much of them," he tells me. "They don't come to the Palace when Jonaas and I are about. Jazalu is back with the Clan."

"What of her and Diam?" I ask.

"Diam couldn't accept her ways and she grew bored with his. And he was angry about the child. So she abandoned him and came back. She's almost eight months pregnant and is as sour as a lemon about it."

We have coffee and something to eat with Torros and I give Hubertus the gold bracelet I bought him. He's pleased with it, but is so unused to being given a present that he doesn't know what to say.

(Saulus breaks off the narrative at this point. LeMaitre records that he was distressed and introspective for some minutes after. There is no clue, when he resumes, to the day on which they returned to the valley.)

J.T.

Semantics Division)

The sun is setting when we reach Serenel. There is no one to meet us.

Hubertus tells me, "Jonaas wants a meeting at 10th hour tomorrow. Will you see Mario before you go up to the Blue Place? He's in a bad way."

I say to Torros, "Noni is waiting for you," and he runs off with his carryall dragging at one arm.

I go with Hubertus to see Mario and am shocked by his suffering. I do what has to be done and it's after 21st



hour when I bid Hubertus a good night, heave my parcels and carryall to my shoulders for easier carrying and start up the slopes to the Blue Place.

The stars are ablaze, the singing of insects in the grasses is like the sweetest of music and the breeze coming up from the valley is full of exquisite spring scents. The thickets need trimming again. I wonder how the Red Trees and the Crawlies fare? I can smell the scent of the roses long before I reach the garden and a garland of starflies is dancing over the shrubs which were only seedlings last spring.

The lamp is on in the courtyard. Red Tree's Daughter stirs and brushes me as I pass, the night-daisies are white and gleaming and the silver beetles are making geometric patterns on the mossbanks.

The door is closed but there's light in the windows. I push the door and it opens. I walk into the lovely-familiar room, push the door closed and put my carryall and the parcels on the table.

There's a soft sound. I turn to see Auria, clutching at her nightrobe and with her hair streaming over her shoulders, at the bedchamber door. She's so lovely that tears prickle my eyes.

"Am I welcome?" I ask.

She runs to me and we lock our arms and bodies together in an ecstasy of emotion, kissing and murmuring and weeping.

There's a shriek from the bedchamber and Yo-Yo comes running, naked and chubby and lovable. I scoop him up with one arm and we all hug and kiss together.

Auria pulls away, tidies her hair and goes to make a meal for me. I sit with Yo-Yo on my lap and cuddle him until he grows curious about the parcels. I give him his parcel and he burbles joyfully at seeing the new red ball of tough plastex.

"Red ball!" he says distinctly. "Put in box?"

"Yes, put it in your box," I say, delighted with his progress.

He rushes off and I hear him gurgling over his ball. Auria brings me

fruit from Red Tree's Daughter and some tasty savory cakes. She sits to watch me eat.

"Your letters were so short," she mindspeaks. "You seem to have travelled a great deal."

"Yes," I reply. "I travelled and learned."

So I tell her of The Hand and Alouette, of Torros's escape and of the travels.

I tell her of the car that we bought and then sold at a profit, I describe Bordeaux and what I did to improve the vines, I talk of Toulouse and Montpellier where I also improved the vines.

I describe Zaragoza and tell her how I made changes to the orange trees about Valencia. I talk of Murcia, Malaga, Tangier and Fez, of Tindouf and Chegga and the work in Algeria.

I don't tell her of my father or of the weed which I encouraged to spread over the sands of that terrible desert.

I tell her of Benghazi, Alexandria, of the isle of Crete, of Ghadames and Tunis.

But I don't tell her of our work in the poppy fields where I altered the plants so that they produce perfume but no narcotic.

I tell her of how we worked on a cargo-floater to Marseilles, of our walk to Aix and Arles, of the work we did in Cannes, Savona and Turin. I tell her about watching the shuttles rise to go to Moonbase.

I don't mention that the locusts won't swarm this summer because of what I did.

And I tell her of arriving in Rome and about our shopping spree.

She's pleased with the rose-colored gown, the pearls and the locket.

It's very late—or early, depending on the point of view—when we go to bed. Yo-Yo has fallen asleep on the floor, still clutching his red ball. I tuck him into bed, undress and turn out the lamps. Auria's body is like warm silk against me.

I awake and the sun has just risen. The calendar says 3rd day, 3rd month, 2281 A.D. I slip out of bed and go to the fresher, bathe and put

on my brown kaftan and sandals, then go out into the garden.

Everything has grown within the disciplines I set all those months ago and to me it's more beautiful than Versailles.

I greet Red Tree's Daughter and take some of her fruit, then go to ease my way through the thickets to the West Terrace for the first time since I came back. These past days have been so busy with the Clan's needs that I've neglected looking at my own concerns for too long. Today is mine.

The Red Trees are splendid, singing their breeze-music and swaying gracefully. They recognize me and writhe ecstatically as I come to offer the token drops of blood. The mossbanks have thickened and spread blue, green and purple to the very edges of the Terrace and the Crack. There are new cracks along the blocks of the Terrace's retaining wall and tiny daisies have grown in them. The Crack seems wider, too, and I notice that the Crawlies have moved out and up into the crevices of the rocks on the mountainside. There's a strong chemical scent coming up from the depths, obviously the reason for the Crawlies' emigration. Far below, the Red Palace shines dusty red and half the colonnades have shattered and collapsed.

I go back to the Blue Place and discover Auria and Yo-Yo getting breakfast ready.

"Those at the Red Palace are behaving oddly," I mindspeak to her. "And so many of them wanting to change faces and fingerprints and have illnesses corrected! It seems as if almost all the Clan is here. And Jonaas barely spoke yesterday at the meeting, as though he sulked. What's been happening? Everyone I ask questions of makes excuses and murmurs of other business."

"There's been a lot of trouble while you were away. Has Hubertus explained about Jonaas and Hero and Mahmud?" she asks.

"Yes, and Mario. I've restored his face and the eye, but he won't talk of it," I tell her.

"Everything's been difficult," she tells me. "We had an earth tremor and

there's something wrong with the Palace's power supply now. All the refrigerated food went bad and there was no heating during the last part of winter. Things like that have upset people. No one dared to investigate the computer beneath the West Terrace because of those dreadful spider-things, and you weren't here to tell them what to do as you always have before. So they resent it that you went away. I know that's foolish, Saulus, but people aren't very sensible at this moment, what with the big shift being in the wind."

"But they could have brought in heaters and portable freezers such as we have here," I tell her.

"They did, but things like that added to the general discontent," she explains. "There was also a flood that half-filled the Tunnel for days. The Clan want to leave here as soon as possible, Saulus. The deaths of Hero and Mahmud happened because they agitated about leaving here immediately, before the island was assured. Have you been told about the island? It's near Naxos, a place called Arih."

"I'll see what can be done about the power," I tell her.

Let them have their island, the fools. I'll stay here with Yo-Yo. Perhaps Noni and Torros will stay, too. And Auria? I daren't ask.

I eat breakfast in silence and then leave them to see about the power. It may be too dangerous to take Torros down there.

I make my way to the East Terrace and the Love Palace before attempting to do anything. The computer may have information I can use. The sphincter door sheds adventurous vines as it opens for me and the air is cool and musty in the entryway. As I walk in, the air-circulators and the soft music are activated and a cleaner-bug scuttles out to clean dust from the doorway. I walk through the halls and courts to the Master's room. The goddesses and their erotically worshipful slaves are as exquisite as ever, and the colors of the mosaics, hangings and furnishings are still as fresh and lovely as when I first saw them.

"Computer," I say, "are you an auxiliary of the big computer in the

Crack? Do you share the same power-source?"

"I am self-contained and limited to the Love-Palace," it tells me. "My power-source is solar and separate from any other."

"Can you tell me about the Big One?" I ask. "I need to know about the power for the Red Palace."

There's a pause.

"Perhaps," it says, "you refer to the Controller of Defensive Functions which is situated beneath the Garden of Meditation."

"Perhaps," I say. "Can you tell me about it?"

"I am aware that it exists and that its auxiliaries provide power for the Red Palace and the Fort," it says.

"The Fort up on the East Ridge?" I ask.

"There is no Fort on the East Ridge," it says. "There is an Observation Post on the East Ridge. The Fort is also beneath the Garden of Meditation. Access to the Fort is available beyond the figure representing Thought in the Great Room. I have no further information."

I remember the goddess of polished stone reclining pensively in the Great Room. I go out and walk to the corridor which leads there.

The goddess has one hand raised to her forehead and the other is pushing away an ardent half-beast lover. She frowns slightly and has eyes made from blue sapphires. I go into the space beyond her and there's a soft sighing as part of the wall slides open. Steps lead down into the darkness.

"Light the passageway for me," I say.

"I have no function beyond the Love-Palace," says the computer.

"Then leave the door open until I return."

I start down the stone steps. They lead down a very long way, the darkness growing more and more solid as I go. I adjust my sight, but it's very dim when I reach a flat place which I soon discover is a corridor. I feel my way along one wall for some distance until I come to a dead end in the blackness. I feel about and realize that there's a metal

door here. Further feeling about discovers a doorplate to which I press my palm hopefully. I hear the door open and feel the air move and then the lights come on so suddenly that I'm momentarily blinded.

When I can see again I discover that this is a small complex of rooms and passages cut from the solid stone. Some rooms hold supplies of food contained in dust-covered vacuum boxes; one room has guns of a kind I've read about and the rest are empty of all save for dust.

I walk down more steps to another door and, when it opens, the corridor is littered with the skeletons of men. Their uniforms are still intact but crumble at a touch. There are signs that tell me they died of radiation. I climb over them carefully, reluctant to disturb them, and make my way along the corridor. Here the glolamps are very dim and, at the far end, I can see daylight. As I walk closer to it I realize that I'm coming to the Crack. A few abandoned webs and an old nest tell me that the Crawlies had begun to invade the passageway at some stage. The chemical fumes are terrible and catch at my throat.

Then I'm at the Crack, the passageway shattered and split apart. Below, the darkness is impenetrable, above me the light filters through dusty webs and opposite is the continuation of the passageway where I've been before. Over there is the Controller of Defensive Functions, the Big One.

I judge the distance across the Crack, hoist my kaftan and move back. A speedy run, a great leap and I'm across, blundering into thick webs in the dimness. I tear the webs away and blunder my way to the big door which is always half-open.

The lights come on very dimly and I immediately understand what the chemical odor comes from. Water has run down the walls and is still gathered in dirty puddles on the stone floor. Some bags of powdered metal and chemicals have fallen, broken open and become very wet. The fumes they give off are very toxic. I hold my breath and go through the

further door to the Big One. Here the air is musty but breathable and I close the door to keep it so.

Big One's panels are dull and lifeless except for a few specks of light and some dials and gauges that show tiny movements.

I put my hand to the recognition-plate and say, "Are you still able to speak?"

"Yes, Master," says Big One.

"Then," I say, "describe your present functions and capacities."

I don't understand much of what it tells me, but I gather that it no longer supplies the Observation Post with power and that power to the Red Palace has become limited to a something-or-other factor. Something has to do with compression forces and malfunction. The dissolution capacity is maintained but the projectiles can no longer be fired and are possibly damaged. Utilization of energy banks 3 and 5 is no longer possible and reserves are low. It mentions displacement once or twice and I wonder if this could be because of the earth tremor that Auria mentioned.

"Can you restore the power to the Red Palace?" I ask.

Big One says, "Possible to cut power banks 1 to 8 and redirect power to Red Palace, close baffles on tanks 2 and 3, place alerting screens on low power."

"Do that, then," I say.

"Due to malfunction there is danger that closing baffles on tanks 2 and 3 will institute self-destruct and dissolution mechanisms due to distortion of damper," it says.

Alarmed, I say, "Don't close the baffles then! I don't want you to self-destruct!"

Big One says, "Self-destruct mechanisms on hold, automatic destruct at Red Alert. Power banks 1 to 6 redirected to Red Palace. Closing off extraneous function now due to inefficient communication levels."

The lights go out. That seems to be an end to it.

I go out to the store room and begin dragging the fuming bags to the Crack and pushing them over the edge. They fall a long way before I hear any sound of impact. I tidy up

what can be tidied and see to it that no more bags can fall down. The air is already clearing slightly. Coughing, I hoist my kaftan and jump the Crack again.

All the lights here have gone out, too. I adjust my vision once I've negotiated the corridor where the skeletons are, but it takes a long time to feel my way back to the Love-Palace in the darkness and I'm very glad it's sealed off from those fumes by two doors.

The door behind the Goddess of Thought closes as I come in and I realize I'm filthy with dust and webs. I go back to the Master's Room and bathe, put on a plain blue kaftan and dispose of the other in the room where the mech washes and dries clothes so efficiently.

It's after 10th hour when I get back to the Blue Place. Auria is cleaning it unnecessarily and Yo-Yo is singing a strange little song as he helps her. She puts the kettle on to make coffee and I swing him up for a cuddle before I kiss her.

"Come play?" Yo-Yo asks.

"I have to go down to the Red Palace and tell them that some of the power is on again," I say. "You play with your new ball in the meadow."

He runs off and Auria and I settle to drink coffee. She seems worried about something and takes a long time to broach it.

"Saulus," she mindspeaks, "Hubertus has been talking to me while you were gone. He and some of the others have some idea that I might be able to persuade you to take over from Jonaas. It's not a new idea. They discussed it with me several times while you were away. They think that, with their backing and Hubertus's organizing abilities, you could act as a leader—"

I interrupt with, "I won't become Clan leader under any circumstances. I want nothing to do with it and I've already told Hubertus so. I'll tell him again. I'm not the least bit interested."

She displays relief, as though she feared the prospect.

"Good," she tells me. "I was afraid you'd want it. Don't go their way, Saulus. Don't become corrupted."

I have to laugh at that. Auria's ideas on corruption are peculiarly her own where the Clan's concerned. I wonder, not for the first time, how she ever became involved with it in the first place.

"And," she tells me, "Jonaas has called a meeting for 11th hour. It's to do with the island. Will you go?"

"No," I tell her. "I'll go to see Torros."

We drink coffee and then I kiss her before going down to the Red Palace to tell them about the power.

TWELVE

It's 12:30 when I get back to the Blue Place. I'm surprised to find that Jazalu is there, because she's kept well away from me since I got back. Auria looks enigmatic and is busy making a meal, while Yo-Yo sits under the table, gurgling at his red ball.

"I heard you were back," Jazalu tells me. "Noni told me."

"I've been about the Red Palace frequently," I say.

I don't like her being here. She upsets Auria.

Jazalu gives me an artificial smile and says, "I came from the meeting. You should have been there, Saulus. It's all set. We leave the valley by the end of the month."

I knew this would come but the news upsets me. I won't go! I won't! But what of Auria?

"Jazalu has been telling me of the plans the Clan is making," says Auria in a strangely quiet way.

"Such plans, Saulus!" says Jazalu. "We'll be closer to the center of things and the island's a perfect place to use as a headquarters! Jonaas and The Hand have planned some big operations together already. Drug-running's becoming too dangerous to handle from Rome but, in the north, there are big opportunities. And, by pooling our Talents and The Hand's resources, we can establish operations that'll make us richer than we've ever been! The lottery scams, bond forgeries, some truly profitable robberies—"

She goes on talking, but I hardly hear her. For all her outward calm I

can tell by her glandular activity that Auria is distressed. Is she afraid to leave the valley or is it anger at something Jazalu said?

I interrupt Jazalu, saying, "Did you wish to see me on business or is this only a social visit?"

"Oh," she says, "I wanted you to have a look at the baby. It won't be more than a month now and I'd like to be sure that everything's as it should be."

"It's a boy," I say, "and very healthy. But you shouldn't be too active at this stage. Live quietly and don't take drugs."

"Are you sure it's healthy?" she says.

"Of course I'm sure," I say.

She chatters on for some time, but I hardly listen. It's a relief to see her go.

Yo-Yo, Auria and I eat.

"Is the power in the Red Palace working?" Auria asks.

"Some of it," I say. "There's enough to make life comfortable down there."

She finishes her meal in silence and then blurts suddenly, "The Clan will never change, Saulus! They won't live quietly on their island! They're habitual criminals, incapable of thinking any other way! It'll all go on as before!"

"I suppose so," I mindspeak to her, "but I won't be with them. I intend to stay here with Yo-Yo."

She doesn't respond to this.

"Will you stay with me?" I ask.

She looks at me with expressionless eyes, but I feel her emotions swell. She comes to put her arms about me and her eyes are suddenly wet with tears.

"Saulus," she tells me, "I have no choice but to do as Hubertus decides! I have the directive he implanted in my mind! I would have run away long before my confrontation with Jonaas if I'd had a choice! I can't make those kinds of decisions for myself!"

I think on that for a time, drawing her onto my lap and stroking her beautiful hair.

"I could make it possible for you to make your own choice," I tell her.

"If you decide to stay I want you to be willing, not because you're a captive. You don't wish to go to the island?"

"No, Saulus. I want to be free of the Clan."

"If you're willing to open your mind to me," I say, "I'll remove the directive."

She hesitates. Why does she fear?

"Saulus," she tells me, "I have secrets that are precious to me. Secrets I wouldn't want you to know."

"Have I ever tried to take your secrets?" I ask. "I won't look at them. I'll simply remove the directive that holds you captive to the Clan."

She does not reply but, after a moment, I feel her open to me like a flower opens to the day. It's a precious thing, willing and trusting. Oh, how I love her!

The directive is very strong. Hubertus is clever about such things. I examine carefully, afraid of damaging her should I do something wrong. And, after a time, I see the way. I put her into pseudo-sleep and she rests against me, then I fold myself into the directive very, very carefully and dissolve it slowly so that there will be no trauma. It takes time and I am very gentle. And it is gone. I remove myself and give her volition again. She blinks at me, resting against my shoulder. She has such beautiful eyes.

"Now you have your own right to choose," I tell her.

She kisses me and then pushes away to begin clearing the remains of the meal from the table. She's quite closed off from me and as enigmatic in manner as the goddess on the ceiling in the Love-Palace.

I help with the tidying up and then Yo-Yo says, "Come play?" so I pick him up and go out, down past the West Terrace and down the long slopes to the meadow. The long-grasses are rich and healthy so we play with his ball for a while, then play bob-up-bob-down until he tires of it.

I lift him onto my shoulders and go down into the valley. The little

lakes are full and the water is pure. All the trees are covered with new leaves and some are thick with blossoms. The ground-covers are thick and some have little flowers or berries. A sharp-tooth scuttles away and Yo-Yo squeals. I look about at the valley and the mountains and it's all so beautiful that tears prickle my eyes. The only poisonous radiation is high beyond the West Terrace near the Peak and, with Torros and Noni to help, this could soon be buried and harmless. The rest is very fertile and there's food in plenty for the looking.

