



tomorrow

No. 11

SPECULATIVE FICTION

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

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SPECULATIVE FICTION

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EDITORIAL



I thought it might be useful to describe what happens at the manuscript-reading end of this magazine.

In the morning or early afternoon of every day but Sunday, I go to the Main Street post office. I deposit the mail I've processed, and go to the box to collect today's mail. And I begin to form impressions immediately.

For instance, there are always a small number of #10 (business-sized) envelopes. The slim ones usually contain money, in one form or the other, and I'm glad to see them. The thicker ones contain requests for guidelines, which I'm always glad to fill. Some of them contain checks for \$4.00 for a sample issue, which they learned about from the *Writer's Digest* listing. I am glad of those, too, because I don't really see how you can expect to sell to a magazine without even seeing an issue first.

I am less glad to see that the applicant often stopped reading right there, and didn't notice that it also said to send an envelope and postage. Among those who did read a little further, a fair number enclose a return envelope (no postage, usually); a #10 envelope. But, what the hell, some of these actually pay off with a good story later, so I don't really mind.

The thick #10 envelopes I regard with deep suspicion. They contain stories—usually short, almost always about Adam and Eve turning out to be the hero and heroine (frankly, I don't believe in Adam and Eve, I don't believe they were called Adam and Eve in tribal legends until the comparatively recent invention of the English language, and I have in any case read that story before. Often).

I wish people would realize that a story which is *about* a story is not going to do it. For some reason, people who fold stories and stuff them in #10 envelopes very often don't know that, far more often than the people who use 9" x 12" envelopes. No, I don't know why this is.

And I quickly look through the 9" x 12" envelopes, because once in a while the envelope is intended for someone else, and because I want to segregate the catalogs and the magazines, leaving nothing but story submissions. And then—provided I don't have a little yellow card that says to stop at the desk for mail that has to be signed for, or for returned subscription copies that have gone astray in one way or the other—I stop at the bakery for a cup of coffee and a sweet roll before getting into my car and driving home.

At home, I begin slitting envelopes, confirming my suspicions about the #10s. The 9" x 12"s (and occasionally odder, bigger sizes), contain likelier material. Most of them aren't very likely, but that's to be expected. I reject most of them, send one or two back to their authors with requests for rewrite, maybe buy one outright, and maybe not.

I also get, about once a week, a story without a return envelope—or, sometimes, an envelope but no postage. Or, once in a great while, a story without a return envelope, no name on the manuscript and, it turns out, no name or address on the original envelope. All those I file, for a few months; then I throw them away.

I also do not welcome covering letters, but I get them in copious number. I especially do not want those which contain a (sometimes very extended) synopsis of the story, together with a detailed summary of the author's other accomplishments. I don't know why people do that. The only thing that counts is the story itself, and for that nothing else is necessary or desirable. The only covering letter I want to see is the one that tells me the story is a simultaneous submission. That spares me the need to read the story.

And I go upstairs and fire up my computer, so that I can write my letters on the stories and send them back, or, occasionally, buy them. The next day, I do it all over again.

I do other things; lots of things, to keep the magazine going. And Kandis Elliot does a lot of things, I going up the road to Madison, WI, once in a while so we can put an issue together, and I occasionally going up the road to Des Plaines, IL, to see the printer.

But nothing is as important as checking the mail every day that I'm in town, and processing the manuscripts quickly. Despite the various problems—which I volunteered for, knowing full well they would come—it is the most vital, and the most satisfying, of all my activities. There is nothing quite like the feeling I get when I realize that I am reading a keeper; there really isn't. The hairs on my forearms stand up. So don't stop sending them.

— Algis Budrys

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Cover by Paul Lehr, © Copyright 1994, Paul Lehr.

"Jeever's Lost City" was inspired by the cover.

Illustrations by Kandise Elliot, Kelly Faltermayer, Roger Gerberding, Judith Holman, Michael Kennedy, Russell Morgan, Margaret Ballif Simon, and Darla M. Tagrin.

PERSONAL COMPUTING FOR THE DISEMBODIED

Brooks Peck

Illustrated by Roger Gerberding

I slithered my brain through the ceiling, flipped open another panel, and dropped into a waist-high garbage can.

I. I AIN'T GOT NO BODY

The memory of my dissolution is as clear and high-definition as the day I wove it into cotton strands and patterns of hypodermic needles while lying dead on the Emergency Room table.

And I remember Paul, stupid Paul my assistant, dropping our lunch on the primer pedal while I was quite obviously in the Field Zone. I had just closed the twenty-third panel when I heard the coils fire and felt all my hair wire up with static. I tried to get up off my knees, stumbled on my lab coat, and skinned my palms. Then I heard a soft click and had the sensation of being anchored in a strong current of water, or like ten thousand army ants rushed over me. I realized I couldn't see.

Maybe it was my fault, since I'd left the thing active while I went in to adjust it. I was lazy. It's like sticking a knife in the toaster oven while it's still plugged in. I do that all the time and haven't been shocked. Not badly. But this was quite a shock. I knew precisely what was happening to me—I thought it through as two heavy paramedics loaded me onto a cart and trundled me into an ambulance. I was in a coma, but too preoccupied to be surprised I was aware of it.

The Katz Field—named after me, Klezmer Katz, famous quantum physicist on his way to death—is quite simple in principle. It makes atoms want to stay atoms, and not be parts of molecules anymore. For a while. After exposure to the Field, salt becomes sodium and chlorine. Rocks crumble to silicon and some iron and copper or whatever. Complex things like wood are also reduced to their constituents—in that case mostly carbon and nitrogen. The energy requirement to achieve this is not so much, because it's a chain reaction that sustains itself temporarily. All you need to do is change the angle of a few pions and you're on your way. I dreamed of using it to break down all our piles of plastic and the ozone-eating chlorofluorocarbons—once the kinks got worked out. Let someone else worry about the military applications.

So I was melting.

The iron dropped out of my hemoglobin and settled in paths along my veins and arteries. As enzymes crumbled, my cell walls became mush, sloshing together like apple sauce.

The ER crew looked puzzled as my muscles caved in and my skin sagged. Minutes later I stopped breathing; my diaphragm had become wet Kleenex. They pronounced me dead at 2:03 pm, Cen-



tral, and filed out of the room. I remember the wooden door thinking into its frame as it closed behind them.

I remembered.

Something was wrong. I wasn't supposed to be aware, but here I was looking around the room... somehow. I decided I must be only nearly dead. I tried to move legs, arms, mouth; nothing worked. And no wonder: all of the ligaments had detached from my bones. I could see it.

Somehow—not with my eyes—I could see wherever I wished and had been doing so for the past few minutes. I could even look back at my face. I looked calm. Glad I sprang for the designer eyeglasses, they're very sharp. I zoomed in on some of my arm hairs until they were as big as tree trunks, full of crinkled detail. One of the hairs suddenly pulled out of its follicle with a bang like a truck backing. I reared back, startled. All of my hair was falling out.