I see the beginnings of the old mountain road that leads toward the land they once called Syria. It's almost covered in tiny daisies which follow the sun with their pretty white faces. And, up on the North Ridge, the old Observation Post is almost hidden with vines. In my mind I can see how easy it would be to cultivate the valley and have all that one could possibly need.

I swing Yo-Yo down and we walk back to the slopes, holding hands. Some of his chatter is unintelligible but, occasionally, he speaks quite coherently. I must explore and find out what else can be done to improve his thinking. I've already learned so much about the brain from examining his.

We pick some of the scarlet and white flowers which grow so thickly on the slopes and Yo-Yo says, "For Auria?"

"Yes," I say. "You take them to her and give her a hug from me."

He rushes off, up the slopes and beyond the thickets, squealing happily. I go to visit Torros and Noni and admire their new arrangements in the apartment they have decided to move into. It's very attractive and overlooks the old White Court where the stone nymphs hold a large bowl that was once a fountain.

It's almost 16th hour when I get back to the Blue Place. Auria is out somewhere. Yo-Yo has toys from his box spread everywhere, so we put them back in it before I give him some milk and biscuits.

Then I discover the note on the table from Auria.

It reads, "Saulus, you have given me the ability of choice and I must think some things out before I make decisions. Please indulge me in this. I am going down to see Meriem and I may stay the night with her. Do not come for me. I need time away from you so that I may see you more clearly. —Auria."

I take Yo-Yo out and we walk around to the East Terrace and the Love-Palace. I'll show this to Auria tomorrow. Perhaps it'll help her to think more kindly of a life in the valley. Yo-Yo likes it and runs about, shouting at the "pretties." Will Torros and Noni like it? Tomorrow I'll show them, too.

"Computer," I say, "tomorrow I'll be bringing some people here, perhaps to live. I want them to be able to come and go as they please."

"Free access programmed," says the computer. "Is it your wish that I open the storage compartments and have food available?"

"Food?" I say. "What food?"

"Food stored in the vacuum freezers," it says.

"Is it still good after all this time?" I ask.

"Storage is maintained at maximum efficiency. The food is unimpaired," it says.

"How much food is there?" I ask.

"Storage is 86.8% full," it says.

"Make the food available, then," I say.

So there'll be food for a while and we could get busy with cultivation in the valley for more food to be ready when the storage runs out. That's very reassuring to plan on. Torros will approve. He likes to plan ahead.

I take Yo-Yo back to the Blue Place and wash us both, then make an evening meal. Yo-Yo is tired so I put him to bed early, then go out into the garden.

The stars are very bright and the night scents are wonderful. I play with the silver beetles for a while, say goodnight to Red Tree's Daughter and take some of the roses to put in a vase for Auria. I tidy the Blue Place as she likes it to be kept and am very aware of her absence.

When I climb into bed I can smell Auria's faint fragrance. This is pleasant but depressing, too.

I awake and the sun has already risen. The calendar says 4th day, 3rd month, 2281 A.D. and it's already 6th hour.

I take Yo-Yo to the freshener, dress us and get breakfast. Yo-Yo goes to play with his red ball so I decide to go down to the Red Palace to see Torros and Noni and then to find Auria.

I'll take them to see the Love-Palace and they'll make decisions, perhaps.

I go down and through the remains of the colonnades, then into the main corridor. Few are about at this hour. It's only about 6:30 so I hesitate to wake Torros and Noni yet. I'll find Auria first.

I go to Meriem's door and knock. After a long time, she comes, bleary-eyed from sleep and the alcohol which is still evident from last night. She scowls at me.

"I want to see Auria," I say.

Meriem curses and says, "Well, you won't find her here! What time is it?"

"Didn't she stay with you last night?" I ask.

"Why would she be staying with me?" she asks. "Did you two have a fight?"

"No," I say. "Go back to bed."

That's very puzzling and makes me uneasy. Where can she be? I go back to the colonnades and open my psi-field large to seek without politeness. I feel the 'paths stir, am aware of the 'kinetics but I find no Auria. Hubertus mindspeaks a curse at me for disturbing him. I bring my psi-field back to normal.

No Auria. Not anywhere in the Red Palace.

A terrible worry begins to needle at me. Where is Auria? I think on it anxiously for some moments, then I spread my psi-field large again, demanding strongly.

"Where is Auria?" I mindspeak.

They stir, protesting. Jonaas mindshouts at me, Hubertus curses again, Noni queries and the lesser

'paths show fear at my demand. I draw myself in to normal again. No one knows of Auria! No one!

Fear seizes me. I run to the Tunnel. The monorail car has gone!

I know then.

I run up the slopes to the Blue Place. Panting, I go to the locked drawer in the big chest. It's still locked. I run into the bedchamber and find that all her clothes and belongings are still there. No, not all. Her carryall and what she calls her "work-clothes," the red bodysuit and her light boots, are missing. And her overcloak with the fur collar.

I calm myself and go into the other room. She has run away from the Clan and from me! I made her free to go and she has fled. I sit at the table and try to think about what I should do. My thoughts go around and around in confusion. I need coffee. The indulgence will make me feel better and keep me occupied. I'm about to fill the kettle when Yo-Yo comes in, chuckling.

"It's good that you're happy," I say. "What makes you laugh?"

"Auria," he says. "Present."

"What present?" I ask.

"Present," he says. "For you."

He has his red ball in one hand and a folded scrip, somewhat grubby, in the other. I take it from him hastily and unfold it.

It reads, "Saulus, I leave this with Yo-Yo to give to you in the morning. I hope he will remember. By the time you read it I will be in Izmir. What I am doing is something that should have been done a long time ago, but I was a prisoner of Hubertus's directive and could not. And, now that I find it possible, I must do my duty as I know is the only thing left for me to do. The criminal minds and attitudes of the Clan will never change. And you are as guilty as they are for helping them to continue their nefarious schemes. Personal considerations must be put aside and the Clan must be brought to an end. I am a Psi-Org Operative. I hope the Psi-Orgs will be kind to you, Saulus. I'm weak enough to want you to know that I loved you. —Auria."

I read it, then read it again. The blood pounds in my temples. Sweat wets my armpits.

I open my psi-field large and project to Hubertus, "Wake up! Auria has betrayed us to the Psi-Orgs!"

He begins to curse me. I mindshout at him to take in my knowledge! I tell him of removing his directive, of the note, of the monorail car missing, of Auria being gone for at least fourteen hours. Suddenly Jonaas is mindspeaking and I'm aware of Noni, Carolus and the Twins. I tell them, too. They begin broadcasting to the others.

I break off contact, grab Yo-Yo and run into the bedchamber. I change his clothes and mine for practical ones, stuff money and my identidisc into my pockets and grab a carryall.

"Is game?" Yo-Yo asks excitedly.

"Yes," I say. "It's called Hurry, Hurry, Quick, Quick!"

He follows me, picking up his red ball as I throw fruit and bread and his warm coat into the carryall. I run outside and his short legs pump busily as he pursues. I pick him up and run heavily down the slopes. From high above the Red Palace I can see some people running for the Tunnel, clutching belongings. I am almost at the colonnades when I realize that we have a perfect hiding place in the valley itself!

"Hubertus, Noni, Carolus, Twins!" I mindshout. "Go up to the East Terrace by the old path near the thickets! There's a hiding place inside the mountain where nobody will find us! Tell the others!"

As I reach the colonnades I find Meriem, the Twins, Carolus and Mario emerging from the Palace. I direct them to the East Terrace and almost collide with Noni and Torros who follow, laden with belongings. Some of the 'kinetics redirect their flight after Torros and Noni. I see Paul and Radley vanishing into the Tunnel and old Gino following them despite my cries. Such panic is ridiculous and has become an unthinking drive. What difference will a few minutes make?

Jazalu comes from the corridor, staggering under the weight of her pregnancy and two carryalls full of goods, screaming at others who pass her to run toward the slopes. She hesitates at the steps and then Christina and young François blunder into her. She teeters and falls heavily, thumping down the steps with her carryalls. I put Yo-Yo and my carryall down and run to her. She's half-stunned with shock and will have painful bruises. I try to lift her but she's heavy.

Hahmed, Fatimah and Guisepe almost knock me down as they thrust by. I shout to them, but they don't hear me. I try to drag Jazalu to her feet, but she grips her carryalls with fanatic strength and I can't manage her.

Cecile runs by and then Jonaas appears, carrying a jewel box and clothes, his face a mask of fear and rage as he moves down the steps. Yo-Yo squeaks with terror at the sight of him.

"Help me!" I shout to Jonaas.

"You imbecile!" he rages at me. "This is all your fault! You're a Psi-Org Judas-goat!"

Yo-Yo, frightened, runs toward me and, as Jonaas strides forward, cannons into his father. Jonaas staggers and I see his face distort with madness.

Yo-Yo, staggering from the impact, is suddenly a ball of fiercely blazing, searing flames! He screams, tottering backward, and falls over the edge of the colonnades! Yo-Yo, beloved Yo-Yo! No! No! No! No! Yo-Yo!

I spiral into Jonaas's mind and he shrieks! I see him fall and then I abandon Jazalu and run to leap down to Yo-Yo.

Yo-Yo! Oh, poor, dear little man! Dear little brother! Burned horribly, inside and out—his skull—and the brain within—beyond my capacity to restore—I can't breathe—He's dead! Dead! A horribly burned little body with, mercifully, a broken neck from the fall and still clutching the remains of his beloved red ball!

I cry out! I bellow with rage and grief! Everything seems to darken in my vision—He was learning, becoming whole little by little, a thinking

creature who could have developed further—Yo-Yo, who never harmed anyone and who loved me, trusted me, is taken from me!

I climb back to the colonnades and my vision clears. I see sharp and clear—so clear!

Jonaas, helped by Cecile, is struggling to his feet, still clutching his belongings. My rage consumes me! I shout at him with hatred and anguish, preparing myself to strike! This is the time!

"Killer! Jonaas the Killer!"

He turns, bellowing his madness and gathering himself to burn me with his mind-fire! But I am quicker! I feel a momentary heat as I spiral into his mind again, this time to destroy, to sweep away, to cleanse, to obliterate! I hear him screaming!

I am the flood, the storm, the irresistible force! I spiral ferociously, destructively through his brain, becoming part of each pathway—each synapse—each chemical/electrical carrier—invading each cell-cluster and erasing, unraveling his senses /conscious volition/instinctive memory/motor function/identity of self—tracing every neural connection—wiping clean and destroying and removing all that makes Jonaas himself and sentient and a living creature!

His screams are those of an animal already dead and jerking as muscles and nerves release the last of their energies! I am swift, strong, clean, cruel, ruthless and thorough, erasing and destroying without mercy until all that remains is worthless brain matter!

There is no more to destroy! Jonaas is gone! Jonaas, my enemy for so long! And my rage still consumes me! I withdraw from what was once a living creature and stare at him through a haze of fury! He sprawls, without dignity or grace, on the stone of the colonnades, his eyes staring sightlessly and his mouth agape, his belongings strewn about him! And Cecile is screaming in terror and—What? What? What's happening? The Psi-Orgs—Auria—Hubertus is suddenly there, shouting at me! Jazalu!

I run to Jazalu, tear the carryalls from her clutching hands and heave

her up clumsily, to stagger across the colonnades and up the slopes with her. I hardly see or feel, I'm a machine, an automatic creature, running, staggering up the slopes! My breath comes in great gasps, my body aches, but I am unable to give in to physical weakness!

Yo-Yo, oh, my beloved Yo-Yo, the most harmless and innocent of creatures!

Someone shouting—What?—What?—Hubertus is shouting. Helping me with Jazalu—But what's the water from?—Oh! Oh! Jazalu is having her baby! But it's too soon, too soon!

My head clears slowly. The baby. Must see to the baby.

I realize I'm nearly to the Love-Palace—Here's the door—People milling about—I run into the corridor—So tired, tired—To the Master's Room—Hubertus is shouting to the others—Ah! The Master's Room! To the bed—I begin scanning her. Too late to prevent the birth without damaging both. Must continue and correct the processes quickly, quickly!

She cries out.

"Be calm," I say. "Take deep breaths—push—yes, push—"

Noni is with me, helping. I stimulate healing processes for the bruising. Balance and re-balance Jazalu's glandular system, haul her clothes away. Ah, Noni's assisting the passage with a delicacy which draws my admiration.

There—There—Ah, it comes, the new, precious life!—There, Noni takes it—Gently, gently—Assist Jazalu's physical recovery, ease trauma—Pinch cord, tie it—Christina comes to help—

Noni wraps the baby in something. I hear it crying in a strange way. I put my attention to Jazalu.

It's done. Now she'll sleep—Christina is clearing her—

Noni shouts, "Saulus, the baby!"

I put my attention to the baby. Born too soon, too quickly—Clear the lungs carefully, carefully, assist the heart rate gently, gently, adjust the metabolism slightly. There—There—Oh, wonderful! How he cries! Such a sound of protesting life!

Hubertus takes the baby—I'm so tired—

Torros is there! I must tell him of the workings of the Love-Palace! I babble at him and he listens, nodding.

"The others," I say. "How many others are here?"

"About twelve, I think," he says. "Saulus, your skin is burned, your clothes are scorched—"

Regenerate myself, begin the balancing, tiredness fading—

"Take charge," I say. "Keep the door closed. They can't find us here if we stay inside. I'll see if I can find any more out there."

He's talking, but I don't listen. I run to the sphincter-door and out onto the East Terrace, run down the slopes—Down in the valley I can see a woman, her arms loaded with belongings, staggering toward the Tunnel. Cecile? Difficult to be sure—

I run down the slopes toward the colonnades—Oh, Yo-Yo!

Poor little man! Dearest Yo-Yo! Can't leave him for the sharp teeth to devour—

A piercing siren sounds shrilly as I reach the colonnades. An electronic, computer-voice begins to shout, amplified many times over. I look up toward the West Terrace and realize that it's the voice of the Big One reverberating across the valley!

It booms, "Red Alert! Red Alert! Enemy sighted in the west! All systems impaired! Self-destruct coming into effect!" It keeps repeating the message, over and over, the echoes resounding and the siren shrilling penetratingly.

Red Alert? Self-destruct? Enemy?

I look up at the Peak and see something small and high come over the Ridge! And another! Air-cars! The Psi-Orgs! The enemy!

There is a great rumble, a booming sound, a heavy vibration through the earth and an immense spray of

smoke and debris shoots into the air from the West Terrace, from the Crack!

The smoke rises and rolls in a great, gushing black cloud and the earth continues to shake beneath my feet! There's a terrible sound like the groan of a giant, like the groan of the earth. The Big One has self-destructed and destroyed the Fort as it was programmed to do!

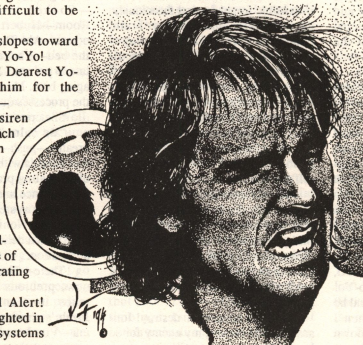
But something horrifying begins to happen, so horrifying that it takes me a moment to recognize what it is! I gasp and cry out as I take in the terrible thing that is happening!

The whole of the slopes, the whole of the West Terrace and part of the mountain beyond has begun to slide toward me! The sound is terrible, a groaning of immense agony, so

that sliding, groaning earth behind me is deafening, a roar that vibrates through me!

I risk one look back over my shoulder. The earth is like an immense black and brown and green wave!

I run, run, run, the earth shaking so violently that it jars my legs as I mount the slopes! I hear the roaring impact as the Red Palace is crushed beneath the wave and then the earth heaves mightily! I'm tossed, pushed, swept away, tumbled and thumped and beaten by the earth which rolls and heaves about me! I roll and scramble, wrap my arms about my head, draw my knees up to my chest as I'm caught up, engulfed, hurled with the rolling earth! I'm pounded, beaten, crushed—



It's dark. I look up and the stars are so beautiful. I'm so heavy. Ah, my body pains. Half-buried. Must move, struggle, make efforts to free myself. Ah, the pain! My legs? No, not broken, only bruised. Covered in dirt. Must get up! Must fix the pain. Ah, better—

What place is this? Where? Fresh earth, clay, debris of grass and trees. Where? Ridge up there. Perhaps I can see from the top. Oh, so tired! Walk slowly, re-energize muscles, stimulate endocrine system. Step by step. A road? Which road? Pretty daisies. Yo-Yo, where are you? Auria?

Step by step—
(At this point the narrative becomes increasingly disjointed and deteriorates into gibberish and aimless singing of the Faith song "My life is a Flame." Later this becomes merely a tuneless noise.)

Saulus was found on the Plains of Harere, better known as the Plains of the Warlords, two days later and taken to Grenoble-Psi for treatment.

Since completing this narrative he has been kept in the Security Wing of the Complex. He has not been allowed to communicate with any but the Security Controls and

certain of the Therapy and Administrative personnel.

He has remained approachable but cautious, is co-operative and willing to comply with any orders or treatment deemed necessary, and seems content enough to remain where he is at present.

He seems fully intelligent and recovered from trauma, but makes no attempt to communicate in any real way.

Petitions from Louise Vestos, Callios LeMaitre and the Heads of Staff indicate a strong desire for clemency and a demand for further investigation into the powers of this extraordinary young man. It must be noted, however, that he comes under the Red-Line Classification Rules, which makes any decisions about his future dependent on full Council agreement.

It may be of interest to the Council that, in the investigation of the so-called Love-Palace, twenty-two days after Saulus was first brought to Grenoble-Psi, it was found empty of any members of the Clan—as might have been expected after all that time.

Several priceless art works from the pre-Warlord era, said to be the creations of Abelard Andissoro, were discovered there and have since been removed to the Louvre. The Love-Palace has been sealed intact. The valley has proved to be of great interest to horticulturists and biologists from Central Research, and preservation orders are, at present, in force.

*J.T.
Semantics Division)*

THIRTEEN

Memo:

Dated: 23-8-81

To: Louise Vestos, Director, Study Center.

From: Central Council Advisory Section.

This is to advise you that, after careful consideration of the petitions from yourself and other interested parties, it has been decided to allow the subject of case 113L—"Saulus"—to continue working with the Research and Development Sections. In the

light of his past cooperation and the remarkable results achieved during the past two months, it has also been decided to place him in the Category of S1-Unique (Probationary).

Miles Roche
for C.C.A. Section

Louise Vestos was a handsome woman of middle years and noted for her dominating personality. She possessed the authority of long experience and was used to managing people. With Saulus, however, she was more cautious.

She took the memo back from him and said, "So now you're an official member of Grenoble-Psi. I'm really pleased for you. Are you enjoying the work you've been given so far?"

The light shone on his dark-blond hair and his eyes seemed particularly luminous this morning. She always found his eyes disturbing and, judging from what she had heard, so did most of those who had met him. Quiet, polite and restrained in his manner, he nevertheless managed to emanate an attraction that could not be attributed only to his psi-field.

"It's very interesting," he said mildly. "It was kind of the Council to make me S1-Unique Probationary Classification—especially considering the bribes I was offered by three of the Councillors and five of your top Security people."

Her brows rose at this.

"Are you making accusations?"

"No. But I thought you might be interested."

"I'm sure you must have mistaken their intentions. What do you class as bribes?"

"Their support in my case for certain physical changes."

She was shocked at this, but tried not to show it.

"And did you succumb to these bribes?"

He gave her a smile which held immense charm.

"Of course. I'm not a fool."

She decided against delving further.

"Be thankful that the Council and others value your Talent despite

its potential danger. Do you understand how close you were to Termination three months ago?"

"If I didn't, there have been plenty of people anxious to tell me so. I also understand how much I owe you and Callios LeMaitre for your support."

She shrugged at that, but was pleased to have her efforts acknowledged.

"May I ask that you pass on my thanks to Callios LeMaitre? I haven't seen him since my recovery, but I know he petitioned on my behalf. Did you persuade him to do that?"

"Certainly not. He has been genuinely interested in what happens to you, but he's a very important and busy man and is not a member of the Grenoble-Psi staff. He asks after you. I'll be glad to pass the message on."

"I'm very aware that Security made difficulties which you fought. It's good to know that I have your goodwill."

"Security would be less severe toward you if you told them where to find your old friends, Saulus. That Probationary proviso won't be lifted until you give Security reason to feel they can trust you."

"Nonsense. Security will never trust me. No Super is ever completely trusted by the Orgs. By betraying my friends I wouldn't be trusted by anyone!"

"You must be thankful for what you've been given," she said severely.

His face became expressionless and the eyes very cold.

"Grateful? I'm not grateful to anyone. Why should I be? None of this is of my choosing. I don't owe anyone anything. I do what I do because I wish to, not from any feeling of gratitude."

Louise was an Alpha 'kinetic. Her hair swirled and was re-arranged, a sign that what he said disturbed her. She looked at the file on her desk.

"The work you did with Agricultural, Biology and Medic-2 has them clamoring for more, and Biochemics is complaining of departmental favoritism. You'd better decide on who you're giving time to before I have a staff war on my hands."

"Medic-2 takes up most of my mornings and I won't drop that just to fit in with Research."

"I'm aware that you're doing wonderful work in the hospital section—"

"Medic-2 and Agricultural I don't mind, although I don't understand some of their technical jargon. But Biochemics! It could be interesting if they didn't become so upset when I ruin their theories and systems by doing what they say can't be done! What do I know of theories and systems? I'm not trying to cheat them, trick them or make them feel foolish! But some things I know in my own way and I can't always explain when they shout and gobble! Sometimes they behave as though I deliberately deceive them! I'll give them another try, if you like, but I won't argue about theories!"

Louise decided that another discussion with Lubscholtz and Kenlinson was necessary before Saulus washed his hands of Biochemics altogether.

"I'll see what I can arrange," she said.

She noted that he was wearing a new kaftan and sandals.

"Are you seeing Auria Shasti today?"

"Yes. It's my free afternoon."

"You have no difficulties with Security?"

"Not since she was removed from active Observation duties. And for that I have you to thank. I'm very grateful. Would you allow me to express my thanks by correcting your vision?"

"There's nothing wrong with my vision!"

"No, it's good, considering your age. But I could restore it fully and you wouldn't need to squint at all. Accept it as a thank-you gift and not a bribe."

She considered, her hair swirling again.

"Close your eyes," he said.

She did so. There was a faint itch beneath her lids. "Will this hurt?" she said nervously.

"No."

The itch passed slowly.

"It's done," he said. He was already moving toward the door.

She blinked at him, aware of the sudden change in clarity and definition. "Saulus!—Thank you."

He smiled and went out to where the usual three Control-guards awaited him, and others hovered to engage his interest in small projects proposed by their own Departments. Saulus was always kept very busy.

Auria Shasti's re-entry into Saulus's life had been at his own demand. With Louise Vestos to assist in the matter, Security found it convenient to have one of their own agents personally involved with him, but were disappointed at finding that she was no longer prepared to act as a personal "spy." It took little time to realize that, in fact, they had not gained an advantage, but had lost a useful operative to Saulus.

Auria Shasti was removed from Security activities in all but technicality, and seemed not to care at all. It became convenient to give her the title of Liaison Officer.

Auria stirred on the bed and attempted to draw away. He held her.

She mindspoke, "Saulus, I must go. Simone will be at the meeting place in an hour."

He released her reluctantly and asked, "You haven't any qualms about it, then?"

"No, it's logical enough. Are you certain you can do it?"

"Quite certain. My need grows worse every day. I'll act on the 28th."

"So soon?"

"Why not? If I wait any longer I'll only lose patience with Biochemics again. Would you like to look at my plan again while Security has the spycyes switched off?"

"One last time, then."

He drew the somewhat crumpled scrimsheets from beneath the pillow. She looked at them carefully, noting the additions he pointed out to her and considering them. She nodded and folded the sheets, then watched him as he slid them back into their hiding place.

"You're quite determined on this?" she asked.

"Quite. This is no way to live."

"Then I won't see you again until— Saulus, it seems such a gamble."

"I don't see it as a gamble. And I won't go on like this."

He kissed her and allowed her to climb from the bed.

Security Report 557E

Dated: 29-8-81

To: Central Security Investigation Division.

From: Control Head, J. Farraday, Grenoble-Psi.

On the evening of 28-8-81, Case 113L—"Saulus"—was escorted to the Central Security Block at 21st hour, his normal retiring time. With him were Controls Boucher, Lauret and myself. After some conversation concerning activities for the following day, Saulus prepared for bed and his lights were out by 21:40.

Controls Boucher, Lauret and myself followed normal procedures and checked the alarms and cameras, finding them to be in perfect order. Control Boucher took first watch and Control Lauret and myself retired to the guard-alcove.

At 1:10 Control Boucher woke me to take second watch and I took up my position at the duty desk. Saulus was asleep and all appeared normal. At 4:40 I woke Control Lauret for the third watch and retired again.

At approximately 5:10 I was awakened by the service bell. I heard Control Lauret leave the duty desk and go to the bedroom. He returned moments later and, at my query, said, "All's well. He was having a bad dream, that's all."

At 6:30 Control Lauret woke Control Boucher and myself. He said, "Saulus is getting dressed. I'll check his breakfast order." We did this together and found it to be as usual.

At 6:35 the outer grilles were opened and the relieving-guards, consisting of Controls Felichi, Maurice and Tadger took over. Controls Boucher, Lauret and myself left the area and went to the Off-Duty Lounge for breakfast.



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Control Lauret then said, "I'll join you in a minute. I want to consult the duty roster for next week." He went out.

At 6:45 precisely the alarms went off in the Central Security Block. Control Boucher and I immediately ran to the grilles and there we found Controls Felichi, Tadger and Lauret. Control Lauret was dressed only in his underclothes and was very agitated.

He said, "I went to see Saulus at 5:10 when he called. Next thing I knew I was in his bed and my clothes were gone."

I immediately notified Security-2 and Reception to tell them that Saulus was attempting to escape in the identity of Control Lauret. Reception then informed me that Control Lauret had checked out of the Control Section only moments before and that his fingerprints, identidisc and activator-card had all been in order.

I notified Security-Head Muriettis and waited with the others. I then made this statement in the presence of Controls Felichi, Tadger, Boucher and Lauret with Security-Head Muriettis as witness.

(Signed) J. Farraday
Control Head.

Memo:

To: Louise Vestos, Director,
Study Center.
From: Security-2, Henrique Muriettis.

Further to my previous memo, as nearly as we can ascertain, Saulus was picked up in a dark blue shuttle-bug outside Reception at 6:42. The registration number of the car was not noticed. It is thought that a young woman was driving the vehicle, but no description could be given. No further information is available at present.

H. Muriettis
Security Head.

(Facsimile of scrip only)

To: Louise Vestos
From: Case 113L—"Saulus"

I am writing this while waiting for contact to be made with certain of

my friends. I will ask them to post it to you before we leave.

You have been most kind and helpful to me since I was first brought to Grenoble-Psi and I regret that what I am doing will cause you problems and concern. For this I apologize, but see no other course open to me.

The Psi-Org Council have given me the Probationary Classification but this is not suitable in my view. I would be no less a prisoner with this Classification. I do not care to remain a prisoner.

Therefore, I write to you in hope that you will pass on the carefully thought-out solution which I propose and which I enclose with this scrip. I am aware that details will need to be refined, but it must be left to cleverer people than I am to work these out.

My needs are not unreasonable or difficult to arrange, but they are vital to me if I am to remain connected with the Psi-Orgs.

During the past three months I have made it quite clear that I am willing to co-operate with the Psi-Orgs and their allied departments. Of the twelve programs I have worked on in Research and Development, I have proved my value in eleven. I do not make claims for Biochemics since I found the people there unreasonable and stupid. That I have been so valuable is not an egotistical statement. It is the truth.

Friends of mine once advised me thus: Give of your abilities, but be sure you receive payment or people will not value what is given. So I propose the bargain which I enclose.

I wrote it out and hid it in my pillow for many weeks so it is rather crumpled, for which I apologize.

The essence of it is that I want my beautiful Serenel. Let me live there and have my friends about me once more. In Serenel I will be content to live for all my days. Some form of amnesty could be made for my friends and any other Outlawed Talents who will come to Serenel. I will undertake the work of a settlement with my friends, an open prison in that valley. Then we can all work together and gain a measure of fulfillment in our lives.

I do not know the correct words to make this all sound right so you will find my writing out of the plan showing ignorance of the ways to put it. But I am not ignorant of what I want it to be. I have chosen myself an agent who will speak on my behalf. This agent is Auria Shasti, who is of the Orgs but also close with me.

You will not find me. I am experienced and capable of avoiding discovery for as long as I please. Even Auria Shasti will not know of my whereabouts. I will contact her when I decide it is safe and in my own way. Should any harm befall Auria Shasti I will take revenge. This is a blackmail which I regard most seriously.

It is unfortunate, but necessary, that I trust nobody. I also impose a time limit to the period when the Enforcement Agencies and the Psi-Orgs must give me an answer. That time is 1st Day, 11th Month, 2281 A.D. Two months is surely enough time to reach decisions, provided that the important people who discuss it do not idle away the time. An announcement of the Serenel settlement must be made in the public media on that day or I will simply vanish and that will be an end of it.

Surely my abilities and my willingness to work with the Psi-Orgs must be worth some discussions and decisions? Would it not be sensible to have socially undesirable Talents limited to a place where they can live useful lives?

I ask for nothing in my plan which will cost the Orgs or the governments great finance or inconvenience. And I could be of great profit to many, I think. I lived in that valley for almost 22 of my years without causing difficulties. I was happy there. Remind those who look at my plan of this.

My bargain is a simple one. I am a simple man. But not an imbecile.
Saulus.

(Facsimile of scrip only. Received at private address.)

To: Callios LeMaitre.
From: Saulus who was also Big Black in Chegga. Dated: 29th Day, 8th Month, 2281 A.D.

This is a difficult letter to write. All letters are difficult for me as I am not experienced with the correct form and manner of them. I say what I mean, but if I put things down that seem foolish or poorly expressed, I hope you will not mind.

I did not get the chance to see you after the Therapists took over when the recordings were finished, but I was allowed to read the transcript of my "trauma breaking." I listened to the recordings, too.

It must have been a distress to you when you realized it was you I claimed as my father. The fact is true, but I will understand if you do not wish to acknowledge it. There is nothing between us but genes and a few friendly hours which we shared.

I liked you when we met in Chegga. You were not as I had imagined and this was a good thing, since I had imagined a god and not a person.

My mother's name was Lorrax Jameson. She was an Epsilon 'path in Administration at Rome-Psi when you were there studying in Psychology-3. She became pregnant by you because you epitomized the ideal man for her, but she had no wish for the relationship to become more serious in an emotional way. She was already pregnant with me when she became involved with Jonaas and drugs and criminal activities. She spent the last nine years of her life in a dream-haze at Serenel as one of his women.

She taught me much and was a good mother in some ways. She bore Jonaas two children. One was still-born, the other was Yo-Yo. I loved Yo-Yo very much. My mother was gentle and pretty, but not clever. She died of drugs and radiation poisoning when I was too young and ignorant to help her.

I do not mean these facts as a confrontation to you. I merely wish you to know because I like you.

I hear rumors that you and Louise Vestos are involved together. That is a pleasing thing to me. She has been kind to me and I like her.

Perhaps we will meet again some day. I would like that. Thank

you for helping me when I was ill. I hope you will have a happy life.

Saulus.

Personal.

Dated: 17- 11- 81

To: Louise Vestos, Director, Study Center.

From: (Central Councillor) Miles Roche.

Just a few lines to let you know that all is going well at this end. Once we plow through the formalities it will be a mere matter of procedure to establish the Serenel Psi-Center.

Auria Shasti certainly knows how to argue! (She reminds me a little of you during our training days together!) A clever woman, always ready with a point and as hard as granite when it comes to ensuring that Saulus gets what he wants.

As it happens, the Council finds this solution to the old problem of Outlaw Talents very convenient. It is proposed to set up a Serenel Authority and the mountains will be ringed with some very nasty, Talent-proof devices to prevent escapes.

The Authority will oversee the internal organization as Saulus and Shasti proposed it. Some of his ideas are surprisingly perceptive when one examines them in detail.

It was interesting to note Le-Maitre's claim of parenthood and his stand about his son's rights and privileges, don't you think? Council has suggested that he become Liaison Head between Serenel-Psi and the other Orgs and he seems very interested. He could be a very busy man for a while.

One thing I would like to know. How did all this fuss about the Andissor sculptures grow so out of hand? Saulus continues his demand and Paris Municipal Arts is up in arms about it! The Louvre Authority gets into the media at every opportunity! Frankly, I don't think Saulus has any hope of getting them back to his so-called Love Palace again.

See you at the Berlin meeting?

—Miles

FOURTEEN

Coming in over the low eastern mountains by air-car, LeMaitre experienced his usual thrill of excitement at the view of the valley. In ten years of monthly visits, he had never lost his appreciation of the change from harsh mountains and arid stretches of ugly countryside to this fantasy-world nestling so strikingly in its isolation among such areas of devastation. The colors seemed brighter here than in any other place he knew of, perhaps because of the forbidding darkness of the mountains or, perhaps, because he had grown to love it more than any other place.

It was a large valley, seeming only partially cultivated until one examined it more closely. From the air, the lakes in the basin were blue and shimmering, surrounded by thick copses of graceful trees, huge rock formations and lush groundcovers which drew great interest from visiting horticulturists. The small groups of buildings on the southern slopes of the valley hardly intruded into the viewer's awareness unless one knew them as well as LeMaitre did.

Although there was no dangerous radiation to be found in the valley, it was still dangerous to venture into some areas of the basin without adequate protection because of the mutated rodents known as sharp teeth.

In the east, the waterways became obscured by thick forests of trees which often puzzled visitors because of their mixture of unknown species. The remaining radiation patches in the valley had been removed with great care and enormous cost, but the mutations caused by the old influences could still be found here and there. The waterways coming from the western peaks surrounding the valley had been corrected by Noni and Torros several years previously and no contaminated water was to be found within Serenel now.

Bird-life in the valley was plentiful and exotic, but the killer-birds had long gone, as had the Crawlies and the stinging-moths, due to the decision made by Saulus concerning them some ten years earlier. He refused to

eradicate the sharp teeth because he claimed that they were part of the complex ecology of the valley. But it was suspected that he retained them because they were good to eat.

Toward the western end of the valley, on the broad terraces of the northern slopes, huge orchards of the famous Red Trees waved their luxuriant foliage and brought considerable revenue to the valley because of their fruit. They would grow nowhere else in the world and it was suspected that Saulus had arranged this, too.

Lower on the northern slopes, huge vegetable gardens had been established and were another fascination to horticulturists. These gardens were protected from insects and other non-human predators by huge green and purple mossbanks and immense colonies of silver beetles which nested beneath them.

Where the Red Palace, the colonnades and the Tunnel had been was now a large hill, partially forested and partially covered in eye-catching gardens. The scar left on the mountainside where the West Terrace had once been was now concealed by robust vines and a particularly unusual type of purple fern that produced small white blossoms.

The Love-Palace was invisible from the air, but the gardens which grew about it and over it were very spectacular. The East Terrace and the land about the Spur in which the Love-Palace was hidden was supported by solid rock, and had been fenced since Noni's children had been born. An elevator-shaft had been built up the sheer cliff face to the East Terrace from the valley floor, although it was possible to walk up by the southern slopes if one had the energy and the inclination.

The Serenel-Psi Complex was an orderly collection of buildings among orderly gardens and trees on the lower southern slopes and the valley floor at the western end. The Love-Palace Spur overlooked it and was isolated from it by the height of that sheer cliff. The Complex rarely housed more than three hundred people at one time, quite apart from the Outlaw Talents who lived in what

was known as the Serenel Village and a small collection of dwellings below where the Observation Post had once been.

The Love-Palace housed only fifteen Talents and the Village was set directly below it, hence the need for the elevator-shaft, since social life was usually very active.

The small hospital where Saulus worked on a constant stream of special cases, Research and Development Division, Biomedics, Biochemics, and the Agricultural Laboratories, all dominated the higher buildings on the southern slopes. In between were quarters for Controls—a very minor influence in the valley—and visitors, several large workshops utilized by the Talents, and an extensive entertainment/recreation area. In the workshops, many of Serenel's Talents produced pottery, jewelry, fine machine equipment and electronics, craftwork and clothing.

Most of the Talents who were "permanent tenants" in Serenel were actively involved in the work of the Complex in one way or another. Hubertus Aanensen was Special Advisor to the Serenel Authority, Torros Kinaidy was in charge of the workshops, and The Hand (he had never admitted to any other name) was Staff Liaison Officer. The Foster Twins worked in Biochemics Division when they felt like working and Meriem and Christina, still spry despite their ages, headed the Catering Division with Fatimah and Mario. Jazalu had joined Carolus and several of the minor 'kinetics in Maintenance, Noni was occasionally involved in engineering projects, and François was in charge of the Complex gardens. Pearlman and Justine, and several helpers who had once been among the Rats, were in charge of the orchards and vegetable gardens on the northern terraces.

Saulus was usually busy, but worked when and where he pleased. He was too valuable to be pressured in any way, but when he devoted himself to a project the wait was always worthwhile.

It was said that only three people could influence Saulus against his

preferences—Auria, Torros and Hubertus—but there were times when even they wondered if this was true. Quiet and pleasant-mannered as he was, Saulus could be very determined and very stubborn when he chose. His authority, never too obvious and seemingly mild, was never questioned. Even Hubertus, who took his position very seriously and maintained order and discipline, consulted with Saulus.