These new perceptions were puzzling but awesome. I could see cells in my skin, dark and collapsing like spent dirigibles. And I could see little currents of fluid flowing around, and molecules even, although at that point it wasn't really seeing but almost a tactile sense, like feeling wet clay in the dark. Was this death? I had no idea what death was, but this seemed too real.

Nonetheless, I began to form a theory. When something is hit with the Katz Field, two things happen. First the atoms become very excited and super-charged; then a split second later they settle down and become normal again. But the damage has been done—all bonding properties are lost. Slowly the object's atoms drift apart, starting on the outside and working in.

There are other, unexplainable effects, though. In the case of my digital watch (I needed a new one anyway, that one was scratched), as the atoms became charged, the electrical flow from its battery also increased tremendously. Then when

the atoms calmed down the electricity vanished. There was a loss of energy and I had no idea where it went. It didn't radiate away as light or heat or microwaves or anything. Why should a lot of raw energy go *poof*?

This problem held me back from going public. I couldn't publish without offering at least some reasonable theory. As Paul and I crowded the perimeter of the Field Zone with detection instruments, searching for the missing energy, we made a discovery. Sitting out in the Field Zone was a magnetic field of the shape and strength that a watch battery would give off, right where the original watch had been. It was alone; there was no flow of electricity to produce it.

Electrons are mighty mysterious things, even to me. They move from place to place but never pass in between. Somehow, the Katz Field had sent the watch battery's charge somewhere else, where it continued to flow, but which we could only detect by its magnetism.

And now it had happened to me.

My brain's electrical field, flowing through five billion neurons with some 10^{13} connections, all blasted intact to some other dimension or something—a complete copy of myself still alive and thinking but free of its biological carcass; humming away like the battery even after its physicality had been long since swept into the recycling bin.

As I considered the implications I wanted to laugh. What power I now had—the freedom to move and see anywhere! It was like having a set of invisible, flying eyes—eyes which could see in the entire spectrum. I scanned the room, experimenting, and found I knew the exact size and weight of something in a glance. But I had no sense of physical self. I was as big or as small as whatever I looked at.

This had been quite an afternoon. In all my wild imaginings, I never imagined *this* back on the day I first had the idea for the Katz

Field. That was a long time ago; I couldn't remember it very well. Actually it was a complete blank. How long had it been? What was I doing then?

My memory was gone. I could remember some patches of the last few days but the rest was blank. What was happening? My mind had betrayed me. No, I had simply left it behind. I enveloped the carcass of my head with my energy field. My brain was permanently blacked-out, but in place of the old electrical impulses I substituted myself, the weird creature of energy I had become. The thoughts flowed again and I remembered it all: every detail of my life from day One to now. It was all there, I just had to look.

In my relief at regaining my past I was slow to realize the obvious—it wouldn't survive much longer. Like the watch, my body was falling apart at an alarming rate. Hydrogen and oxygen atoms flew off the surface, combining in the air as water. I jerked about in panic. After my brain was gone I'd be an amnesiac ghost. A wandering phantom with no identity.

I needed to save my memories, and right now or I'd be as good as dead. But how, write them down? That would call for a warehouse of paper and I couldn't even hold a pen. The seconds slid past and I was helpless to reverse the process of my own invention. This is it, I thought, so much for immortality. But as I gazed at my dead body an idea formed. Even though it was dead, I had received information from my brain by directly reading its structure. Perhaps I could make a copy or model of my brain to use in place of the original. A model that wouldn't decay.

How? I screamed to myself.

Calm down. This is a problem, solve it.

Method first. To make a model, I had to be able to manipulate things and move them. As noted, I no longer possessed hands, but could I still affect the physical world, maybe like some key-bending psychic? Anything was worth a

try. I focused on a jar of tongue depressors on the counter and willed it to move. Nothing happened. I tried again, concentrating hard but the jar did not budge. On the table, though, my right arm lifted with its fingers curled into the air. But my muscles were not doing the lifting, I knew. They had the consistency of soggy cereal flakes. I realized my mistake—when I thought to lift the jar I had concentrated on my hand and arm so *they* did the moving. I had to think directly to the jar.

I imagined not parts but all of me in contact with the jar, and then simply went up. The jar and I soared to the ceiling, contents rattling. No problem. I unscrewed the lid and pulled all the tongue depressors into the air, making a whirling sort of collage. With no hands there seemed to be no limit to the number I could hold. This was good. Maybe I could do something now. On the table my skull popped and cracked as the bones split. The physical structure of the brain would go soon.

So I could build. But how to design a model of my brain?

I zoomed in on a neuron in my head. It looked like a gigantic jungle plant or some sort of seaweed with drifting tendrils. From a human biology class I took ten years ago I remembered that the process of memory boils down to two things: the number of zones each neuron has releasing neurotransmitters, and which type of neurotransmitter each zone releases. Number and type—this was the information I needed to record for each and every one of my 5,193,546,683 neurons. In ten minutes.

I began to weave. I tore threads from cotton balls and bandages around the room, and then shredded them into microscopic hairs. Along the hairs I tied knots in a hasty code to replace the data in my head, starting with the warm thuds of my mother's heart and my first gasp of air. Every glance and touch remembered, I now re-recorded. Lunch on

August 4: knot, knot, knot. Trip to the beach August 5: knot, knot, knot. Once I paused over some particular incident of mashed peas splattered on the floor and wondered, Do I really need this? Does it make a difference in the future? Yes! I answered. Every second in my life made me what I am now, and I couldn't lose that. I flew back to work, shredding sheets and paper towels from a utility closet and adding them to the growing pile. I was fast; I could scan and bundle hundreds of neurons at a time, but time went faster. My skull had powdered and the cerebrospinal fluid was boiling off.

All the sections of my brain controlling movement I abandoned, there was no need for them. The same for automatic functions like heartbeat. Hearing and vision I paused over, then kept just to play it safe. Smell I had to keep because it was so intertwined with the memory system. Speech I chucked.

The neurons were getting harder and harder to see as they degraded into simpler and simpler chemical structures. Materials ran low too. I tore into the cardboard ceiling panels, peeling a layer of fibers off to trace out my life. I also fished my wedding ring out of the goop on the table and used the diamond to scratch dots onto metal instruments I found in bins around the room.

I stopped thinking and worked the endlessly repeating pattern of read and copy. This many zones, this transmitter from this zone, that from that one. Read and copy. Read, copy, read, copy—

Abruptly I was finished. Everything was out as far as I could tell. I rose up and looked around the room, disoriented and tired and very scared. Was that thing on the table really me? Or was I the pile of fluff and rags spread along the counter? I wondered if my idea had worked at all and if I would be able to read the model. I paused, collecting myself, then encompassed the pile in my field. There was silence as I fumbled around those foreign objects, but a second later, in a rush like a

sluice gate opening, the information flowed. I remembered everything.

The door opened and an orderly drew up short as she stepped in. Her feet sloshed in the water—twenty gallons covered the shelves, walls, and floor. All that remained on the table in the center of the room was a spattering of gray dust in a rough human outline. "God damn," the orderly said, looking around. Seconds later a tall doctor entered. "...In here," he was saying to the person following him. It was Paul. It felt good to see a familiar person, and I was glad Paul had come. He can be pretty responsible, if clumsy.

The doctor looked around the room and frowned with his mouth and forehead. "Was Mr. Katz moved to the morgue already?" he asked the orderly.

The woman shook her head. "Wasn't processed."

Paul cleared his throat. I couldn't wait to see what their reaction would be when he explained that I'd dissolved. "It appears he's left on his own," he said calmly. "Fits into what we know about this syndrome." *Syndrome?* "He must have been in a deep coma. Now he is probably wandering around, quite delirious."

The doctor continued to frown, perhaps not liking to be told he had mistakenly pronounced a patient dead.

"Just look what he did to this place," Paul prodded.

Clearly Paul was the one who was delirious. He should know exactly what had happened. We had discussed the effects of the Field on living specimens quite a bit.

The doctor chewed his lip and nodded. "Well this is strange. But you're the expert. Let's see if anyone saw him."

They filed out. As Paul followed, he turned around and gazed at the black carbon on the table. He smiled and left.

God damn, I thought. What was Paul doing? Was he afraid of being held responsible for my death? That

was silly—it was an accident. My fault, even.

I had more pressing things to worry about, namely getting out of that room. I scanned my brain copy to remind myself who I was, then looked around. Above the ceiling panels was a space about a foot thick for the fluorescent lights. The panels were a bit thin now, but intact. I could hide my parts up there until I solved the problem of getting home. Home would be safe. From there I could decide what to do next. I wanted very much to see Sarah, my wife, to find out how she was taking things. I couldn't decide if I would try to communicate with her or not. Certainly it was possible—I could write her a note even. But I didn't want to scare her. Think about that later.

Just as I slid aside one of the panels, a custodian came in with a mop and bucket on little wheels. He clicked his tongue, shook his head, and walked over to the fluffy pile on the counter. "What's this?" he asked aloud. I moved next to him, panic rising. He reached in and fingered the carefully organized mass. With the tiniest effort he shredded thirteen lectures on American Government from college and one of the best dates I ever had. I wanted to scream. He was going to crush me like an ant. I grabbed his bucket and mop (his back was still turned), raised them up, and flung them over. The metal bucket clattered against the wall, and as the broom hit the floor I separated the wood so it snapped in half.

"Lord, what are you doing tipping over?" asked the man, pulling his hand out of my mind. He sighed, righted the bucket, collected the broom and went out.

If he had glanced through the little window in the door a second later, he would have seen the great blob of cotton and cloth, and an assortment of scalpels, clamps and scissors all leap up and vanish into a hole in the ceiling. Actually I had to be careful not to jostle the model too much and tear the pieces. Re-

arranging the whole thing didn't matter, as long as the individual knots weren't damaged.

I thought to sigh, but couldn't. This was too intense, too frightening. I never felt so vulnerable as right then. There were so many problems ahead. I wanted to go home. That was simple enough in theory—I could move and carry my brain copy with me, but how would the people in the hospital take to my floating down the halls? (I had to start thinking of the brain as a part of me; it was all I had.) And how would I get across town without being trampled or run over? Maybe I could go up and sort of fly over the buildings out of sight, I thought. No—one strong gust of wind would kill me.

What was Sarah doing right now? Had she heard what happened? I pondered this, hardly noticing as the custodian came back and returned the Emergency Room to order. After he finished, I looked out through the wall to the hallway. Somewhat separate from the rest of the hospital, and with no patients for the moment, the trauma center was quiet. I risked a brief trip away from the brain to reconnoiter. Down the hall was a reception area. Two nurses chatted behind a wide desk. A set of automatic doors opened to a driveway for ambulances. Beyond that was one of the parking lots that surrounded the complex.

Where to? I wanted to just float out, but that would be forgetting myself. I was so sick of that place. I watched people come and go for over an hour, toying with ideas of hiding under their clothes or in bags. None of it was very logical. Around the corner another custodian came out of a room, pushing a large cart with green plastic bags sagging off its sides, and I saw my way.

I slithered my brain through the ceiling, flipped open another panel, and dropped into a waist-high metal garbage can. I arranged the hard parts of my mind in the center of the cotton and then pulled a bunch of trash on top,

proud at how dexterous I had become. A few minutes later the custodian came in and heaved up the can. I held on tight to every thread as my brain tumbled into a garbage bag. Inside, I pushed out an inch in every direction so that the soft mass floated in a bubble of space, protected from being crushed.

We rolled out of that prison room, finally free. I was excited. On to great things in my new mode of existence. I would become the greatest explorer in history of the macro and micro worlds. Make way for one who is nearly a god! The garbage cart skidded to a stop before a square metal door set high on the wall. The custodian pulled it open and lifted the bag, with me in it, inside. The door shut. I dropped.

As I fell I suddenly wondered if the hospital used an incinerator. I screamed silently and flailed arms and legs no longer there. All that effort only to end in fiery brain death! Then I grabbed the entire garbage bag and glided to a halt, hovering in the black chute. In panic I had forgotten that gravity was no longer an issue for me.

My choices at that point were limited. Go up and give the custodian the surprise of her life, or down to the inferno? The custodian decided for me. Two more bags smashed into mine and we all tumbled into a blue bin sitting at the end of the chute.

The bin sat in a dark hallway with exposed pipes along one wall, hissing through gaps in their insulation. This was no better. Out of immediate danger, but no closer to home. My new self didn't feel so tantalizing anymore, just unsettling and alien. After an hour, a man in gray coveralls arrived to shove the bin out a garage door and slam it into a group of similar ones. It was dusk in the half-full parking lot.

My escape plans at that point were vague. I thought perhaps I could sample registration cards in the cars until I found one from my neighborhood, then smuggle myself in the trunk. I cruised the lot, picked

a car at random, and made another brilliant discovery. It was dark inside the glove compartment. I couldn't even find the registration, much less read it. Not a good idea after all.

What now? I was getting worried about nighttime trash collections. Across the lot I found a large motorcycle. It wasn't as good as my BMW, but it was awfully nice painted glittery gold. There were big fiberglass cargo boxes on each side. I decided to steal it. I reached in, turned the lock, slipped it into neutral, and after making sure no one was around to see, wheeled it over next to the garbage.

A minute later, brain in the boxes, I cruised the night. I left the engine off and wheeled the bike along, keeping to side streets and alleys. The only sound was the breathing of the tires on the asphalt. Whenever I sensed another vehicle or person coming near I pulled over and 'parked' until they passed. I hoped no one saw me. The last thing I needed was to get caught by the police and impounded.