LeMaitre's air-car landed at mid-morning, but it was late afternoon before he could escape the Complex and officialdom. With a folder of schedules, petitions and suggestions for future projects beneath one arm, he walked through the Village and down into the gardens about the elevator-shaft.

Noni and Torros had produced two daughters, now aged three and five. Both were playing near the little ford over the stream which flowed down to the small lake known as the Lotus Pool. The little cave where Saulus had once lived was nearby, vines half concealing its opening.

Both little girls were incredibly dirty and robustly healthy. Neither showed any signs of Talent, but they were charming children who, like Jazalu's ten-year-old son, would be educated outside Serenel but would visit the valley regularly when they were old enough. LeMaitre exchanged polite greetings with them and decided not to inform Noni of their present state.

The elevator ascended rapidly and he stepped out into the enchanted gardens of the East Terrace. Slender, blue-foliaged trees spread delicate canopies over purple and green mossbanks, large clusters of pink and white daisies, and a variety of blossoming shrubs. Ferns and groundcovers of several strange but exquisite varieties crowded the edges of walkways and over rocky areas.

An animal, not unlike a golden leopard, sprang toward him playfully and butted his thigh to have its head scratched; bees hummed busily in the afternoon warmth, and two rainbow-scaled pythons poked enquiring tongues at him as he passed their

perch in a dark-leaved plum tree close to the sphincter-door.

The door opened at his approach and he walked into the cool entryway. The computer recognized him.

"Good afternoon, Callios LeMaitre. Saulus is in his garden. Will you take refreshment?"

"Later, perhaps," LeMaitre said and made his way along the corridor.

The interior of the Love-Palace remained very little altered in its internal structure from the way Saulus had first found it, but there were some divisions to make the apartments more convenient and some rooms had become work areas. The apartments were still beautiful and the tenants knew better than to spoil them if they wished to remain in the Love Palace.

LeMaitre called out to the Foster Twins as he passed a room where they were busy with a semi-abstract sculpture of rather disturbing design. He spoke to Hubertus in the small but excellent library area and he waved to Simone as he went through the vast living-area known as the Great Room.

The now-famous Andissoro sculptures had been returned after a three-year battle between Saulus and the Louvre, and there was an older sculpture of a charming nymph, salvaged from the West Terrace collapse, which hid the door to what was now a storage area—the remains of the old Fort which had been sealed off at the outer end by Noni and Pearlman.

The Master's Room and three large, adjoining rooms had been joined to the Blue Place to form an extensive apartment for Auria and Saulus. Beyond this, the old garden remained largely unchanged but, where the path to the West Terrace had been, there was now a large and airy pavilion.

As LeMaitre walked past Red Tree's Daughter, now a huge tree, she brushed his shoulders lightly and the rose-vines slithered slightly against the wall. The mossbanks were as beautiful as ever and huge clumps of white and scarlet daisies sent faint perfume into the court. The pavilion was covered with white, scentless jasmine (Saulus found the jasmine-scent

too cloying but liked the blossoms) and the stone wall beyond was covered with blossoming vines.

Auria, slender and youthful, dressed in a soft blue gown, was sitting at a table in the pavilion, an old book before her. Saulus, in Dark Mode and wearing what appeared to be a silver bodysuit, was talking with Alouette Coltain.

Auria exclaimed at seeing LeMaitre and came to kiss his cheek. Saulus smiled and the silver beetles which were his "bodysuit" suddenly ran downward to expose his arms and torso, but did not leave his hips and legs as he came forward to embrace his father.

Saulus mindspoke, "You look very well. How is Louise?"

LeMaitre replied, "Very well, too. We signed another marriage Contract last week. How can you bear those things crawling all over you?"

"They say 'hello' that way occasionally," Saulus told him. "I'm pleased about you and Louise."

He walked to the mossbanks and the silver beetles began running from him in a stream, seeking their nests and revealing him dressed only in a codpiece. The codpiece was because Auria insisted on it. When he went down to roam the valley basin he seldom wore anything but sandals.

Auria rarely interfered in the activities of the valley people. Since, officially at least, she remained a member of Grenoble-Psi Security, she travelled from Serenel regularly but briefly, Saulus and his surroundings being her main interest. She was not unpopular with most of the Talents of Serenel, but there remained a slight caution between her and them which Auria seemed content to do nothing about. Her two closest friends were Noni and Alouette.

Alouette had come to be regarded as Saulus's assistant and "organized" him when he was willing to be organized. She had sold her home near Vichy nine years before and come to the valley with some management by Hubertus and The Hand. "I was so bored!" she had told Saulus. Now she looked as youthful as Auria and LeMaitre did and had formed an

unexpected and warm alliance with Hubertus.

"For how long are you staying?" she asked LeMaitre.

"Permanently," said Saulus. "He and Louise are retiring here and becoming members of the Serenel Authority."

"You might have told me!" said Alouette. "I'll have to organize a decent rowdy to welcome them. Where are they to live?"

"In the new villa being constructed near the ford. They'll stay in one of the visitors' apartments in the meantime."

"Why aren't they to live here? There's plenty of room."

"Living with the Clan would drive Callios insane in no time at all and I have enough bossy women about me as it is," said Saulus. "You and Auria and Noni and Jazalu living close to Louise? What a frightening thought!"

He ignored the protesting exclamations from Alouette and Auria and took his father's arm to lead him inside.

"It's true, you know," he mindspoke to LeMaitre. "They get on very well as it is, but with Louise about they'd all squabble. She wouldn't approve of our free-and-easy ways at all."

"I should warn you, Saulus," LeMaitre said, "that Louise is still very doubtful about living here. It's because of the odd rumors which are inclined to circulate. It took me all my time to persuade her to give it a try."

"She'll be content here, I promise. What rumors are circulating?"

"Well—it's that very thing about being content. There are so many criminal Talents here, people with very positive personalities, competitive people who must have found it very difficult to adapt to the confined conditions and the discipline. And yet they're all content. They've been content for a long time."

Saulus slid a glance at him.

"So?"

"But it puzzles people that they are so content. So few arguments,

everyone cooperating, everyone enjoying their lives here and regarding your word as law. The rumors are that, well—I don't want to upset you."

"Tell me."

"It's because of the results you've achieved with patients who were mentally handicapped. Nobody expected such remarkable results. Tampering with physical matters is one thing, but tampering with the workings of the brain makes some people uneasy. So rumors tend to circulate that, perhaps, you might have tampered with the brains of criminals here, and that's why they're all so happy to stay. I argued with Louise, but she's still uneasy."

There was a silence between them before LeMaitre said, "You wouldn't do such an immoral thing, of course."

But there was something of a question in his statement which was not lost on Saulus.

"You'd have to define 'immoral' and 'criminal' for me if we're to get into arguments about such things. I would never do anything damaging to anyone, Papa."

"Yes, but—"

"Louise and you will both be content here because it's a good place to be content in. Don't you trust me?"

"Well, of course, but I'm biased."

They moved into the garden where Auria and Alouette were staring out at the valley.

"I have a lot of new petitions for you to consider," LeMaitre told Saulus. "Agricuture-2 is delighted with the new seed oil. And Bio-chemicals are very pleased with the success of their latest projects."

"They should be. I had to listen to hours of pointless theorizing. They never change! What's happening about the desert weed?"

"They're harvesting the weed now. Something to do with anti-bacterial enzymes in it. I also have a prayer sent to you by Diam Ennio. Remember him?"

"How could I forget! They tell me that the Faith is more popular

than any other religion now. Strange when you consider how much it stole from all of them and a lot of human-developmental movements besides! But it seems to be a good thing on the whole. What's the prayer about?"

"The Americas developments. He prays for your secret influence in his work."

"He doesn't need my influence. People seem to regard him as a god, if what I hear is correct! But perhaps I'll write and wish him well. How have you and Louise adapted to renewed youth?"

"We had no difficulty with anything but the questions. We tell everyone it's merely cosmetic. But sooner or later someone is going to notice the perpetual youth of a lot of your friends."

"It's already been noticed. I ignore the questions. Obeh will be awake. Come and see him."

The nursery-room was brightly colored and light. A naked, rosy-cheeked child was sitting up in his cot, blinking at them as they came in. He was almost three years old, a sturdy and golden child with Auria's dark hair and fine features and Saulus's gray eyes. He smiled hugely at the sight of LeMaitre.

"Granpa!"

"Yes," said Saulus, "it's Granpa and you may say hello after you make pee-pee."

He picked Obeh up and whisked him off to the freshener. He returned presently and handed Obeh to LeMaitre.

"He's Talented," Saulus said. "He makes minor broadcasts every so often."

"That's wonderful!" LeMaitre exclaimed. "Another 'path in the family!'"

"Auria and I decided to have another. It's a girl, already three months on the way. She'll be blonde like me and she'll have Auria's eyes."

"Saulus, I am pleased! A real family! It's all working out beautifully, isn't it?"

"Maybe. We're happy, anyway. Come along, Obeh. Let's go out and see the big shadows creep across the valley."

They went out to see the sun set.

Saulus did not tell LeMaitre that Obeh also showed minor signs of having the same remarkable Secondary as his father.

Only Auria knew that as yet. There was time enough to prepare for the future when Obeh was older. And there was the daughter to come. If he had calculated correctly, she would be quite as remarkable.

And, in the meantime, there was the new hospital for mentally and physically afflicted children, to be built high on the southern slopes. Research and Development were very interested in the project, and it would be enjoyable to teach his own children the things which had taken him so long to learn and perfect.

"Do you still do your dance to the sun, Saulus?" LeMaitre queried, still carrying Obeh.

"Every morning. And Obeh has been joining me of late. He's very good at it, aren't you, Obeh? We prance about together and then we say hello to Red Tree's Daughter and the silver beetles."

"I brought Obeh a present," LeMaitre said, drawing the red ball from a loose jacket pocket.

Obeh squealed at sight of the ball and clutched it happily.

A momentary shadow passed across Saulus's face, but he smiled, slid an arm about Auria and turned his attention to the valley as the shadows of the mountains crept toward the eastern end.

LeMaitre had already forgotten his doubts.

"Beautiful Serenel," he murmured. "What more could anyone wish for?"

"Quite so, Papa," said Saulus. ■



WRITING, PART NINE

Algis Budrys

The series comes to an end, but there's good news on the next page

I think it's time to review.

In Parts One to Three of this series, I told you how to write a story; the seven parts that must exist in order for a piece to be a story. This is as plain as day. It is, in effect, merely a definition. It excludes such other constructions as the jape and the slice of life, which I did not say were lesser forms. I said they were scarcer, and they are. Fortunately, most readers apparently want stories most of the time, or at least will settle for stories. So that is what I addressed.

Although a good jape is very apt to be memorable, since the entire situation can be summarized in a short paragraph, as I said before (A) good japes are scarce, and (B) if they weren't, and entire magazines could be routinely full of japes and nothing else, readers would be overwhelmed by a plethora of last lines. A short story mirrors life more realistically, and life is what we are about, in the end.

And I told you how to write a story because that is the place to start. As time passes, and proficiency grows, you can explore a number of other constructs—in fact, you will hardly be able to resist the impulse, and you shouldn't resist it. But first learn to write a story, with all seven parts out there. Because until you do, you will not in fact be confident of anything, though you may think you are. You will find pieces suddenly falling apart under you, you will come down with Dreaded Writer's Block, and you will wish yourself dead, in extreme cases; worst of all, you won't know what's wrong... unless you remember that I told you, way back there at the beginning.

With that said, I went on to Part Four. And Part Four sprang on you the idea that not all the seven parts had to be clearly delineated in the manuscript; that they only had to be present in the story, and the manuscript, I said, was not the story. And it isn't. The manuscript is only the written-down version of the story, and its purpose is to guide the reader into experiencing the story, large parts of which may occur off the page.

This seems to be a little hard for some people to understand. I don't know why. I cited examples—John Collier's "The Chaser" and Roald Dahl's "The Man From the South"—which are genuine examples of the story told sideways or backward, and with parts of the manuscript missing, as distinguished from Damon Knight's "Not With a Bang," which is a jape, and written down completely, as all japes must be. It follows, after all, that if the manuscript is not the story, this could happen, on purpose. It does happen, in the case of nearly every one of the truly masterful short story writers—besides Dahl and Collier, and Steven Vincent Benet, such living masters as Bradbury and Ellison, Wolfe and several others.

But not at first. At first they, too, put out all seven parts plain to see. It's an evolutionary process. And it's not necessary to be more subtle, if all you want to do is sell stories for the rest of your life, making a pretty good living. In any case, as I do not seem to tire of telling people, learn to walk before you set off at a gallop.

With that out of the way, I told you that writing is a lonely profes-

sion. This is a cliché, as you know, and the tendency is to nod at it without really examining it; one of those truisms you absorb before you really know enough to understand it. But you should examine it; no one else can write your stories for you, and in the end no one can advise you. People can give you the basics—as I have done—but once you start to write seriously, you are following your own individual track. You may go hither and thither looking for advice and encouragement, and it may make you feel good for the moment, but the advice, sound as it may be, will only confuse you. Why? Because that makes the story less than your own. And once you have incorporated the advice, somehow, you will find that a few pages later you will have to get advice again. You have lost touch with the story. And eventually you will come down with Dreaded Writer's Block. Most cases of Dreaded Writer's Block come on when you forget that writing is a lonely profession.

I told you, too, to pick a place where you will do your writing, and a block of time which is inviolable. There is hardly any crisis in the household which cannot wait a few hours, or that someone else cannot solve. This seems unlikely at first. Trust me. Only if you give in to the various demands, and thereby demonstrate that you don't respect the time either, will it remain a problem past the first week or so.

Then I told you about agents—it's a marriage, not indentured servitude, with all that that implies—and I told you about editors. I didn't tell you all about agents, or about editors, because no one can. Somewhere, at

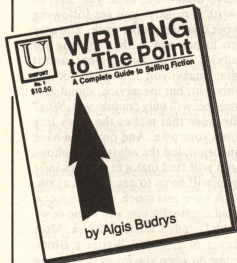
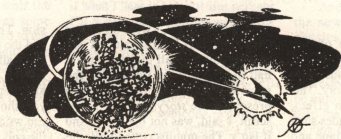
this very moment, an agent or an editor, or both, are doing something you would swear was impossible. And the same goes for writers. It's a business with people in it, and people will do things that are neither advisable or rational, just because they're people. Only in fiction do cause and effect work well enough for a mere

human to follow. Whatever happens, don't take it entirely to heart; life's too short for that kind of preoccupation.

You will find, in the preceding eight parts of this message, everything that forty-two years in this business have taught me about this business. Some of it is only there by

implication; the parts that are plainly said will suffice to launch your career if you follow them, and the rest will come clear as you go along. I have no reason to lie to you, and I have tried, very hard, to pare each section down to plain language and as few words as possible.

And now I am done. ■



A PRE-PUBLICATION OFFER YOU SHOULD LOOK AT

Later this year, The Unifont Company will bring out Algis Budrys's *Writing to The Point*, a 64-page book on writing. It will contain all the writing articles that appeared over the first ten issues of this magazine, re-edited and expanded. It will have an introduction by the author, and an appendix containing two separate essays, "Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy" and "What a Story Is." In this book you will find, in permanent form, everything you need to know in order to become a published author. Algis Budrys has taught hundreds of people at scores of workshops, and edited not only this magazine but many books and other magazines. The methods he describes in *Writing to The Point* are methods that have worked repeatedly.

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IN THE PIT

Elisabeth Vonarburg

Translated by Jane Brierley
Illustrated by Darla Malone Tagrin

Contradiction was impossible there, you saw



May I help you? Ever since you came in, you've been looking around as though you were surprised. You seem to think that the decor has changed. But I don't remember seeing you here before. I'd remember, because to begin with you're physically...well, I won't embarrass you, let's say quite *impressive*. And I wouldn't forget a face like yours. What's more, I've been here long enough to know everybody. It's always the same people who come, anyway. Who come back.

Well, of course, even newcomers like you. Don't you find that people here kind of look like they're related? Oh—well, that's because you're really new. No, it isn't a contradiction. Contradiction is impossible here, you see.

Thanks, I'll have the same. The house specialty: changes color with the heat of your hand. You're quite

cold-blooded, I see. But take me, now.... I'll tell you something: every newcomer orders this drink. Attracted by the name, of course. So it wasn't very hard to be clairvoyant just now, as you can see.

Why don't regulars drink Chameleons? Well, in the first place, there aren't any regulars. Another paradox, if you like: newcomers, but no regulars. Except the guy who owns the place. The tall, thin one over there, sitting absolutely still near the band. He stays at that table all evening long. I don't know if he listens to the music, but he must be hearing something. Technically speaking, he's deaf: no ears. But these days that doesn't stop a person liking music, does it? No, no implants. He never trusted electronic miracles, and anyway, he doesn't want some jerk messing around in his head. The light's pretty dim, I know,

but have a good look at him. That's right, he's got a slight mutation. Comes from a Zone 3. Well, yes, "slight," slight for us here, anyway. It's early yet, but since you've got such sharp eyes, take a good look—the people, not the decor. You see what I mean?

Guess you're broad-minded. Good. Is that a smile I see? Well, you look broad-minded: a good poker face is just as useful sometimes, you know. But I don't think you were shocked, not really. I didn't *feel* that the looks of our regulars shocked you. I feel things like that, now and then. Nothing paranormal, don't worry. It's just that after living here for some time you develop a sort of sixth sense.

Like with her. I knew right away what she was. There she stood, in front of the snake house, and.... But I'm wandering.

I live here, on the third floor. I play the guitar and I sing. Delightfully anachronistic, isn't it? But there's still an audience for the human voice, for merely human dexterity. You missed my gig. You'll have to come back tomorrow.

Another Chameleon? Why not? Oh, yes, I didn't tell you why the regulars don't drink them. Right: because they drank a lot of them when they first came here. Why don't you guess the rest? You're here to play, aren't you? The Tavern is just the place, as you know.

Of course I remember that you've never been here before. But someone told you about us, obviously. Remember, you seemed to think that the decor had changed. That's because nothing's permanent here; the people and props change faster than a chameleon. Joke, ha ha. Not amused, eh? I can do better than that when I'm really on a roll, but I need a little time to warm up. Your Chameleon hasn't changed, though. The boss would be disappointed if he saw that, even if he hasn't got eyes. He sees things through his skin, that's why he's not wearing a shirt. Got a mean tongue and knows how to use it, too. Doesn't use it often, that's all.

Yes, the decor changes a lot. Not really the boss's idea, more a kind of...collective tropism. The guys in the band, the boss, the customers, they all make changes. Sort of just grows. There's no real plan. Chairs and tables get moved around, disappear, are replaced by others. Someone thinks they'll paint a mural, someone else brings new curtains or lamps. Some days, the guys go to the Flea market. Or a customer tells us about some new technological magic they're inventing Up There or somewhere else. They bring samples that we try to fit in, which means something has to go, and so on. A sort of organic movement, Brownian, if you know what I mean? Unpredictable.