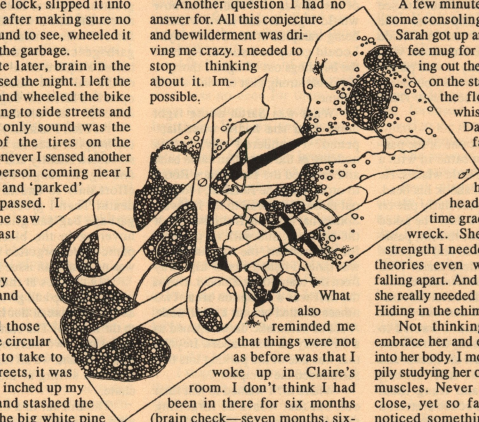
Between all those stops and the circular route I had to take to avoid big streets, it was hours until I inched up my own block and stashed the bike under the big white pine by our front walk. The house was dark; it was late.

I unbolted the boxes from the cycle and flew up to the roof. I could have opened any window, but Sarah would hear. Instead, I pried up the cover on our unused chimney and slipped down the shaft—a tight fit. The fireplace on the second floor was likewise sealed. I left the boxes wedged behind it. For now I was safe, really safe. When I became used to the idea, exhaustion swept over me in a wave. *I sleep?* I asked, even as I drifted off.

II. AN INVISIBLE SON

When I woke up I was instantly aware of my lack of flesh, the loss of my body. It was gone and it felt so weird. You can't imagine what it's like to lose the one thing you've always had, something you are reminded of with each step, itch, and breath. I felt like a negative. A living emptiness. My brain was still safe behind the wall, my memories secure. Could I have drifted away from it in my sleep?

Another question I had no answer for. All this conjecture and bewilderment was driving me crazy. I needed to stop thinking about it. Impossible.



What also reminded me that things were not as before was that I woke up in Claire's room. I don't think I had been in there for six months (brain check—seven months, sixteen days). Dust covered everything, even the bedspread. The room was tidy and still.

Claire was our only child. She died of crib-death at three months. You should have seen how excited Sarah was during her pregnancy, always smiling. And the plans.... This isn't important.

I heard voices downstairs and drifted through the floor. Sarah sat at the dining room table with Paul.

Sarah. She was dressed for work but hadn't combed her hair. She looked so good, so beautiful. I rushed down next to her and gazed

at her long face and blond hair. I had missed her so much.

Paul was saying something about how things didn't look good since I had not yet turned up and they were going to check the river. I stopped listening to him and watched Sarah as she nodded and flicked her gaze from her hands to Paul to the wall. I wondered what she was thinking, how she felt. Like everyone else, she had no reason not to believe him. I wanted to shout and tell her I was okay.

A few minutes later Paul said some consoling words and left.

Sarah got up and rinsed her coffee mug for ten minutes, staring out the window. She sat on the stairs and looked at the floor. "Shit," she whispered.

Damn it, this wasn't fair. For ten years Sarah had been my support. She helped me get my head together every time grad school left me a wreck. She gave me the strength I needed to stick to my theories even when they were falling apart. And now the one time she really needed me, where was I? Hiding in the chimney.

Not thinking, I moved to embrace her and ended up flowing into her body. I moved around, happily studying her organs, bones, and muscles. Never had we been so close, yet so far apart. Then I noticed something odd. I found something not of Sarah but alive. It was small and practically featureless. *A child*, I realized abruptly. So young, Sarah didn't know about it yet. Our child. This was terrific! Another chance. Except, I remembered, I couldn't be there. Sarah would be raising him alone.

My perspective reeled and I was looking at the banister. Sarah had stood up. She grabbed a jacket and her briefcase and went out, slamming the door.

The house was silent. I wandered from room to room like a kid home from school sick. I looked at

all of our things, the things we had bought together or made together, like the radiator in the laundry room which we painted purple, and which still smelled of it every time the heat came on. I kept thinking, What now? So intent on saving myself I hadn't given any thought to the future. My new existence, without family or work or anything, was useless. I was dead but in hell because I knew every damn thing I was missing.

I have to get back, I decided. I need to be normal and whole again. I need to live. The problem: I was quite decomposed.

The solution?

I toyed with the idea of going to a morgue and picking up a new body, but that wouldn't be me. What I needed was a way to build a new Klezmer Katz. Upstairs I opened the fireplace cover and moved my brain to the attic. Sad. I was a ghost haunting a pile of lint. Half-heartedly I made more threads and tied some more knots, recording all the recent events including my escape.

How could I make a new body? During the frantic preservation of my mind, I'd never included a blueprint of myself. There were thousands of my old cells lying around the house chock-full of DNA, but I didn't have thirty-five years to wait, and anyway there would be a completely new person in that body. Come to think of it, raw materials wouldn't be a problem. Working on a molecular level I could get all the carbon and water and whatever else from the world around me, but I had no plan of my body to follow. No map.

Except for the one at the lab. In a burst I saw that maybe it was true. The electric current of my watch was leading a phantom existence; the same for my brain's electric field. But when hit by the Katz Field, every single atom gets highly charged. Were those atomic forces also preserved? And if so, could their magnetic fields be detected, like my watch's?

Those fields would be extremely weak—far too weak for any of the equipment at the lab to pick up. But I would be able to see them, if they were there. And they would show the exact layout of every molecule and atom in my body right at the instant...right at the instant Paul murdered me.

That was hard to face, but it was the only thing that fit in with his behavior. Soon, I imagined, Paul would make a noble gesture to continue my work and then the "discoveries" would begin. I cursed myself for not letting anyone know just how far I had progressed. It was going to be a surprise.

Paul was of little concern now. Now my objective, my most urgent goal, was getting back to the lab, finding my magnetic blueprint, and making a new body so I could be reunited with Sarah—and our child. That meant leaving the safety of the house and travelling again. Soon.

The motorcycle wouldn't do anymore. It was certainly reported stolen by now, and wouldn't be very handy indoors anyway. First things first. I collected some plastic spoons and yogurt containers, aluminum bookends, a bunch of flattened soda cans, tacks—all kinds of junk. On these, in microscopic dots, I redefined my brain, replacing the flimsy cotton knots. I worked slowly this time, double checking for errors, and when I felt certain it was right I gleefully doused the old brain in rum and burned it up.

I gathered clothes—pants, a shirt, shoes and socks, gloves, a knit cap, sunglasses and a gray overcoat. True Invisible Man attire. I secured my new brain parts on the inside with duct tape and experimented carrying and manipulating it all inside my energy field. For the head I crumpled up a ball of newspaper and wrapped it in layers of a musty yellow curtain from a trunk in the attic. I added a layer of Sarah's base makeup and a mat of whiskers from my razor. No matter how much I tried, I couldn't get the nose right; it was just a lump with nostrils drawn in black marker. It had no ears at

all. When the dummy body was finished it didn't look very human, but I hoped that anyone who got a good look would not suspect fakery but think they were seeing an extremely ugly person, and turn away in embarrassment.

This project, along with various clean up and preparation tasks, took all day. Just as the sun cast orange beams through the kitchen windows I let myself out the back door. Right leg—bend, forward, down. Left leg—bend, forward, down. It wasn't that hard, but I wouldn't call it walking. I was a puppeteer, rather.