You knew what I meant. I knew I was dealing with an educated man. It's in your aura, your vibes. My good old sixth sense. Not by your looks, not in the Tavern. We'd have

problems trying to really judge someone's personality by their face around here. Take the girl in red at the other end of the bar. Yes, it's a man in drag. You sure got good eyes. He's part of the last act. Charming guy. And a lovely girl, as you'll see. He's slacking off a little right now, in between shows, you know. But when he sings, you couldn't tell the difference. So you see, physiognomy is out.

Right, it's a hard word to pronounce. My speech can't be slurred already, not after only two Chameleons! Let's sample a third. You think I drink a lot of them for a regular? It's not a contradiction either. Told you, it's impossible here. Because there aren't any rules, that's all. This is the Golden Fleece tavern. Your friend didn't stay long enough to really get to know the place, probably. Perhaps he wasn't so broad-minded as you.

I'm not sure it was a *he*. I just took a chance. Well, you see, I was right. No rules about that either, only statistics.

How do you like the new decor? Personally, I find it a bit gloomy. I like the idea of a pit, all the same. It's one of the few things that doesn't change much from one phase to the next. Yes, everybody's in the pit, how very perceptive of you to say that. And with these tiers they've built, it's just a question of level.

Excuse me. Just a play on words. One Chameleon more and I'll be flying. What do the regulars drink? Why be so anxious to know? Nothing wrong with being a newcomer here. No newcomers, no regulars either. Who was it who said the new is merely the old, forgotten? Some woman, I think, on the subject of clothes. Okay, let's have another Chameleon each and forget about this misleading question. Old, new, what the hell, does it mean anything in Baiblanca, I ask you?

You're not from Baiblanca, I know. Just a manner of speaking. I wouldn't dream of asking anything personal, not at this point of the evening anyway. You don't ask me how I know you're not a local?

Good. You're beginning to understand the rules of the game.

You're smiling again. Think you've caught me in another contradiction, don't you? No rules, I said just now. But, in a game, when the rules change by mutual consent they're not rules, right? Not laws. Or the only laws that suit human beings—mutable laws.

You're looking around with a strange expression. Skeptical?

"Human beings" seems inappropriate to you? Perhaps you're wondering whether the people who come to the Tavern are the only ones I'd consider calling human beings. Well, you might just be right, although that would be going a bit far. Everyone can come to the Golden Fleece, you see. But everyone doesn't, or doesn't come back, at any rate. Your friend, for instance. He stayed Up There, he didn't want to come with you. He might come back, though. Without you. I'm no sectarian, there's always room for those who want to be saved, as the preacher said. One of our regulars, the preacher. No, he hasn't left. Or yes, for good: a Zone 6, even the magicians Up There couldn't do much for him.

Up There? Oh, I mean, the rest of Baiblanca. A question of altitude, if you like. Moral altitude, you've got it. Everybody there's so virtuous, so law-abiding. So immutably pure. You think so too, eh? But you know, most of the ones who visit us—the spectators, not the actors—are from Up There. No, it's not surprising. But I don't think it's the usual sort of cliché. *They* think it is. That they fancy a bit of slumming: a little dip in the slime makes you feel so good about your own righteousness. Romantics, when you come to think of it. Delightfully naive. In other words, fucking phonies. When they go back Up There, to their grand houses on the Promenade, for instance, they think it's over until their next visit. But we're all in the pit, aren't we? The Brownian movement that keeps the Tavern in continual flux doesn't stop within these four walls. If I were drunk enough to philosophize, I'd say *we* were the

real Baiblanca—invisible, the hidden heart, the crucible where all human substance eventually comes to be tempered, hardened, or destroyed in order to be born again, and leave ...and come back.... Sometimes, come back. *She* hasn't come back yet.

But I don't think I'm drunk enough to tell you about her yet. There's a time for everything. Anyway, Chameleons don't get you really drunk, not an old regular like me. Getting drunk is a matter of choice.... I don't look particularly old? That's a matter of choice too.

Oh no, don't worry, I'm no metame. This really is my face. I was born with it, I will die with it—although, come to think of it, metamorphs have their own face when they're born and sometimes die without ever changing it. But none of them have died of natural causes, as far as I know. In any case, the first generation is only in its forties. We'll have to wait a little to see whether they're immortal.

I hope this talk of metames doesn't shock you? We're not Up There, you know, where it's kind of indecent to talk about them. Even at snob parties where they fawn over the few they've managed to scrape up—the few who've got the guts to show themselves. It doesn't shock you; I knew you were broad-minded. Anyway, you're not from Baiblanca, are you? You're from higher up, "up there" with no capital letters. Nothing miraculous about my guessing: it's the way you move—smooth, sort of fluid, really, and then suddenly tripped up. Used to weightlessness. Asteroids or Lagrange 4. Want me to guess? Let's say Lagrange 4 for now. No, I won't say why "for now," but I can tell you why I guess one of the Lagranges: the asteroids almost never come down to Earth, and when they do, they're not looking for the Golden Fleece.

The boss picked the name, long before my time. He's pretty old, though it's hard to tell how old, with a skin that leathery. I've been here about ten years, but the Tavern's been going at least forty. Just about

as long as Baiblanca. Almost a historical monument. The fur above the bar, that's the Golden Fleece. What animal is it? Some sort of mutant he found in his Zone, obviously. Kind of big ape, it seems, though Ted's not from a tropical Zone. He's from Northamerica. Ted, that's the only name he goes by, far as I know. Mine's Karel. Pleased to meet you, Philip. First names only. That's enough of a handle on people, don't you think? Civil status...I'd prefer the uncivil status, the natural state, if you will. True, a first name is pretty civilized already, but you do need to distinguish between all the I-memine.

Me? I come from...everywhere. Well, from quite a few places. I've knocked about a bit—a vagabond. A displaced person? Uprooted, yes, but I find that a bit melodramatic. The waters rose, that's all. The village was rebuilt a little further back, and then further back again, until one day there wasn't enough people left to rebuild a village. In the northwest of France, it was, but who cares, it's all under water now. We weren't important enough to rate a dike, and anyway, we know what happened to most of the dikes. Go to space? Well, the Lagranges are for useful people. I was the son, grandson, and great-grandson of a fisherman. Not much to catch in the water now, and not much to catch in space when you've got no qualifications. Anyway, space is for the law-abiding, the good guys.

You've got that far and yet you're here now? Who says you're going back up there? The traps of Earth, you know. No, the Tavern is not a trap. I told you just now, it's a crucible—a touchstone, if you prefer a less igneous metaphor.

Academic word, igneous? Oh, I'm only a self-taught man. An antique-lover, at best. But you now, if you come from a Lagrange, you must be a really educated man. No? You mean, you just found yourself up there one day? And what brings you to Baiblanca? Just visiting? Business? Both. Lucky man.

What, not lucky? But that's the sort of question one doesn't ask.

Actually, it wasn't even a question. If you're at the Tavern, it's because you're not completely...let's say "adjusted," to be discreet. Nothing to be ashamed of: maladjustment is the beginning of wisdom. For us here at the Golden Fleece, anyway.

Me, I live here, so I've found a place, I guess. An adjustment? Maybe. A point of equilibrium, at least, between two falls. It gives me a kind of status, for a while anyway. It's not unpleasant, sometimes, to represent permanence to those around you, to be the one who's always there when people *come back*. When they come back. Right: she never did. Doesn't mean she never will. The Brownian movement does miraculous things. Sometimes I see faces in here that I haven't seen for years.... Oh no, I've not been waiting for her for ten years! I couldn't even swear I'm waiting for her. And even if she did come back, I'm not sure I'd recognize her. Not right away. Some are like that. But they always come up and talk to me in the end, I'm the one who's always recognizable. And I talk more freely than Ted. They come to compare their past with mine, reestablish their history, if you will. What's the use of changing if there's no one to confront with the change, no way of judging the distance you've covered?

That's why I don't like Baiblanca. A city with no sense of distances, built from scratch to prove that nothing has changed and ever will. No history, no past, nothing but a new city, devastatingly new even now, after fifty years. Beautiful, no question about that. But such a contrived beauty, the triumph of control, the total human environment, you can't get away from it. Parks, suburbs, avenues, waterfalls, canals, the play of mass, form and line. Ah, the sunrise over Parliament with its symphony of light and shadow, a great work of art, like this whole city, don't you think? Always so aesthetic, it makes you want to puke. And the Promenade, thumbing its nose at the rising sea, a marvellous example of human determination to survive in spite of everything—as they say in the travel

guides. Have you seen the memorial plaque in the middle of the Promenade, giving the total cost of the city? But you must have seen the one in the Park, at least, it's right at the entrance, you can't miss it. Haven't been to the Park yet? You prefer the human zoo, I guess.

No, we don't think of ourselves like that, here at the Tavern. If anything, we have a superiority complex. I know, that's often an inverted inferiority complex, but why not? I like inversions, they cut both ways. You really should go to the Park. The zoo is fascinating. You only have domestic animals on the Lagranges...in the Lagranges, I should say. When I was little, I remember I found it hard to imagine how you could live in a concave world, upside down like flies. But I learned, you see. That's an inversion, too: concave, convex, up, down, the relativity of space. I like that. Even more, I like the idea of the metames finally being settled in one of the Lagranges, out in space where everything human becomes relative—up, down, and our precious verticality, to begin with. And the supremacy of form over inner being, that we always deny on rational grounds but that we can't get out of our heads nevertheless. Don't you think it's significant that metames are sent up there when they're caught at puberty? They haven't come out of the coma yet, after the onset of the change, and they're already in a shuttle, heading for Lagrange 2.

You still seem skeptical. Think I'm being too philosophical? No doubt it's not the feeling that all things human are relative, which has brought the metames and the normals who are their mentors together on, or in, Lagrange 2. Should I say their "guardians?" You agree, this time. Sure, it's so they can keep them all in the same place. And take their time about conditioning them—you're absolutely right, I see you haven't been taken in by the official propaganda. Which, mark you, is *also* true: it is better to confide these kids to specialists than leave them to the tender mercies of their parents; they learned that early on. There are even

some adult metames among the specialists and on the executive council of Lagrange 2, or so they say. However, human motivation being the complex thing it is, I wouldn't say that the metames have been sent to live in space for purely tactical reasons, or just to keep them under effective control. I would like it to be also a sort of poetic intuition....

Revulsion? Yes, that too. But then they would have been kept in quarantine up there and not allowed to work on Earth, however useful they are. Although you hardly ever see them. There are so few—about twenty thousand to our hundreds of millions. And they don't shout it from the rooftops, that they are metames. They only change for their work, and even then it's not obvious. What extraordinary discretion. The greatest power human beings have ever had, total metamorphosis of the human body—yet if you walk down the streets of Baiblanca, or wherever, listen to the news or what people are talking about, you'd think it doesn't exist. But then Baiblanca hardly knows that the rest of world exists. The Zones and their mutants, the recuperation areas with their lovely acid deserts which are being so slowly reclaimed—more slowly than the waters are eating away the good land, have you noticed? And new earthquake ruins are visible everywhere. But you don't see any of this in Baiblanca. No one thinks about it, or if so it's secretly, guiltily. One of these days, you'll see, they'll make having an opinion a criminal offense: "For defeatist attitudes impeding the reconstruction of the human race."

Yes, let's drink to our health, and to the future of the human race, but no more Chameleons, if you don't mind. Anything else will do.

You're humming along with the music. Bob Dylan, yes! The boss saves everything he can find—ancient records, tapes, CDs, and the hardware to play them. Always this taste for antiques. Dylan's been dead more than a hundred years, and the places where he sang are under water: New York, the California coast...but he's still with us, for a

while at least. *The times, they are a-changing*. These people were touching, don't you think? They sang "the times are changing" because people's minds were changing. That wasn't anything new, though. Every generation has had the same experience, although this one made a lot more noise about it than most, having the unfair advantage of electronic equipment. Don't we have a lot more reasons to sing that now? For us, it's the Earth itself that's changing, the shape of continents, the ground under our feet, the human body itself, yes, the human body.... But there's no Dylan among us. People's minds don't change much any more, odd, isn't it? Or perhaps not so odd—just reaction. Not a very good idea, I'm afraid, wanting to hang on to the same old vision of the world to reassure ourselves when everything's crumbling. But I can understand the need, yes, I sure can. The fear, the anxiety...ain't we pathetic?

Me, write songs? Oh no, I execute, I don't create. The right word is "perform," yes indeed, it was a lapsus, a revealing one—they all are. I just sing and play the guitar. I do it well, I'm told. Nothing like Dylan, but not unpleasant. I execute...I don't know what I execute, really. We all are our own executioner, aren't we? What or who are you *executing* by coming here? Ah, you say nothing, which says a lot.

You don't like that, do you, the latent terrorism of that kind of remark, the unavoidable trap: "Even if you say nothing, you tell. Even if you do nothing, you act. Even if you choose nothing, you choose." Old clichés. And you know what's so awful about them? They're all true sooner or later, at some moment in our lives, "Love-is-forever," or "why-did-you-leave-me," or "the-murderer-always-returns-to-the-scene-of-the-crime."

No, she hasn't returned yet, I told you. Very commendable persistence on your part, worthy of a reward. Don't worry, I'll end up answering the question that you so cleverly persist in not really asking. You still don't want to talk about

yourself—still being defensive, eh? Be careful, though: I might not tell you my real story. We are all in the pit, as you so aptly remarked just now. And after all, you *did* come here, to the Golden Fleece Tavern.

Ted really wanted to make some allusion to the legend of Jason and the Argonauts, I believe. He's very educated, is Ted—I mean, he really knows a lot about antique things and ideas. He taught me practically everything I know. You should see his library: he's got a fortune in genuine old books. No eyes or ears, but boy, has he got a brain. And a rather special sense of humor. The story of Jason is more than just the search for the Golden Fleece, there's the episode of the dragon's teeth, and then Medea, the enchantress, the poisoner, the child-killer. You nod your head, you know all this, good, I must introduce you to Ted. Now and then, he likes talking with colleagues—other amateurs of antiques.

What's that got to do with the fur over the bar? That's quite a tale, and I don't feel like indulging in horror stories this evening. Not that kind of horror, anyway. Yes, that big ape must have looked quite human when it was three-dimensional. And you know what? It was a female. I'll let you wonder about the rest. And I'll introduce you to Ted, I promise. If he likes you, he'll tell you the story himself. He looks after his customers when they're worth it. And they're pretty well all worth it. Look at them. They begin coming in about now. Night falls, they come out, they gather here. The tribal instinct, in a way.

They're not all mutants, actually. Did you see those two who just came in, with the sequined dresses? Friends of Heinrich, the guy in the red dress who gave you that charming smile just now. They come to watch every one of his gigs. And the girl at the bottom of the pit, beside the stage. That really is a girl, not a mutant, despite the scaly skin. She chose to be like that for a time. A metame? No. She wishes she were—each surgery costs her a fortune. She has the money, though: she's the daughter of the head architect of

Baiblanca. Talk to her? I don't advise it. She doesn't like men, or at the most only transvestites, and I don't think you qualify, as far as I can see. No, she hasn't tried changing sexes, I don't think she will, either. She's quite happy the way she is, you see. Now, take July, the one who's setting up the instruments on the stage. He's changed sex three times. He too dearly wishes he were a metame. To regret not being a metame! What a perversion! How low must one have sunk to indulge in such a thought—that's what they must tell one another, our virtuous liars, Up There.

Don't make such a face. Your friend must have told you about the Tavern's reputation, or you wouldn't have come. I am not saying you are a pervert, believe me. The word exists only Up There. Inversion, remember? Their perversion is our normality, and yes, we're rather proud of it. Their normality our perversion? Philip, my boy, you underestimate us.

Metames? Sure, they come here, some of them. Often. And they come back, sometimes. Perhaps she will. And I might not recognize her. But she'll give some sign, I'm sure, if she comes back. She'll find me. Certainly if she comes back.

I knew what she was, right away. It wasn't here, it was in the Park, in front of the snake house. She'd been there a quarter of an hour without moving. I was watching the snakes too. They fascinate me—so slow-moving, yet lethal...like water. And they change skins, don't they? Anyway, there was this girl beside me, staring, and finally I began to take notice. And I knew what she was. I like to think it was intuition. She stood completely, preternaturally still. You'd think a puff of wind could blow her over. I hesitated about speaking to her for a long time, not because I was afraid—she seemed absolutely incapable of doing anything violent—but because I was really worried she might faint. She wasn't thin or pale, she didn't look sick, but there was this...aura about her, a starved, desperate sort of emanation. I said something idiotic,

"Lovely, aren't they?" She looked at me. Her eyes were greeny-gold, like a snake's, with the same fixed stare, how can I put it—imperious and scornful at the same time. Perhaps that's what made me add something that surprised me: "They almost make you wish you could demolish the snake house and let them loose on Baiblanca." That's when she focused on me. We got to talking about the city in a desultory way. She didn't seem quite there, you know, like someone who's got questions to ask, but holds back. I don't know how it happened, but after a while I brought her here. She was looking for work, she said. She had a nice voice, I was a musician, I thought we might get together. I'd just been hired, and I knew Ted was looking for something new, another act. I also told myself she'd interest Ted. He has a weakness for metames. And if there was anywhere that a metame could have a little peace, it was the Tavern, weirdly enough.

A metame running amok? Yes, of course, I thought of that right away. A metame who'd broken her contract, who was on the run, refusing to go back to Lagrange 2 after her month-long stint on Earth. Crazy. An amok, as they say. But she didn't look crazy, you see, just...lost. Amok isn't what they'd have us believe. They try to frighten us with it, but it isn't necessarily homicidal mania. In any case, most amoks only kill themselves. It makes a lot of noise and mess, but blowing themselves up is their only effective way of doing it, after all. Rather inconvenient, when you come right down to it, this ultra-fast regenerative faculty they have. I've always wondered, if you could get all the bits and pieces and put them back together....

But that's not the point. The point is Bali. That was her name, don't ask me why. It was the new name she'd chosen on Lagrange 2, as metames do. She liked to dance, the sinuous Asian kind of dances. The island of Bali no longer exists, perhaps that's why she chose the name. Anyway, I brought her to Ted, and she sang something for him. When

he said he'd hire her, she replied: "I'm a metame." "Of course," said Ted, right off the bat. And she didn't say another word while I showed her where to put her things. As I was leaving the room, she said: "What if I'm amok?" "Everybody's amok here," I said, "No one will notice."

What's the matter, you think I use the word too freely? But we're the underside of Baiblanca here, remember. We say out loud what Baiblanca hardly dares dream in secret. The Tavern...why do you think it's existed for so long, that it's never been closed? It's a question of public hygiene. Concentrate all the infection in one place—boils have a role in the scheme of things. Thus the good folks of Baiblanca or Lagrange 2 know where to find their metames when one of the more shaky ones disappears from the authorized circuits. Don't look, you won't see anything. The Central's agents are excellent metamorphs in their own right: they know how to disguise themselves. They were there the whole time Bali was, and we only realized it afterwards.

Have one of these cocktails, instead, I'll make you one myself. Being bartender is one of my many trades. I just walk behind the bar and *presto*, there we are! That's what Bali liked about the Tavern: the Brownian movement also takes place inside each of us.

She stayed about six months. In the end, she never did sing. She had to get up a repertoire first; we had to rehearse. For the first two weeks, I expected her to be gone each morning when I knocked at her door. But she stayed. She served at the bar at first, then waited on tables. She liked talking to everyone. July...she spent hours talking to July. Or to Fancy, the girl with the scaly skin, although it wasn't scaly at the time; she was into tattoos in the early days—the phosphorescent kind, you know? Fancy even did an act for a few weeks: they doused all the lights except for a small one, and she danced. But she soon got tired of it. Hard to believe, but our Fancy is shy. She liked Bali a lot, although she

never tried anything with her. She knew Bali was a metame, of course—everyone knew. But she contented herself with admiring her from afar. Bali couldn't understand that anyone might *envy* her. Envy an amok! It took her some time to admit that she wasn't anymore amok than the rest of us. Just because she refused to return to Lagrange 2, go back quietly to the metame pound, that didn't make her amok. People have a right to live their lives, you know, and for a metame, that means being able to metamorphose when and how you want, not when and how you're told to by the Central. That's all she wanted, just to be able to play around a little. Explore, find herself, go outside their norms for normal people. Oh, I know, they say norms are here to protect the *metames*, not the normals. That's what they keep repeating in Lagrange 2. But the truth is, it's the other way around. Lagrange 2 is a zoo in its own way, isn't it? Where creatures who are potentially dangerous, because they're much too free, are nicely neutralized through training—and most of the time, they don't even realize it.

You don't agree? Or you agree too too well: you knocked over your glass. Never mind. It doesn't matter, I'll wipe it up and get you another. My round.

Have you ever noticed how wise, understanding and perceptive we are in retrospect? I'm talking long retrospective here—nearly ten years. I've had lots of time since to practice my wisdom, perception, and understanding. My tolerance. I was twenty-six, you see. I'd been knocking about for four years, my archaic guitar slung on my back, little jobs here and there, bumming around. A rebel? I'd like to think so, but I'm afraid I don't deserve such a romantic label. I was...obstinate. A loser. Not a loser in the grand style, just a leftover, sullen, brooding, believing in a world of winners and losers. I went in for the romantic posturing, that's for sure. When Ted hired me, for instance, I wasn't even grateful—too busy savoring my degradation. Ted,

the Tavern, the people who came here, I looked at them the way normal people do. Not as the reverse side of society but as the bottom: deadbeats, pathetic at best, repugnant at worst.

You're wondering why I brought Bali here, then. First of all, because it was the only place I could bring anyone: I lived there!

Well, it wasn't as simple as that, obviously. She looked so lost. She was also beautiful, did I tell you she was beautiful? And then there was the danger. A kind of defiant gesture. Some romantic impulse in me said, "Well, as long as you're living with



these people, might as well go all the way!" To bring them a metame, amok in the bargain, was just the thing to do—or at least bring them someone who could actually be considered amok, who certainly thought of herself as such.

What did I think of metames then? I believe I didn't think at all, was careful not to, in fact, like most people. And yet I knew what she was the instant I saw her. It was the sort of conclusion you came to logically around the Tavern, what with the transvestites, transsexuals, lesbians, mutants and the rest: all you needed was a metame to complete the show. I didn't understand at the time that we were all in the pit together. Bali understood faster than I did.

Lovers? Of course. It happened three or four weeks after she arrived. One evening after rehearsing, she kept me there for the night. The next night too. Just like that. We didn't discuss it. In love with her? No, of course not. I wanted to see what it would be like to fuck a metame. But I was very fond of her.

That's what I told myself, naturally. That I wanted to see if I could, that I liked her a lot anyway but nothing more. What I really thought and felt...I didn't know, didn't want to know. And I didn't, not for a long time. Was she in love with me? My, you've got the mind of a shop-girl. That's not what she was about. We'd met by chance, were together because, without knowing it, we each had something to prove to ourselves. I never asked her, she never asked me. We were careful not to.

I don't know how it got started. How things began to go wrong, I mean. She never changed in front of me or anybody, you understand. She talked with Jully, Fancy or the others. Even with Ted sometimes. But never directly about *that*. Anyway, although Ted likes metames, he doesn't discuss it much, or at least he never gets down to particulars. Something to do with that big ape's skin over the bar: getting really close once is enough for him, I suppose. And Bali didn't discuss it with me. Later, I realized that she had tried,

once. But she was so indirect...she overestimated me, I didn't understand. But it wasn't a source of tension between us, you see. In a way, you could even say that she was grateful that I left her to sort it out for herself.

Yes, sort it out. Why do you think metames go amok? Wouldn't you become a bit bizarre if, once you'd learned to talk, you were told not to do it except under orders? Perhaps a better comparison might be to say "not breathe except when told to." You can be conditioned all you like, but there's no way of controlling a person completely, especially a metame. There comes a moment when the lid blows off—and more often for metames than anyone will admit. The lucky ones arrange a system of safety valves. They come and live on Earth instead of Lagrange 2, or they stop working for the Central. They manage, they adapt. Adaptation is a wonderful thing, I've always thought.

That's all she wanted, Bali: her own system of safety valves, in order to survive. She didn't want to blow herself up, not her. She'd escaped from the black and white world of Lagrange 2—"if you're not with us, you're amok, and if you're amok, you die"—and she was trying to build a gray world, at least, before finding some colors.

Have you ever noticed, everything pushes the metames toward suicide if they don't adapt to the system on Lagrange 2? The only way of controlling the metames who are slipping away is to push them harder, drive them to eliminate themselves. Seems that even when there's one holed down with explosives asking to talk to somebody—it happens, you know: a lot of them want nothing better than to change their minds—they send along someone whose job is to push them over the edge.... Bali was not at that stage, never had been. On the contrary, she'd gotten as far as admitting that she wasn't at all amok, that she wanted to live, and that she had a right to live in her own way.

It was one evening when Marco wasn't there to do his act. Marco,

you see, was our Heinrich in those days. The Brown movement, remember? The people and furniture always moving around, some leaving, some coming. The names change, but the reasons for coming stay the same for everyone: to sample. So, Marco wasn't there. He was the main act at the time. Heinrich is good, but Marco was much better in drag, more varied, more complex, sang well, and danced marvelously. Marco...was always beautiful, Marco had been blessed, Marco was something else. A drag show at the Tavern, you see, it's not just about a more or less good takeoff. Here, the takeoff might not be where you expect it.

Anyway, it was a weekend, there were a lot of people, as always, and Marco wasn't there. Ted sent me to look for him. Marco lived in a gay community in the western suburbs of Baiblanca. I knew them a little, as Marco had taken me there a few times. But no Marco, and the others couldn't or wouldn't tell me where he was. To cut a long story short, I came back empty-handed, but as I entered the Tavern, I saw the doorman's beaming face, and heard Marco's second number. Had that idiot come back while I was gallivanting all over town looking for him? I was pretty mad, I'll tell you. But the problem was solved, and Ted was certainly happy: the frustrated customers wouldn't start tearing the place apart. I sat in my corner of the bar and did the usual, sipping a drink while I watched Marco. I wasn't listening to him anymore, I knew his repertoire by heart. But just looking at him was something. And that night Marco outdid himself.

Not only the voice, but every gesture, each bit of mimicry...it was so real, more feminine than even a woman. And with a sort of lightness and ease, a kind of regal nonchalance. After each song the room was absolutely quiet, and then it would explode. After the last number they went crazy. And at that very moment, while they were whistling, shouting and beating on the tables, Marco began to strip. Just to show you how

the audience had got carried away by the songs—there wasn't the slightest snide or dirty remark. They went on clapping a little, as though to encourage him, and then, silence. No music. The musicians were watching like everybody else, and it never occurred to them to improvise some striptease accompaniment. It was...a declaration, a statement, neither erotic nor suggestive, just...joyful. As he took off his clothes, he danced joyfully, unaffectedly. At last he was naked. He turned around slowly in the spotlight, so that everyone could see his body—powerful, slim, polished, except for the fleece surrounding his erect penis.

And he changed.

I think I'll have another drink. A Chameleon, of course. Take it easy if you like, but I am thirsty.

Bali. But she didn't become Bali right away. For a moment, she was Marco, as he would have been had he been born a woman.

I can't remember exactly how the audience reacted. A moment of stupefied silence, I suppose. No clapping, not right away. A few laughs, nothing aggressive. Lots of them knew Bali, could and did appreciate the situation. But I don't really remember. I was too angry. Yes, so angry I was actually seeing red, couldn't speak, sat rooted to the spot for I don't know how long, muscles all knotted, while the lights came up and people began to chatter.

When I came into her dressing room, Bali didn't seem surprised or embarrassed. Or amused. She wasn't indifferent either, just...attentive. She knew exactly what I was feeling, better than I—that faculty metames have of seeing people's emotions like a multisensual aura floating around each body. But I didn't think of that then, I never really thought of that, she managed things so that no one would. I was simply disconcerted by her watchful calmness, and instead of shouting stupidly, violently, "What did you do that for?" I said nothing. It was she who said: "I'm leaving, Karel."

I snorted. Where to? Lagrange 2? To throw herself into the arms of

her guardian angels, promise to be a good little girl now that she was past the acne stage? Finished with exotic experiments? I hoped she'd enjoyed her stay in the zoo.

She looked at me, shaking her head gently, and said softly: "Karel, you're so afraid."

I had to laugh at that. Two years living in the Tavern with the most bizarre, sometimes repulsive people, and this...kid tells me I'm afraid? A little kid like that, younger than I was? And afraid of what? Of her, perhaps? If it helped her to think I was afraid, good luck to her, but don't ask me to believe it. I wasn't afraid, I was just rather disgusted, if she wanted to know, because she'd done it in public. That moment when her body seemed to tremble and dissolve, like wobbly gelatin.... Well, you couldn't tell what was what in that amorphous mass! Disgusting, that's what.

She remarked that the others didn't seem to find it disgusting. Quite calmly. I shrugged; solidarity among circus freaks, that's to be expected. I saw her stiffen, and pushed the point: what else did she expect from that kind of crowd? And anyway, she'd done it here in the Tavern, not in front of normal people.

"Normal, like you, Karel?" she said. Her voice shook, and I thought I'd got her where I wanted. She walked over to me—she was still naked, had just begun taking off her make-up. "Normal like you, Karel," she said again, in quite another voice. I was surprised. She was smiling, and suddenly it was an invitation. She wound herself around me. I thought I knew what she wanted and I started to laugh, though I didn't push her away. She wanted to prove to me that she was a woman, despite everything. I began to kiss her, in a condescending sort of way, to caress her, a little roughly, I didn't want to *spare* her, to wait for her. I let myself slip down on the floor, pulling her with me. We wrestled, and I could hear her laugh as we writhed in mock combat, laugh deep in her throat the way she did when making love. I laughed too. It

was all a joke. She'd stay, of course. Stay with me. As I laughed, she suddenly flipped me over and straddled me. I felt my groin begin to tingle, I was coming, I opened my eyes.

And I saw her change. I *felt* her change. As if something was draining out, moving, re-forming, sliding...I was still holding her, and the texture of her skin, her muscles, the shape of her hips, everything was different. It was a man astride me, stronger than I was, nailing me to the ground, moving slowly, caressing me, and I was coming, damn it, in spite of myself I was coming. Against my belly his penis was hot, hard. Close to my face, his face. The face of my handsome Marco, but with eyes greeny-gold, staring, unchanged, and the voice of Bali who murmured, "Normal like you, Karel, like you."

Then he went away, *she* went away, Bali came back, someone came back anyhow, and she knew who she was, she was somebody at any rate, and I...I was no one now, I was beside myself.

And so I stayed on at the Tavern. To find the road home, first of all, to find someone who would be me. And later so that she could find me again. You don't come to the Tavern by chance, you see. Not me, ten years ago, and not you now. Let's have a last drink before we go to your place—or my place, what does it matter? Let's have a last drink and look around the Tavern, where beings who know more or less what they are, but don't dare admit it even to themselves, come to meet others who know more or less what they want to be, but can't necessarily achieve it. Let's look at Fancy and her scales, and Jully, who may be a woman again in a few months. And let's think about Bali, who may come back some day to see how I'm getting on. Each new metame who comes in here gives me a little hope, but you're not Bali either. Of course you're a metame, I knew it right away, I told you—sixth sense. Come, let's dance a bit before leaving, don't be afraid. And even if you're afraid, everybody's normal here, no one will notice. ■

RETURN TO COOLE

Cara O'Sullivan

Illustrated by Brian Lee Durfee

For Jay

*White feathers gleamed against the Irish green-
ness; the morning mist rose off the lake*

A vague odor rose from the wet leaves that the wind had piled on my balcony—it was that sweet smell starting to turn bitter with decay. Rain whispered into tree leaves; wind hissed softly as we read Yeats' poetry. The monorail traffic of Salt Lake City was muted, distant as another dimension.

While the five of us read Yeats, scenes from my last trip to Ireland kept coming to me, scenes from which I could pluck details for the virtual reality world I was creating and testing at work. As each of my friends read, I typed notes into my Yeats infobase. We read all the favorites: "Come Away Oh Human Child;" "I Will Arise and Go to Innisfree;" "How Can We Know the Dancer from the Dance?" Then came Michael's turn.

Strapped upright in his wheelchair, from which he usually threw out gentle prods and jokes, or questions that kept you going for hours, Michael read *The Swans at Coole* to our small book club. Diane, Michael's sister, propped the book up for him. He touched the page with one clenched hand, moving a crooked finger down the page as he read. He sounded older than his thirty years; his voice was more subdued than usual, the sound of it pale with a wisdom I rarely heard:

*The trees are in their autumn
beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the
water
Mirrors a still sky.*

*Upon the brimming water
among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty swans...*

The silence among the five of us was close and soft, as though a light snow were falling in the room. Just outside my balcony, the trees rustled gently in the wind, nodding in our direction, listening.

*But now they drift on the still
water,
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they
build,
By what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes when I
awake some day
To find they have flown away?*

When Michael finished reading, the silence was audible. A shadow passed through me, a cold premonition. I looked over at Diane. She was watching her brother intently, searching his face.

He said simply, without smiling, "That's my favorite." His eyes were dark, his face pale.

"It's beautiful," I said.

Jared rose and said, "Well, it's past this middle-aged guy's bedtime. I should be going, before the walk-tube to Sugarhouse stops. Thanks for having us, Megan." He did not go immediately, though. He walked over to the open patio door and stood there, looking into the dark and the rain, the gentle wind lifting some gray and black strands of his hair.

Diane placed a hand on Michael's shoulder and asked him, "I need to talk to Anne for a moment



about the church camp-out. It might take a few minutes. Are you tired?"

Michael looked up at her and smiled. "Oh, I'm a bit tired—I've been in my brace for longer than usual. Maybe if you'd call Dad first—then he'd be on his way while you're talking to Anne."

"No problem. May I use your phone, Megan?" Diane asked.

"Sure," I replied. "You know where it is."

Jared came to Michael, laid a hand on his shoulder, and said, "I'll see you later, Michael. See you tomorrow morning at the old grind, Megan."

I laughed and Michael said goodbye. Jared turned and walked out the door, stooping slightly to clear the frame. I turned to Michael. His intent gaze startled me—even though I'd known him since we were nine years old, it never ceased to unsettle me. "Megan, did you visit Coole when you went to Ireland?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "And I want to see it again this summer. I'd like to get up to Sligo as well. Why?"

"Oh, just wondering. I'd love to see Ireland. With you, if I could."

"I could take you on a pub crawl through Dublin or Cork."

He didn't laugh as he usually would when I made humorous references to his conservative lifestyle. He was Mormon and didn't drink.

"But just think how it would be," Michael said, insistently. "Did you see wild swans when you were at Coole?"

"Yes, I did," I said, pausing for a moment, lost in a memory of white feathers gleaming against the Irish greenness, the morning mist rising off the lake, mountains silent nearby. A white farmhouse glowing in the incredible light of western Ireland. So different from the arid beauty of Utah. "They were beautiful. And you could smell the flowers everywhere because it had just rained. Michael, when I finish this enhancement of the company's virtual reality program, I'll have to create Ireland for you."

His eyes widened for a moment, but then he frowned. "That's nice of you, Megan, but I don't think we

could afford the session time. And besides, I really couldn't share it with you the way I could if we were actually there."

I leaned close to him and asked, "Can you keep a secret?"

"Meg, I know *all* your secrets." He laughed, more like the regular Michael.

"True," I had to agree ruefully. "But let's say you could share a virtual reality experience that wasn't just multi-user and interactive, but was also psycho-dynamic."

Michael tilted his head, gazed at me, expectant. I knew that look and I knew I had him then. "You mean the end user isn't limited to choices determined by the software—that given certain rights, the end user can edit to an infinite degree in the program?"

"As project leader, I'm not confirming or denying," I said, rising from my chair. "And you didn't hear it from me."

Michael reached out and touched my arm. "How psycho-dynamic is it?" he asked.

"Quite—depends on the positronix filters and the function-security you assign each user. I can't say anymore for a while. But I'll find a way to get you into a session."

"Will you be needing a beta tester?" he asked. "Jared said he'd like to have me work for you guys again."

"I know he did, but the security on this thing is a little tighter than usual. They haven't even told me if they're going to bring in outside beta testers. We may have to keep it all internal. That's how new this thing is, Michael."

"Could it let me feel what it's like to walk?"

I wanted to tell him how it would and more, but realized then I may have said too much in my eagerness to share. "You'll see," I replied, then paused. "I'll get you a session—somehow."

"Thank you," was all Michael said.

Diane came in then and said, "Dad's on his way." She looked at Michael, cocking her head. "You look

chipper all of a sudden. Something happen while I was on the phone? You look as though someone just told you how the universe was born."

Michael only smiled and asked her how soon their father would be there because he was feeling very tired.

When Vernon, their father, came in, he said hello to me in that kindly, genteel way some older men from the West have. He seemed to study his son's face for a moment before lifting him from his wheelchair to carry him to out their van. Michael smiled at me from over his father's shoulder.

After they left, I closed my infobase file and shut off my laptop. I opened my patio doors and sat in front of them. I let the wind shake out my hair and my tangled thoughts, wondering about the feeling I'd had during the poetry reading, of Michael slipping away.