When it was fully dark I walked across town. With my shoulders hunched and head angled down, no one paid me any special attention as we hurried through the September wind. Nearing the Physics building, I slowed and stepped behind a tree. A striped pavilion had been set up on the front lawn, its nylon cords snapping in the breeze. Tonight was the Dean's reception, I remembered. People in suits and dresses wandered among candle-lit tables, carrying plates. I moved around the next building to the back of the lab area, opened the locks with my mind, and crept along the halls. No one was around inside. The door to Paul's office, I noticed, was open a few inches. I peered in, curious because I'd never seen it.

Boxes and books and papers cluttered the room so much there was no space to walk. Clothes hung from a line stretched across the ceiling. He had a cot set up, and a Bunsen burner surrounded by empty soup cans on the desk. The walls were covered in black marker scribbles. Some of it was equations, but mostly there were spiders—hundreds of flat, black spider shapes in various postures creeping around the room. Time to let that boy go, I decided.

My lab looked almost as chaotic. A counter ran along three of the walls, covered with boxes of electrical components. The control panel stood in the middle of the room like

a podium, facing the Field Zone. The actual machinery of the Field consisted of square metal panels, like lockers in a gym, along one wall and down part of the floor.

Excited, I walked over next to the Field Zone. Magnetism, I thought, and sort of squinted, praying it was there. The area in front of me wavered and then snapped into new focus, revealing every single thing we had exposed in the Katz Field, all drawn in tiny magnetic lines. I wandered among the ghost images in the dark: my watch, six books, two pounds of broccoli, and so on. Over by the wall I found me, kneeling down, head turned to watch Paul do my undoing—an instant frozen in time.

I hopped from shoe to shoe in glee. It was all there—every electron's magnetic field showing how they were arranged into atoms and molecules and how the molecules connected to make a solid, living man.

I started to copy all my vital statistics onto the extra pop cans I brought along. There was so much more information than I had thought. The job would take at least four nights, I realized, and sighed inside. I wanted to be with Sarah. But this was the only way. I had finished one knuckle of one toe when the lights flickered on. Paul stood in the doorway in a bathrobe, holding an umbrella.

"Who the fuck are you?" he demanded. He looked me up and down with wide eyes. I couldn't speak of course. I moved my hands as if to say *wait*, but he shouted "Demon!" and ran from the lab. I didn't want to leave but I had to get out of there in case he called the police. If they found this body/brain, I probably wouldn't survive. Better cut the phone line for more time, I decided.

I flew my body after Paul, not even bothering to fake a walk, and as I sailed down the hall he charged out of his office. He raised the umbrella to his shoulder, and I realized it was a shotgun. I dashed the other way. My clothes flapped and my head came untaped, bouncing along the floor behind me. Paul shrieked. There was an explosion and a blast of lead pellets ripped through my side, sending metal and plastic clattering and I forgot—something. *Get home!* I screamed to myself. Just before hitting the glass door leading to the main hall I smashed it with a burst of force and sailed through.

Paul sprinted right behind me, skittering on the shards and falling to his knees. Watching him, I almost slammed into the outside door. It was solid and locked—there was no where else to go. Paul raised the gun as I searched for the latch and slid it back. I pulled on the door and it rattled, still secure. The shotgun clacked and Paul screamed through his teeth, then stuffed his hand into his robe pocket and pulled out more shells. I yanked on the door. There was another lock but I couldn't find it. Final-

ly I scanned the top edge—yes, another bolt. I flipped it back and flew out.

In the courtyard everyone at the Dean's reception faced the door, frozen and staring. I launched myself into the air above their heads, almost free. Paul ran outside and vaulted over the food table, leaving smears of blood on the paper tablecloth. People scattered to dodge him. He stopped and fired again. My body exploded. *Sarah!* I screamed, and, *Go home!*

I shattered and burned.

I flashed away with no brain or body to keep me from moving in a straight line through buildings and cars and people. I arrived at home panicked and confused, remembering the past few hours but not understanding what I was doing. I had followed that last, urgent command from a version of myself which seemed to know what was going on. *Go home*, he had said, and here I was, but why couldn't I remember anything? I felt strange, different. Had I been sick? I flitted from room to room, trying to find the other me. In the kitchen, written in the dust on top of the cabinets, I found the words, *Go to the attic—KK*. I went and remembered everything, including how I had made a back-up copy of my brain and hid it in the trunk.

I rested and recorded the recent events. Paul had been an unforeseen obstacle, but I guessed he would be out of the way now after raining my burning fragments all over the department.

Time to plan again.

EPILOGUE

Just before dawn, the service hatch of a large air conditioner creaked open. A naked man with dark hair crept out, shuddering and gasping. The air conditioner stood over a pedestrian tunnel leading from a subway station to the mall. Over the last three days hundreds of people passed through the tunnel, and not one of them noticed when some minute part of their body harmlessly burrowed out of them and into the ceiling.

A mitochondria? Thank you, sir. Fourteen type-A blood cells? Most gracious of you, ma'am. A little bone marrow? Don't mind if I do.

The service door clicked shut, though no one touched it. The man stopped shivering as the air around him warmed. You might have thought the concrete hurt as he walked down the street, but his feet didn't quite touch the ground.

He headed home. ■

The author gives special thanks to Margaret Holen for her assistance with this story.

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INTO A SUNLESS SEA

R. García y Robertson

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He faced unusual difficulties—in an unusual way

WX URSAE MAJORIS (double system): *WX Ursae Majoris A*—spectral type M2; *Callisto (WX Ursae Maj B)*—spectral type M5 dwarf; Distance: from *Sol* 18.8 ly, from *Tau Ceti* 28 ly, from Alpha C 20.9 ly....

ARKADIA: Largest moon in *Callisto* system; primary *Lycaon*; mean diameter 5900 km; sidereal day 1001 hr; gravity .3g...settled by slowboat from Alpha C in 2614 AD...No outsystem trade. Insytem exports: processed organics, recreational pharmaceuticals, fine wines....

TRAVEL ADVISORY: *Arkadia* is not a signatory to the Treaty of Tau Ceti, or any other convention covering the rights of guests and transients. Whether the average tourist is hosted like visiting royalty, or tossed naked into the arena with a

dozen hungry dire wolves is up to the House of Arkas....