The lake is smoked glass, glazing all its reflections with a pale green. The mist is lifting, leaving the grass and leaves dripping. There, the feel of Irish soil, spongy, but firm to my feet. Placing a hand on a gray boulder to find it's as damp and cold as it looks. The scent of the sea isn't quite right. There is the sound of a bird calling—a honking, sonorous and low, the bell beat of wings pumping air up and away. There come the swans, like spirits gathering the mist about themselves and spinning it into pure white bodies of feather, sinew, and bone—Lir's children returning from their 1,000-year exile to be transformed into humans by St. Patrick.

A football arches and plummets into the flock of swans, and they scatter, wheeling and crying wildly. "Abort," I say instinctively. The lake, the mountains, everything withdraws from me like a receding wave. My VR body net comes into view. The world loses its dimension, goes flat, then dissolves.

I looked up at the viewing windows where some of my design team sat monitoring the session. "I'm the only who's supposed to have full editing rights in this test. The filters for the

other users shouldn't let things like that in!"

"Couldn't resist, boss," said one of my programmers through the intercom.

"Cad," I said simply. "Congratulations, you get to choose today's pizza toppings for lunch. You've just found a bug in the function-control security."

"Why this scenario for testing?" he asked. "Isn't it getting old? We've been using it for four months now—ever since you got back from your trip."

"One complex scene to test all the possibilities. You just don't understand New World yet."

That afternoon I spoke to Jared, who was the director of product development. If anyone could help me get free session time, it would be Jared. I explained the situation—I had a head start there because Jared knew Michael from their church group for singles, the book club, and had worked with him in several beta tests of previous products. Michael was very good at helping us test products—especially those useful for the disabled.

Jared leaned back in his chair when I finished making my plea. "If it were up to me, I'd hire Michael—without being asked—to do beta testing. But Joseph is so uptight he doesn't want outside beta testers at all. In fact, I wasn't supposed to tell even you for another two weeks. Joseph won't go for it unless there's something in it for the company that transcends security concerns."

I made a wry face and sighed. "I know. But we expend huge sums of money on computer equipment donated to the local schools, funding for the ballet, the symphony. This has the same humanitarian angle. Sort of like the Make-a-Wish Foundation."

Jared raised his thick eyebrows. "Yeah, but Michael isn't dying. Or is he?" His voice suddenly lost its usual humor.

"No. I mean, I don't know so. When he read that poem last night, a weird feeling passed through me—some people might call it premoni-

tion, if you're into that sort of thing. Sometimes when we're in the middle of an intense R&D cycle, I get hunches, whispers in my head that hint about ways to pursue a problem or a new line of code to create." I paused and looked up to meet Jared's steadfast gaze. I nearly lost my courage, but went on. "Whatever it was, it was a real feeling. I've seen him close to death in the years I've known him, but never felt that before, Jared—the presence of death, as though it were leaning over his shoulder."

Jared looked at me—I could tell he was weighing his words, trying to figure out how to explain something to me. "You've been friends an awfully long time with him, Meg. Doesn't surprise me that you would get feelings like that," he said. "My wife and I would get sympathy pains—even when I've been on the other side of the world and the one didn't know the other was sick. I think I told you that my wife and youngest son died suddenly while I was away on business. I was walking past Rockefeller Plaza in Manhattan, and it hit me that something was terribly wrong. I suddenly wanted to cancel all my meetings and get home. I was told later that they died about that same time."

Jared fell silent, sat back in his chair for a moment, shoulders hunched over. For a rare moment, he truly looked his age of fifty. He looked resigned and wistful all at the same time. Jared had told me many things in our three years of working together, but he'd never told me this. For once, the skeptic in me was silent.

"I hope someday I'll be that close to someone," I said, and sighed.

Jared looked up. "But you are. To Michael. He loves you, Meg."

"Sure he does, and I love him. He and Diane are the siblings I never had."

Jared was quiet a moment and frowned. "That can be the start of another kind of love, Meg."

"Well, I keep hoping there's someone out there as good as Michael or you," I said in a light tone, trying to change the subject.

Suddenly, a light came into Jared's eyes. He raised a bushy gray eyebrow. "You know, this could work. You don't know this, but Marketing and PR have been pitching a huge media event to the CEO. Why not make this part of it? '*Handicapped Man Employs Interactive Virtual Reality to Visit His Dream Place.*' That could be the demo, the case study to end all case studies. And—well, I hate to be crass, but Michael doesn't look a day over seventeen years old. Marketing just might lap this up. It may push them to focus on the training and therapy applications of New World."

I nodded my head in admiration at my friend. He could be as much of an intellectual and academic purist as any researcher, but he had a hard head when it came to marketing his research or new product. "It's a good idea. I'm just not sure how Michael will like it. You know how he hates attention. Let me talk to him about it—go ahead and talk to Marketing, though, if it's the only way."

"Okay, partner," Jared said. "Now get back to work while I come up with a cunning and evil plan."

I left Jared's office smiling, feeling hopeful.

The farmer waves to me as he walks away across the pasture. His border collie, with whom I have made fast friends, barks at his heels. Inside my coat pocket, the small, freshly baked loaf of soda bread he has given me warms my hand.

The lake is smoked glass, glazing all its reflections with a pale green. The mist is lifting, leaving the grass and leaves dripping. The Irish soil is spongy, but firm underneath my feet. You can smell the sea everywhere on the island. It cleanses the air, soothes the senses. The flowers give off a clear scent in the new air. The quiet is filled with sonorous and low honking, the bell beat of wings pumping air up and away. There come the swans, like spirits gathering the mist about themselves and spinning it into pure white bodies of feather, sinew, and bone.

Jared is walking toward me. I sense his presence, feel his body heat

as he nears me. When we shake hands, I feel bones, sinew, and flesh. I gasp—behind Jared, Michael sits in his wheelchair, amazed, joyous.

"What's wrong?" Jared asks me, looking over his shoulder.

Michael smiles up at the swans, twisting his crippled body, straining his neck as far as it will go to watch them.

"Oh-oh. I was thinking of Michael just now," Jared says.

"You just found a bug," I sigh. "Filter problem. What do you want on your pizza?"

"If we get any further behind, we may have to cut the pizza budget," Jared says wryly.

I concentrate on Michael going away. He fades, watching the swans until the last minute. He seems to waver in the air as though he himself will take flight; finally his image blurs, colors run and he fades into the landscape.

"It would be so tempting to use this for the wrong thing," Jared says so softly that he is nearly whispering.

"What do you mean, exactly?"

He cocks his head ever so slightly, as though wanting to look around him, but fearful of seeing something.

"Dad! Hey, Dad! Over here! We're back!" calls a young boy.

Jared closes his eyes. "This is what I mean."

I look in the direction of the boy's voice. Just under an oak tree

about fifty yards from us stands a slender young woman with dark wings of hair about her pale, oval face. Beside her is a boy of about ten, waving his arms wildly, jumping up and down in excitement. The woman is smiling in that way wives smile when they welcome their husbands home after an absence.

"Dad! Hey! Over here!"

Jared clenches his fists and keeps his eyes closed.

"Jared," I start to say.

"No. They'll go away. You see, if I go to them, I may not want to ever come back." He reaches for me, and we hold each other, keeping each other from our separate griefs until I manage to voice the abort command.

Two weekends later, Diane, Jared, and I went cross-country skiing up Big Cottonwood Canyon—Winter had come to the mountains. I was in a hurry when I picked Diane up. We had to meet Jared at the trailhead. I'd been crunching overtime all week on the New World project and wanted to get on the mountain. But I lost my haste when I saw Michael sweating on a cot in the living room, his face pale, his hair slicked back with sweat. I stayed out in the living room with him, waiting for Diane to get ready. Michael's mother was sleeping, as it had been her night to get up every few hours to turn Michael. Vernon was in the kitchen.

"Hey, Master of the Universe," I said, standing beside the cot. "You didn't catch cold that Sunday at my house, did you?"

He took a long, slow breath as though trying to make sure he got every bit of air and then said, "No, Megan. Probably one of the snacks you fixed. Food poisoning." He smiled wanly.

I took his hand. "I'm sorry you're not feeling good. And I'm sorry you'll be standing me up for the mountain club dance. I'll miss you."

Michael smiled, but again there was that trace of sadness in his eyes. "Tonight you may meet that forest ranger you keep dreaming about."

I made a face. "I'll bet he's a jerk like the rest of them. Michael, I wish there were more men like you. I can talk to you; you take me seriously. You're my friend."

"Someone good will snatch you," he said. "I would if I could."

I squeezed his hand gently and smiled down at him. In that moment, I realized that under different circumstances, he might have succeeded. The irony of it settled on me like cold, bitter metal against my skin.

"I just might have let you," I replied.

He wrapped his fingers shyly around my hand, holding it gently as though it were precious, fragile. We said nothing, for what could we say, things being as they were? I let him



hold my hand as long he wanted and said, "Anyhow, I wanted to ask you and your family about something else, too. I talked to Jared about getting a VR session for you."

"Really? What did he say? Let's get Dad. Would you ask him to come here, please?" he said in a rush, letting go of my hand as though freeing a butterfly.

"Sure," I said. I walked into the kitchen and asked Vernon to come in.

He rose and said, "What are you two up to now? Another midnight trip to the planetarium?"

"Worse," I said in a voice that was dusky with mystery.

Vernon walked in the living room, asked his son how he was feeling, and felt his forehead. He sat down, raised his eyebrows, and said, "Okay! Shoot!"

Diane came in just then as well, finally dressed and ready to go. I explained Jared's idea to them. "I know the media exposure may make you uncomfortable," I said, "but it may be the only way to get the session time. And it would get the company donating its money to things more applicable to what they do. You could be doing others a favor. You never know. And besides, I want my program used by someone who really appreciates it. What do you say?"

Vernon sat a moment, thinking. "Well," he said, "I'm just worried about any strain all that media attention might have on you, Michael, but it's your decision. What do you think, son?"

"As long as I'm healthy, I want to do it," Michael said, and even the fever he had could not account entirely for the intensity of his focus, for the stiff way he held himself.

Diane frowned, and that cold of death brushed past me again.

Vernon only laughed and said, "Okay, you win."

Michael smiled brilliantly. As Diane and I left him there, I thought for a moment how I wished he could come with us, even in virtual reality. But then I wondered, as I flipped the car's electricity switch and started

down the street, would virtual reality be a joy or a bitter reminder, once the VR session was over?

Up the canyon, the sunshine hit the snow, and the blue sky filled us with a joy that seeped into our bones. We met Jared at the trailhead. As we put on our skis, I told him about our conversation with Michael and Vernon.

"Good," Jared said. "Now that I know he really wants to do it, I'll get cracking on it." With that, he was off with a kick. Jared's long-legged strides made him hard to keep up with. Diane and I worked to keep pace. But even in that joy and sense of release, the thought of Michael hung between Diane and me, heavy as an unspoken word pressing against the senses with the need to be uttered. At one point we stopped, took off our skis, stuck them upright in the snow, and sat on a log to have soup hot out of a thermos.

"I needed this," I told Diane and Jared. "All I've done is go to work, send out for pizza for the development team, wolf it down during the commutes, go home, sleep, shower, go to work, send out for pizza." I kicked up a bit of snow with the toe of my ski boot. It flaked into sparkles as the sun hit it, then died into a fine smoke as it hit the white ground.

"Sounds gross," Diane replied. "But at least you enjoy it. I think Michael would enjoy that kind of work—that or physics or astronomy." She gazed down the mountain to the valley below. Pine trees followed a frozen river winding through it.

"He'd be good at those," Jared remarked. "He'd be a good programmer or software designer."

"Yes, he would," I agreed, then turned to Diane. "I know that your parents have made sure Michael has done just about everything a physically normal person would do—Boy Scouts, church outings, camping, astronomy parties, dances. But does he ever miss being able to come and do other things, like *this* with you?"

Diane took a sip of soup, set her cup on her lap carefully and replied, "He bears it all pretty well—you

know that. But he has his moments. I know he wishes he could live a physically normal life. He'd love to get married, have kids."

"What amazes me is that he rarely seems to have regrets. Wistful, yes, bitter, no. Diane, where does he get his strength?"

Diane hesitated, thinking for a moment, ever thoughtful and precise about what she wanted to say. "Because he believes that God will give him these things in eternity."

Jared, who had been listening quietly, spoke up. "That's how I take my comfort about my wife and my son. He was only ten. Somewhere, somehow, he'll be given his chances that he missed. Knowing that doesn't make the pain go away—but it gives strength." He glanced at Diane then, and I saw that look of almost complete understanding pass between them. They were both Mormons, and for them, death was just a passage to a certain shore.

"Right," I said. I could not quite comprehend this religious idea of eternity. Eternity for me had the vagueness of stars hidden during the day. I knew behind all that blueness were the planets, the galaxies, the universe, and beyond. And for my dead parents, what was there beyond the decaying shells I had buried in the cemetery? "I guess it's because I don't have that surety, is why I want so badly to get that on-line time for Michael once our new product is ready. Let him go to Ireland. Smell the sea-scented air. Hold a clover. Let him come cross-country skiing with us! It won't quite replace the real thing—but it means sharing experiences with him that he might not have otherwise had."

"A little virtual reality heaven on Earth," Diane smiled. "You're a good friend to have, Megan. By the way, when do you think he'll get his virtual reality session with you?"

"Well, we're on time—this week! It's November now, so maybe this April or May. Why?" I asked, fearful of prodding too much, even more fearful of that cold feeling.

"I just hope Michael's okay. You don't know this, but he's been sick a

lot the past few weeks. He'll get a cold, get over it, get the flu, and the cycle repeats. I've seen him have good years and bad years. Maybe we're in for a wringer. He may not be well enough to fulfill the public spotlight you need."

"Don't worry about it, Diane," Jared said. "I've pitched the idea to marketing and PR. If they accept the idea, then I'll talk them into being a little more low-key with Michael's session. We'll see."

"Thanks, you two," Diane said. Jared blushed with humbleness and then winked over at me. I smiled at him and said, "No problem. Are you both done eating?" Though the sun was brilliant, the sky clear, I was starting to feel cold, as though I'd walked into tree shade. I reached for my skis, stepped into them and adjusted my bindings.

"Yeah, I'm ready to get going again," Diane said, packing her things into her day pack.

With a kick we were off. The rhythm of my legs pushing the skis, the swoosh of the skis in the powdered snow, my breath the only sound on the mountain—these did not ease me as they usually did. A boy played with his dog in the snow, but I did not smile. No matter how hard I skied, I could not shake the chill upon me.

November, Christmas, and winter passed. Sometimes I'd go for weeks not paying much attention to the snow outside—we were in the thick of our internal beta testing. For us, it was always spring, always green in Ireland. We began building other worlds and scenarios, but this was our standard by which to test. In late March, though, I'd had it and took a three-day weekend down to the canyon lands of southern Utah for a break. Diane, Vernon, and Michael put together a star-gazing trip with some of Michael's astronomy pals. We hauled our telescopes in two vans. We spent the afternoon exploring the red clay gargoyles of Goblin Valley, drove to some Anasazi petroglyphs, and snooped around an abandoned mining camp.

Here, the desert was life stripped down to essential beauties.

As we drove down the good dirt roads, Michael would tell me how he'd love to feel the sensation of rock climbing in a virtual reality setting, and gave me many ideas I had not considered—high school students on archaeology digs in virtual reality, or living the life of an Anasazi Indian for a few hours, grinding corn or wheat with stones, washing clothes by hand, living with hunger when necessary.

That night we were up until one in the morning, gazing at the stars through our telescopes, laughing by the fire. Though Michael looked very tired, he looked so vital and healthy that I wondered if my premonition had been simply a mood, brought on by an overdose of Yeats mixed with autumn rain and chill. He and I sat up talking long after the others had stopped fighting sleep. Vernon and Diane were still star-gazing.

Michael was in a speculative mood. "When I'm down here in the desert and can see the stars, I sometimes wonder if the first humans felt the same awe—or if it was a greater awe than we feel. Is ours less because we have a better scientific understanding? Or is it more?"

"They had spiritual faith, and we have scientific understanding. But the awe—maybe it's the same," I said.

"I think it's a mix of both nowadays. What do you think, Meg?"

"Michael, we're going to be up till dawn with *that* question. This is just the start. Have mercy!" I groaned, thinking longingly of my sleeping bag and air mattress.

"Well, lean against my legs and put your head in my lap for just a while," Michael said.

I moved nearby and did as he said.

"Now, look up," he commanded. I did and stuck my tongue out at him.

"Your tongue is just as gross now as when you were nine," he quipped. "Honestly, look up at the stars."

I shifted my gaze. "I'm gazing at the stars."

And I was. The silence of the desert is not the heavy silence of an

empty room. It is the silence in which you hear slender blades of grass bending beneath the weight of a lizard. Or the whistling sound red hoodoos make as the wind passes through their bones. It is a silence in which the deepest parts of you speak and you can finally hear them. Those stars burned clear. You can see the Milky Way in the desert. If you stare long enough, you begin to feel the Earth turning, moving with the Galaxy as it turns and moves through space.

I shared these thoughts with Michael as best I could. He brushed my temples lightly for a moment with his small, slight hands. I felt his breath like a shy ghost across my forehead. Then he rested a hand lightly on the back of my head.

"I think Moses felt this way that night the Lord showed him the stars and made promises. On a night like this," Michael said, "any regrets I've had go away. And—I feel I have my own promises."

"God, Michael, I wish I could feel that sometimes."

Michael moved his hand off my head and placed it on the armrests of his wheelchair.

"I don't always feel this way. Right now, I regret that I can't be more than your friend."

I sat up, gazed earnestly into his face. "Michael, you are more. You're the brother I never had. You're the only male I'd give that privilege to."

"No," he said with a sharpness I'd never heard before. "I watch you, Meg—you're a brilliant woman, dealing with men who can't understand you or who are afraid of your intelligence. None of that would have stopped me. If this were different—" he gestured with his hands at himself, "—you wouldn't be lonely now, Meg, if I were capable of being more."

I could say nothing but his name. I buried my face into his lap, and he stroked my hair gently. The long nights spent in computer labs, lovers leaving, my parents' deaths, the hopeful prayers begun and undone in a few words, my inability to look past Michael's handicaps, bent my back

with their weight. I shook under that weight, but would not let my sobs out. I rose slowly. My vision was blurred by tears. Shadows from the campfire played across Michael's face. It looked twisted with grief, anger, and a passion I thought belonged only to normal men. I touched his face.

"Meg," he whispered.

I stumbled away into the darkness, my hand over my mouth so no one would hear me.

The lake is smoked glass, glazing all its reflections with a pale green. The mist is lifting off the glen, leaving the grass and leaves dripping. My shoes make a squishing sound in the muddy hoofprints left by cows. Cold, wet socks inside my hiking boots. I smell the sea off in the distance. Columbine, purple moor grass, and foxgloves are bright with rain on their petals. The swans call out in a honking, sonorous and low. The bell beat of wings pumps air up and away. There they come, like spirits gathering the mist about themselves and spinning it into pure white bodies of feather, sinew, and bone.

The swans settle on the water and drift, as though lost in memories as old as the hills that ease gently up in the soft curve of a woman's breast. Beyond a haggart of trees, a farmer calls to his dog, "There, that's my lad!" He whistles; the dog barks and prods cattle in a pasture.

I spot a man on the far shore of the lake, waving to me urgently.

"Megan!" he calls. "Megan!" Is his voice gruff with grief?

I peer at him, truly puzzled, not knowing who it is, not expecting anyone else in this test session. I realize it is Jared. He starts to run around the lakeshore towards me. I run towards him, nearly slipping in the mud, the slick wet grass. We meet, and he puts out an arm to steady me, steady him. His breath comes in heavy white puffs in the cold air, and he coughs at the dampness.

"Is New World ready, Jared?" I ask, trying not to sound too eager, too self-congratulatory. It's just that the months, the long hours, the strings of

code, and hardware testing are getting to me. It's time to deliver this baby.

"It's ready," Jared says, resting his hand on my shoulder. "Megan—Diane just called. They patched her through to me because you were in New World."

"Michael," I whisper, closing my eyes, raising my hand to my forehead.

"He's very sick—they don't expect him to last the night," he says, trying to hold off the grief in his voice. "They're at University Hospital."

"No! It's ready! He can't go now!" I shout. I bend over, I think I'm going to throw up. I clutch my stomach, tears destroying the vision before me. It begins to rain. The mud, black and rich, bubbles up around our feet. The swans shriek, breaking into flight in a cloud of white feathers. Their sonorous cries turn to the cruel shriek of vultures.

"Abort program! Abort program!" cries Jared, throwing his arms around me as the New World splinters apart around us.

I am falling in a sea of black glass.

Thirty minutes later, I woke up on the couch in my office. Jared and Ron, one of the programmers, were bending over me, anxious and tense. I sat up slowly, groggy for a moment.

"Megan. Megan?" Jared placed a hand under my elbow to steady me.

"Jared, what—" It came back to me with the sharp edge of cut glass.

"Oh, God. We've got to go. What are we doing?" I said, my voice rising.

"You lost consciousness. The program went crazy when I told you about Michael," Jared explained. "Apparently, we've got to set up a safety profile—that program can't be used when people are under certain stresses. But we can take care of that later. We've got to get to the hospital."

"But shouldn't she be looked at by the company doctor?" Ron asked.

"No. She's got to get to the hospital," Jared said.

"But Jared, you saw the program go crazy. Look what it did to her. This isn't a simple bug. We need a medical report on this—this is part of

beta. I'll bet Megan's bio readings were all over the chart during the last sixty seconds of that session. New World *isn't* ready," Ron insisted. "You want the product out the door with that bug?"

"I'll handle it, Ron. We'll talk later," Jared said stiffly.

Ron glanced at me. "All right," he said. "Sorry about your friend, Megan. Call us."

"Yeah, thanks," I half-whispered. I pulled my legs around and sat up.

After Ron left, Jared rose and closed my office door. He came back, sat down and pulled his chair close to the couch. He took my hand in both of his. "Neither the program or you were expecting that bit of news. I should have taken you offline. I'm sorry about that; it was stupid. We need to set up some end-user profiles, maybe bolster the filters a little. I'll handle that with Ron later today."

"Is Michael unconscious?" I asked. "Did Diane say?"

He sighed. "He's in a deep coma, Megan. They don't expect him to come out of it. Brain death is just around the corner."

I gasped, the air harsh and dry in my throat. "Jared, I have to show him Lake Coole, say—"

"Say that you love him?"

"Oh, God, Jared, yes. Listen, we'll hook him up. Don't shake your head, *listen to me.*"

"I will. Go on," Jared said calmly. I looked up at him, tried to focus my vision. He looked like a gruff angel sitting there with the office light on his mostly gray hair.

"As long as the brain waves are still being emitted and the right functions are in place and can respond to stimuli, why couldn't a person still function in a New World session? It could be a way to stimulate the comatose brain. Wake them up slowly. Or a way to evaluate whether or not we can bring them back—or even to go ask them if they want to be brought back."

Jared frowned. "You may be on to something. But do you really want to try something like that now? And

how would we get the equipment up there?"

"Easy," I said. "We'll take our VR gear up to the hospital room—the gloves, the skullcap, the body net. We'll get the Irish world on disk with us, copy it on to the hospital's VR surgical training room. I know the system, I designed it. I'll get clearance to do this from the head of the medical school. You know they owe us. And I know the family will let me do it."

"What about company clearance?" Jared asked.

"I'll get it later. Or I'll lose my job," I said.

"If it works, they'll keep you—or someone else will snatch you up," Jared said. "If I help you with this, I'll either bask in the glory with you or you'll have to support me in my old age."

I laughed, threw my arms around Jared and kissed him on the cheek. He patted me on the back awkwardly, then eased away from me. "Come on, we've got work to do," he barked. "You've got to get on the phone and use your charms on our friend at the med school. But call Diane first."

When we arrived at the hospital, they had already moved Michael and his life support equipment to the VR chamber. Jared went about copying the program onto the VR terminal, installing our new interface board, and attaching peripherals needed to run the new software.

Diane sat beside her brother. Vernon stood behind her chair. Michael looked like a wisp of leaf blown accidentally into the room among the web of life-support and monitoring equipment. He had an oxygen tube in his nose, and an IV dripped like a sand lantern, as though measuring out the moments of life that were left. The heartbeat monitor chimed softly in the background. Michael was curled up, his arms close to his chest. His hands were clenched, like the claws of a dead bird. His small crippled body under the sheets made him look not older than ten, instead of thirty. I went and

stood beside the bed. Michael was pale, with a yellowish cast to his skin. His thin brown hair was damp and tangled with sweat.

Diane rose. I took her hands.

"Thanks, Megan," she said.

"Thanks for letting us do this for him," I replied.

Vernon asked, "It won't hurt him? I mean, he's nearly gone. I hate to make him come back if he's on his way. He was asking for his dead grandma just a few hours ago, asking if she'd be here soon." He stopped, too emotional to go on.

"It'll be fine," I said. "I was in a test session when you called. The program is ready. Brain death hasn't occurred yet, so he should actually be able to participate in the session."

Diane put her arm through her father's. "It's what he wanted, Dad. And this could help other people some day."

He nodded and said. "But if he's on his way, don't keep him. And tell him how we'll miss him." He broke down then, unashamed of the deep sobs that racked his thin body. "Excuse me," he said, and left the room.

Diane said, "I'll be with Dad, Megan. I wish I could go with you!"

"If I trusted the program to handle people who've not used it before, I'd let you come," I said. She nodded and followed her father out of the room.

A hospital technician helped me place the VR body net around Michael as best we could. It was a lightweight mesh loaded with delicate and sensitive sensors. I brushed the damp hair off his head and held his face steady in my hands while the technician placed the skullcap on him, carefully adjusting the straps. I then donned my gear. I sat next to Michael and took his hand.

"Ready?" Jared asked.

"Boot up," I said.

"Tell Michael hi for me."

New World begins as a humming beneath the flesh, a light vibration in the bones, flecks of colors, patterns whirling behind the eyes. The world starts primeval, shapes on a horizon,

color fields that turn to objects. The first thing I recognize is the feel of Michael's hand in mine, limp, but warm. Flowers soft against my skin. I lean up on one elbow and look at Michael. He is beautiful, he is strong, with clean limbs. Michael as he might have been. His face no longer boyish and elfin, but that of a man.

I am confused. Is this my imagining or his?

He is sleeping—should I wake him?

"Michael," I whisper, pressing his hand. "Michael." I lean over and kiss his cheek lightly, run my index finger over the planes of his new face.

I feel my hand caught in a firm grip, a strong hand. Michael. He opens his eyes. They are his, the same deep warm brown. It is Michael.

"Meg, where are we?" he whispers.

We whisper as we did when we were nine-year-olds peering up into the sky with his first telescope, speculating on the lives creatures lived on planets circling stars we could see.

"Michael, I've brought you to Coole."

He smiles and touches my cheek with his hand. I put my hand over his. He gazes up at me for a moment, then, startled, pulls his hand away and stares at it. His hands are large, his fingers long and expressive, the tips square and masculine. "This is the program!" he realizes suddenly.

"Yes."

He gazes at his body, lifts his hands, touches his face. There are tears there. "I've dreamed about having a body like this," he says, speaking aloud. His voice has a lower, more normal pitch to it. He is bewildered for a moment, then says, "Does this body—function fully?"

"Imagine it," I say "And it will. Here, I'll help you if you want."

I put an arm against his back to support him. He sits up, a bit shaky. He looks around. The lake is smoked glass, glazing all its reflections with a pale green. The mist is lifting off the glen, leaving the grass and leaves dripping. Scent of the sea—you can smell it everywhere on the island. It cleanses the air, soothes the senses.

Purple moor grass gives off a clear scent in the new air. Columbinas and foxgloves wave gently in the breeze. Yellow primroses surround the lake this time of year. The swans are calling—a honking, sonorous and low, the bell beat of wings pumping air up and away. There they come, the swans, like spirits gathering the mist about themselves and spinning it into pure white bodies of feather, sinew, and bone.

Michael bends his head back to watch them, turns his torso with ease and grace to follow their flight.

"Do you like Coole?" I ask.

"Yes. Good job, Meg," he says, nearly whispering.

The swans settle on the water and drift, as though lost in memories as old as the hills that ease gently up in the soft curve of a woman's breast. Beyond a haggart of trees, my farmer friend calls to his dog, "There, that's my lad!" He whistles, the dog barks and prods sheep in a pasture.

"Meg," is all Michael can say.

I get up on my knees, reach out for his hands. "Come with me!" I say. "I want to show you the road that leads to where Lady Gregory's house stood, the one with the yew trees."

I stand up, ready to help. He places one hand on the ground and slowly pushes himself up. I take his other arm and guide him up. He moves carefully, but with a spry grace I have seen in his sister and his father. He is taller than me, and my hand fits inside his. The other hand he uses to touch my cheek. "I can't believe you've done this for me."

"You'd do the same, for someone you love," I say.

He says nothing, smiles, and leads me around the lake. He revels in the feel of earth beneath his feet. My shoes make a squishing sound in the muddy hoofprints left by cows. The farmer and his dog bring the sheep down the hill to the lake's edge.

"Mornin' to you," the farmer says. He has gray hair streaked with white, large blue eyes, a tweed cap cocked on his head, and a thick Aran sweater giving fullness to his thin,

wiry body. "You've brought a friend, now," he says to me. We have talked, this character and I. He remembers Lady Gregory, Yeats's patron, and her home that no longer stands at the end of the road lined with yew trees.

"My friend Michael. Michael, this is—I'm sorry, I've never really known your name," I say, actually embarrassed.

"Donal." He pauses, as though fishing for a last name. The program feeds him one, and he says, "Donal O'Brian. Nice to make your acquaintance, sir." He shakes Michael's hand. "So, you've come to see Galway, then?"

"I've come to play with your dog, chase your sheep, steal flowers!" Michael says almost wildly.

I watch him, but he seems just fine—almost gleeful, not irrational as I had feared.

"One smart Yank!" O'Brian laughs, as though in downright amazement. We run with the dog, chasing sheep. We eat the soda bread O'Brian offers us. We walk down the long road lined with yew trees reaching their arms out to each other over the road. In the pine forest, ribbons of pale green light twine about branches. Back at the lake, Michael puts flowers in my hair; I feel silly, but part of me doesn't care. How long have we been here? Minutes translated into days?

Michael's joy at his new body amazes me. He is never clumsy. He is lithe, graceful, strong, as he should have been. We sit on a rock together, leaning against each other's back, saying nothing. I can feel his strong back. The warmth and solidity of him.

"Meg, I don't want to go. I wish I could stay here, with you," he says, the old sadness returning. I feel cold again. "I've been sick, very sick. I don't think they can bring me back, can they?"

"No," I say. "But maybe New World could help bring people back in certain situations. Or help say good-bye."

"Ah, you'll be even more famous," he says, smiling proudly. He stands, turns to me, puts his hands

on my shoulders. "I couldn't go back after this, Meg."

"What do you mean?"

"Standing here, walking with you, talking with you, my arms around you. Something I could only dream about before." He strokes my hair for a moment.

"Michael, I wish I could have looked past it all. I'm sorry," I say. "Forgive me."

He pulls me up gently to stand before him, close to him. He puts his arms around me. I lay my head on his shoulder. "I couldn't look past my body either," he says. "I'm not sure it would have been fair to you. It's not important now. I have other things I would say to you right now. There isn't much time."

I look up at him, and I see the passion I saw that night in the desert. We kiss gently, and then urgently. Then Michael pulls away, sighs raggedly. "I couldn't go back to the real world after today. I'd rather take today with me and remember it, think of you from where I am."

"Where, Michael?" I ask, longing to know as he knows.

"I've told you all my life." He looks past me for a moment, his hands on my shoulders.

"What is it, Michael?" I ask. He nods his head and I look behind us.

Michael's eyes widen. Then he smiles. At the crest of the hill, a small flame in the mist, stands an old woman, slender and light, her gray hair carefully pinned up. She is very still.

Michael says, "It's my grandma." He turns to me. "I didn't imagine her. I didn't put her in the program."

I offer this explanation: "Before we came online, your father told me that you spoke your grandmother's name, asking for her."

"Perhaps, but I certainly wasn't thinking of her just now—not as I was kissing you." He smiles at that comment.

"Yes," I reply, not knowing what to really say. I don't want to verbalize the obvious, that he is dying, perhaps hallucinating on top of it all.

"I have to go to her. Meg, I'll never forget."

"Michael, Jared told me to say hi. And the others—" I cannot go on.

"I know they said good-bye. Tell them one thing—if they need me, I'm a thought away. And Meg—someone is coming to you. I know that. That's all I can say. I have to go now."

A cold wind strays by, blowing my hair. The trees are gray against the lowering sky. Where there were flowers, withered leaves now lie. The swans break from their reverie, rise, circle the lake, and let out a mournful cry. The last thing we hear is the flapping of their wings.

Michael kisses me, holds me close. His warmth, the musky scent of him, the damp earth, how beautiful the man who could have been my love. He looks at me one last time as though memorizing my face, then walks toward the hill, steadily, carefully. His grandmother steps forward, catches his hand. They walk up the hill. I watch and watch until they fade to small spots of dim color, then

dissolve into the mist where the swans have flown.

"Abort program," I say. New World dissolves.

I pulled off my skullcap. I gently took Michael's hand out of mine. I had to unbend his cold fingers to do so. His body was curled up like a leaf blown to the ground, ready to be covered by snow. I had to be alone. I walked out into the cool night of early Spring, glancing up at the stars, so bright in that crisp, clear air, pungent with the last tang of Winter and the onset of Spring.

Michael's family had the comfort of their belief. And what did I have? Irony that the only man I might have loved was separated from me by illness and now, death. Irony that the God he believed in had allowed this to happen. I wasn't sure how it fit together or whether I should try to believe it all did somehow. But at least I had given him Coole, thank God.

I walked down the mountain from the hospital to the older part of campus. Salt Lake City stretched before me, street lamps marching in orderly rows to the other side of the valley, clear to the Great Salt Lake. The stars, which Michael and I always shared, seemed cold and very alien. I walked down bustling 13th East with its quaint old homes, student apartments, and upscale shops and restaurants. Two men walked past me, silent, holding hands. Down the block, people laughed and talked in front of the Market Street Grill. The wind shook the trees for a moment, making them rustle and moan.

Footsteps, running toward me. "Megan! Megan!"

Jared. Running, taking big strides with his long legs. He came to me, stood looming beside me like a quiet mountain that is always there. We put our arms around each other and he let me cry, not saying a word. Above us, the stars burned bright, unhidden. ■

ABOUT FRANK KELLY FREAS

FRANK KELLY FREAS—or Frank Kelly-Freas, as he is occasionally known, or Kelly to his friends—needs no introduction. He has been illustrating science fiction and fantasy in color and black-and-white since 1950, and long ago earned the title of "Dean of SF Illustrators." His honors and awards are legion, not only in SF but beyond it, and his work has appeared in a very great number and a fantastic range of places. My own favorite from outside the field is "Presenting the Bill," from not quite the Famous Moments in Medicine series, for *Mad* magazine.

My personal entanglement with Kelly includes a number of covers he did around my work, and an equal number of cover stories I wrote around his work. In the 1950s, we did a lot of that. Probably the most interesting occurred with an *If* cover, which I spotted in Kelly's studio. I wrote a story called "The Executioner" around it, and, much to my surprise, the then-publisher rejected it. So I sold it to *Astounding* for considerably more money, where it appeared as the lead novelette but with a Christmas cover by Van Dongen. Simultaneously, *If* appeared with the Kelly Freas cover and a story called "The Executioner" written by two other guys. Kelly did the interior illustrations for both of them. Editor John Campbell, Kelly, and I, laughed like crazy. The publisher of *If* was less amused.

But the most popular Freas cover for me was the one I spotted leaning against a chair in Leo Margulies's office at *Fantastic Universe* magazine. That became first a short

story, "Who?" and then my first big novel, *WHO?* In the original edition, someone else did the book cover. But when Lancer Books did the next American edition, Kelly did a new painting, considerably more detailed but essentially the same as the original. It shows a man smoking a cigarette and staring out at the audience. He has a metal skull and one artificial arm.

Years later, a collector in England put the novel manuscript and the original painting together, and persuaded the Spencer Research Library of Kansas University to buy them. (That proved to be the foundation of the very good Spencer science fiction collection.) The two of them rest in a cardboard box in a vault. Next to them on the shelf are Lord North's notes from the time when he was losing the American Colonies to the rebels.

Kelly Freas and I went on to do a number of other things together, including his editing and illustrating a book of mine for Starblaze, and his becoming Co-ordinating Judge of L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of The Future Contest at my behest. And I suspect we are not done yet.

So I am very pleased to have a Kelly Freas painting for this issue. And for once I did not write a story around it. Instead, I discovered that it did a very good job of illustrating "Another Story," by Ursula K. Le Guin. This is a happy accident, anticipated neither by Kelly, nor Ms. Le Guin, nor myself. Some days, you just live right.

—Algis Budrys

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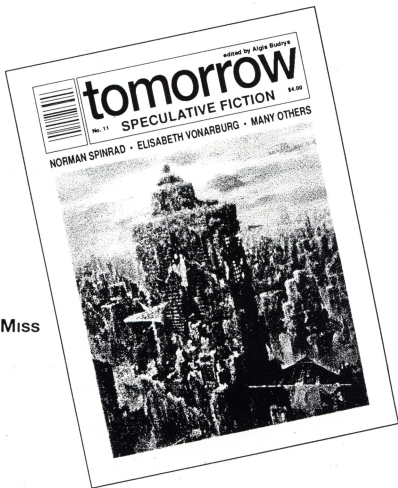
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