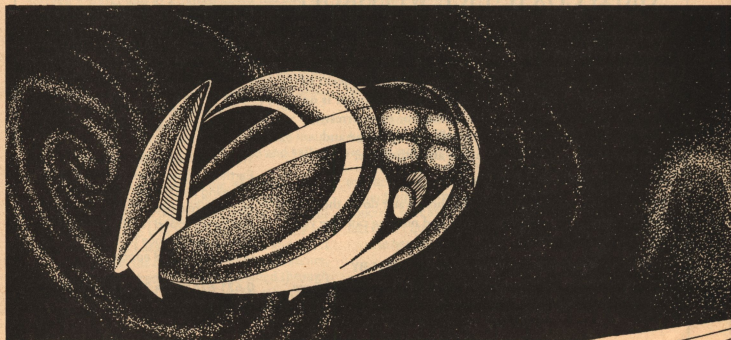
—*Systems Guide*
Ursa Major Sector

THE STATELY PLEASURE-DOME

Sweat beaded at the nape of Devereux's neck, chilled by his helmet's air-conditioning. Through his slit-visor he watched an insectile figure in matte black armor stalk toward him, down the Avenue of Seated Sphinxes, advancing like a two-legged scorpion, swinging a long pole arm. A shining alloy shaft topped with a humming power-hammer. Devereux fixed his gaze on the bright nasty head of the hammer, thinking, *Why bother with armor? This hulk must be a monster in his underwear.* Barbaric display had Devereux hemmed in. Colossal sphinxes—

carved from opposing cliffs of red volcanic rock—lined both sides of the avenue, cutting off his escape. Sheathed in lapis and marble, the stone-breasted lionesses wore tapestry loincloths that fell all the way to the sandalwood paving. Banqueters sat on furs in the laps of the sphinxes. Ebony tables floated at their elbows. Aristocratic flunkies—dressed like dukes on their day off—served pale aphrodisiac wines and narcotic cakes. Lords and ladies craned their necks, getting set to see Devereux pounce into the sandalwood parquet.

He curled his hands inside his gauntlets. Microchips responded to his finger tips. Big plasti-metal gloves tightened around his own polearm. Calling for stims from his suit, he felt chemical courage flow into his veins. Someone especially fond of edgework might enjoy this bacchanal cum



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gladiatorial combat. But not Devereux. Courtly ritual and layers of padding had conned him. He had relaxed his natural wariness, accepting the contest, thinking it would be a civilized amusement, like *kendo* or free-fall fencing—forgetting this was a colonial world, cut off from the hub of human society by time and distance. These people were savages, and he had no chance of bowing out, pleading a head cold. Inbred cowardice. Or a sneezing fit.

In a blur of motion the brute lunged—a frighteningly professional swipe, full of cold fury. Devereux spun sideways. Servounits augmented every movement, making his frantic duck and weave look planned, if not graceful.

The whirring power-hammer glanced off his leg greave. Metal screamed on metal. His leg folded under the numbing impact. Synthetic endorphins cut in. Bio-sensors whispered encouraging lies about minimal damage. Devereux pictured blood and splintered bone, but he was still moving. Had the power-hammer hit square on, the blow would have turned his armored leg into tubed meat, like the fleshy paste served in zero-g lunches.

Giving ground as fast as he could limp, Devereux put parquet between himself and the monster. Damaged

leg armor protested, giving off ominous clicks and whirrs. His breath came from down around his knees. Devereux fancied himself agile, having logged thousands of hours in v-suits, but he had never had to dance about in body armor, dodging a power-hammer.

Reversing his own pole arm, he poked with the spinning drill at the butt end. His opponent parried effortlessly, acting like an authentic fencing master. Devereux damned the man's efficiency.

Feint. Parry. Alarms sounded. A sibilant computer voice whispered, "Rounded obstruction to your rear." He had retreated as far as the sphinxes allowed. Screw helpful voices. This suit really needed wrap-around vision. Devereux banged against a tall curving leg draped in green-gold tapestry. Dropping to one knee, he lashed out with his hammer, cutting a wild arc at boot level—get under the bastard's guard, break him off at the ankles and he might be more manageable.

His adversary sprang up and at him, holding the polearm butt-point forward, aiming to drill Devereux right to the sphinx's tapestried shin.

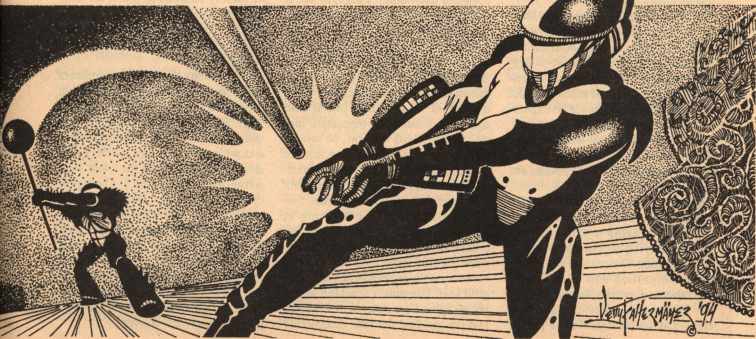
Devereux's swing met empty air. Servounits could not make his fall look planned, or even expected. The power-hammer flew from his bulky

gloves, slamming into the toe of a sphinx, shattering lapis and marble into expensive splinters. The soft computer voice gave a reproachful warning. Fasten your straps for landing. Parquet floor headed his way. Gauntleted fingers caught at the tapestry, bringing cloth-of-gold and green velvet tumbling down with him.

Magog Jr. lifted his hammer. Banqueters leaned forward, watching the hammer fall.

Weaponless. Sprawled grotesquely. Faceplate to the dovetailed parquet. Devereux put pressure into his fingers and toes. Move or be flattened—no third choices. Despite stimulants and endorphins he felt his damaged leg tremble. With a whirr and click Devereux sprang back, still clutching the torn tapestry. Rolling under the falling hammer, he scrambled to the next sphinx, pulling down more fabric. Cloth cascaded all about his startled nemeses.

The maniac in black armor was completely fuddled by this new tactic. Fabric caught in spiked joints, tangling at knees and elbows. The costly weave could not be plucked out with thick metal fingers. Swathed in gold and velvet, but still swinging energetically, Devereux's opponent looked like an expensive gift package gone berserk.



Finding his fallen hammer, Devereux scrambled up, trying to look in charge, hoping to heaven the fight was done with.

"Foul," announced an authoritative voice. Lord Arkas, Prince of Arkadia, Protector of Lycaon, descended from his sphinx, striding over to Devereux. Arkas was a tall, goldskinned, bare-chested man with a blond spade beard. Jeweled like the King of Diamonds, he wore a gilt loin guard and a leopard fur cape. A silver-alloy glove ran up his right arm and over his shoulder. His scent was a powerful mix of musk and heliotrope. Beneath the leopard fur cape Devereux saw the glimmer of mirror mesh—projectile and laser proof. A halo of metal bees circled Arkas' head, guarding him with wicked hypodermic stingers. Lord Arkas was a dangerous man, even at a dinner party.

Unsealing his helmet, Devereux pushed back the sallet and slit-visor, sucking in moist heavy air. The lower half of the helmet stayed bolted to the chest plate, lined on the inside with winking read-outs, chin switches, and voice activated controls. "Who fouled?" He did his damndest to look blandly innocent, as if he might be the offended party. It cost nothing to act indignant and argue. Surly debate showed you took the silly contest seriously.

"You fouled," declared the lordly umpire, "fighting with tapestry."

Never sure how to address his high and mightiness, Devereux settled on an obsequious "Your Lordship," saying, "No one mentioned the regulation. A guest cannot be expected to know every local custom."

"Terms of combat were explicit. Weapons were to be polearms with power-hammers and drill points; not daggers, nukes, or wall hangings." Arkas snapped his fingers. His Herald stepped up, a bald greenskinned Arkadian wearing a gold-trimmed sarong, carrying an ivory staff twined with serpents. The cricket-thin gaffer made a dignified bow and spouted precedents supporting his master.

Damned old toady, thought Devereux. On a private world one played

by private rules. The crowd was all on Arkas' side. They were his relatives, concubines, pimps, and whipping boys—trained to clap, boo, or grovel as occasion demanded. Arkas could have one of them impaled on the horn of a wild rhino if it served to lighten his day. Some had already lost interest in the contest and begun groping and fondling beneath the furs.

Devereux mumbled something about being beaten by the better man. Arkas exposed even, predatory teeth. "In this case the 'better man' is female."

Devereux tried to hide his shock. Beaten by a woman? He meant to impress these people, not be a laughingstock. How could he cut a deal when all they seemed to care for was attending orgies and humiliating him? If the amazon was half as huge as she looked he would demand a chromosome check.

His opponent reached up, pulling back her sallet and slit-visor. Cold animal eyes stared from beneath hairy brows, above a flat-nosed, rubbery face. No chromosome check needed. She was a SuperChimp. Laughter cascaded from the laps of the sphinxes. Voices half-shot with wine and sexual stimulants shouted, "Give the victor her spoils. She won, she should have him." Debauchees looked up from between each other's legs, to see if there was really going to be an interspecies sex show down on the avenue.

Devereux cringed beneath his armor, the butt of a lordly joke. Arkas had practically commanded him to try a "test of skill", then pitted him against an animal that outmassed him two to one. Had he won, he would have looked silly besting a female ape. Losing made him look ludicrous.

Scanning the gallery, Devereux saw Arkas' daughter, Amalthea. She was the only one not laughing at him—or quietly humping in the crotch of a sphinx. Large, somber eyes studied him. She was barely seven spades high, her skin smooth as gold leaf. Diamonds sparkled in her tawny hair. A precious object indeed. Did the girl find the joke distasteful?

Devereux imagined she merely had other things on her mind. He had heard she was to be married.

Banqueters descended from the sphinxes, filing down the avenue towards the docks and pleasure barges. A royal hunt was scheduled next. They thanked Devereux for the show, dragged eyes laughing under blackened lashes. Both sexes wore sarongs or embroidered kilts, nipped tight at the waist. Dangling wrist seals decorated perfumed limbs. Noses, ears and nipples were pierced for jewelry.

As armorers removed his damaged v-suit, Devereux had to play the overressed fool, exchanging barbed chit-chat with these human peacocks. A naked page took his helm and gauntlets. (The little green catamite grinned from ear to ear.) Heavy pauldrons were lifted off from behind, allowing the breast and back plates to be unbolted. Last of all came the loin guard, greaves, foot gear and bio-sensors.

Devereux fumed. The vicious jest could have left him dead or comatose, yet goldskinned lords and ladies thoroughly enjoyed the joke—showing a grossly cannibalistic sense of humor. Even the overpolite *System's Guide* touched on the barbarity of Callisto System, but Devereux hadn't hoped to reform the natives—he merely planned to profit off their savagery. He saw now why people back in Portal system had smirked at the notion of opening trade with Arkadia.

Devereux tipped the armorers handsomely—knowing his life might depend on the good opinion of underlings. More hairless greenskinned servants brought him a fresh cotton tunic and whipcord breeches. (The coveralls he had worn under the v-suit were wringing with sweat.) Changing clothes, Devereux transferred his credit key, medi-kit, stinger, goggles, remote bugs and audio-amplifiers. Strapping the medi-kit to his aching leg, he doused himself with a light lavender scent, to indicate amiable and frank intentions, then limped down the Avenue of Seated Sphinxes towards the Water Bazaar.

Steaming air smote him. The avenue had been air-conditioned, shaded by colored canopies, but the dock area was open to the white hot dome above. Semi-opaque plastic blocked out the sky, radiating heat and light so intense that even the poorest Arkadian wore kohl beneath the eyes to cut the glare. Devereux slipped on his goggles. He found the wet sizzling air oppressive, but Arkadia was a nearly airless moon. Without the dome he would be breathing freezing vapor.

Canals fanned out from the docks. Cavernous plastic tunnels webbed the surface of Arkadia, connecting population nodes, distributing life-giving water. The Grand Canal was clogged with shipping. This was the Water Bazaar. Blue lobsters scrambled over each other in half-submerged pots. Big mutant catfish lazed in flooded cages. Greenskin porters unloaded spices, pod peas, and electronic components from big rounded dhows. Raucous vendors, naked in the heat, sold melons from open sampans.

"*Aman, aman. Huzoor.* Melons ripe as a boy's behind." Devereux was already tagged as a big-tipping stranger.

"*Sf, offworlder, try a slice. You won't turn a shade greener.*" Arkadian lower classes hosted a symbiotic photosynthetic green algae in their epidermal and germ cells. Under the harsh light the algae pumped glucose directly into their blood streams, promoting nudity and saving on upkeep for the proletariat. The gold skin of the lordly families was not merely ornamentation but conspicuous consumption—royalty had no need to photosynthesize.

Arkas' Harbor Master, very cool with his shaven skin and white sarong, ushered Devereux through the watery chaos to a sleek zebeck moored behind the Royal Sun Barge. Limping up the gangway, he saw that the water lapping beneath him was thick with algae, emerald green and smelling like a sewer. Mermaids splashed about the royal barge, begging handouts.

An olive-skinned sharpie in an open turban and half-veil appeared next to Devereux, as though by sorcery. His long, keen nose sniffed the air with exaggerated caution. "*Amigo fata, a stranger in a strange land is in need of a friend.*"

Devereux recognized the sly odor of foxglove, worn by Djemdet Nsar of the Association of Spies and Informers. "I could use a friend, if he does not cost me dearly."

"*Huzoor, a modest fee buys keen eyes and ears; generosity secures a devoted slave; penury will purchase only rude indifference.*"

Devereux slid his credit key into the informer's pocket bank. A solid line of credit from Centauri Bank endeared him to nearly everyone. Interstellar credit was unobtainable on Arkadia—Ursa sector produced nothing that more advanced systems needed. But Devereux hoped to change that. "What do my eyes and ears tell me today?"

The spy slipped into sotto voice, "I will name the lords who laugh behind your back."

"A moment ago they laughed in my face."

Djemdet Nsar was downcast. Devereux scanned the stern galleries of the Sun Barge, wanting to give the spy something harmless to report on. Having the goodwill of the Guilds, he dared not throw it away. "Who is the mutant sitting with Arkas' daughter?"

The informer made a show of studying the royal group. Seated under the Sun Barge's fantail canopy were Lord Arkas, his twin sons Maitland and Malory, and his daughter Amalthea. With them was a brawny humanoid, two meters of claws and tawny fur. Pretending to shade his eyes from the glare, Devereux turned up his glasses. Spying on Lord Arkas was a flaying offense, though as a royal guest he would get off with simple impalement. At maximum magnification Devereux could count the hairs on the humanoid's knuckles. Sickle-like nails curved several centimeters beyond the tips of the mutant's fingers. Upper canines were formed into fangs. His eyes were green cat's eyes.

"*Huzoor, that is the Beast Master. The selective mutation that gives the lords their golden skin has been increased in him. His face and body are covered with yellow fur, except for his palms and the soles of his feet. The claws and fangs are simple implants.*"

Many mutations on Arkas made Devereux nervous. Genetic engineering had reversed the trend towards sterility that began before star travel, when ancient humans destroyed most all the animal species on Old Earth. Selective mutation, polyploid additions, karyotypic fissioning, helped create an explosion of new types. SuperChimps. Giant saurians. Retrobred mammals. Human hybrids. The lords of Ursa sector added ruthless surgery and old-fashioned incest to the mix. People were raw material, molded into something amusing. A few meters away stood a servant with the head of a hawk, the perfect image of his lord's armorial beast.

The Sun Barge cast off. Devereux felt the zebeck surge after the larger ship, drawn into the main channel by electric fields, invisible propulsion, ponderous and eerie, silent except for the slap of water. The smells and shouts of the Water Bazaar fell behind. Tangled banks slid by on either bow, bathed in white crackling light. Tunnel walls were transparent to head level. From the zebeck's deck Devereux saw the full sweep of Arkadia's true landscape—dead lava seas, deep pools of dust, ragged volcanic peaks rising into the faint air. He noted a giant cracking plant. Condensers, fractionating towers and photo-collectors used the hard radiation, bitter cold, and scant pressure to process organics brought up from Lycaon.

Out there it was near sunset. Tiny Callisto and cool red WX Ursa Major were sinking together, casting double shadows over the plain. Arkadia's slow rotation would keep it dusk for a day or so more. But under pressure, life pulsed to a 30-hour clock—Lord Arkas had decreed twenty hours of day and ten hours of night, giving his people ample time for their labors. On the port side the transparent tunnel

wall showed a great slice of Lycaon, Arkadia's gas giant primary. Bands of white-tan cloud tops swirled along the horizon, ending abruptly in the black of space.

The green line of a converging canal appeared. At the confluence of the two canals a pendentive dome enclosed a hump-backed island. Cliffs rose straight out of the canal. Rocky meadows were cut by ribbons of falling water.

The Sun Barge moored at the isle's sandy beach. The zebeck anchored a discreet distance offshore. Devereux saw the royal family disembark—riding gene-spliced albino ponies, with wispy beards and a single curling horn—followed by the Beast Master, a falconer, leopards and gazehounds. Devereux wondered aloud what they would hunt.

Djemdet Nsar chuckled, "The island is stocked with hares and peacocks, plus the odd gazelle. Or there is the chance of killing hapless waterfowl from the canals. But such hunts are ritual excuses for Prince Arkas to be free of the court—to be alone with his children."

Devereux focused his goggles on the "children." Malory and Maitland are not true twins, being separated by a few years in age, but they were genetically identical—clones of their father. Amalthea was barely fifteen standard years—her birthday a week behind her, her marriage a week ahead. Arkadian lords did not breed daughters except to consummate dynastic marriages. Like Arkadia revolving around Lycaon, the girl orbited just outside her father's charmed circle, her face always turned towards her primary.

Arkas raised his silver arm. They dismounted. His falconer brought forward a rainbow-plumed bird, crowned with a bioplug. Devereux pretended to dig wax out of his ear, placing an audio amplifier where Djemdet Nsar would not see it. As long as he kept that ear cocked towards the beach he could listen in clearly and discreetly.

Maitland, the younger clone, was crowing over the bout with the Chimp. Arkas admonished his son, "I

did not set the ape on him merely for your amusement. I did it because I hoped to see Devereux humiliated, or at least dead."

Djemdet Nsar started a tedious anecdote about how Arkas had bred Amalthea from a nameless houri in the Harem. Devereux pretended to be absorbed, trying desperately to hear what was said on the beach. Every casual word could be critical. He needed to know why the ruling house considered his trade deal such a deadly insult.

"The Outworlder? Dangerous?" Maitland scoffed at the notion that Devereux was more than a noxious pest. "He could not beat a beast at dinner. What could he hope to do against men?"

"He is a human virus," replied Arkas, "benign to beasts, but deadly to us. Already the Guilds love him. Let him succeed, and petty hucksters will rule our system."

Taking Devereux's elbow, Djemdet Nsar yammered into his other ear. Listening to two conversations was maddening, but Devereux dared not silence they spy. Djemdet Nsar was nothing if not suspicious. So far Devereux had used only passive systems—undetectable by Arkadian standards—but if the spy suspected Devereux had hidden powers, the information would go at once to the highest bidder. It was unethical for a guild informer to sit on a secret.

"*Estan kabbah.*" Maitland dismissed the Guilds with a vulgar gesture.

"We should just kill him." Devereux recognized Malory's curt voice. The older clone went to the root of problems, doing his pruning with an ax.

"Kill who?" Maitland was confused amid so many enemies.

"Devereux." Amalthea whispered. It was the first time Devereux heard her speak. Her voice had a spoiled arrogance, unaccustomed to contradiction.

Arkas handed off his falcon, taking Amalthea's smaller hands in his, holding them between his palms, speaking solemnly. "Devereux is a guest from Old Earth. Worse yet, he

has Imp connections through Centauri Bank. Killing him outright would intolerably anger the Guilds. They could boycott our organics. We cannot appear to be savages."

Amalthea nodded. Her hands held between Arkas' long fingers, her attitude seemed almost prayerful. Malory muttered, "I would not mind appearing savage. We should show the Guilds who to fear."

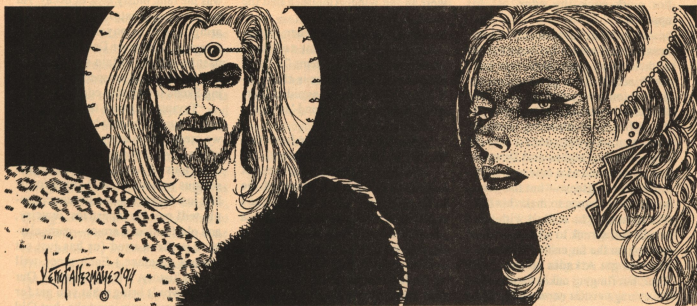
"An antelope!" Maitland leapt to his feet, waving a hunting crossbow. A zebra-striped gazelle had come down to drink from the rill running past the edge of the beach. The thirsty animal extended its graceful neck, keeping a careful watch.

"Loose the leopards," the younger clone shouted to the Beast Master. The mutant obeyed. In a blurring burst of acceleration a speckled cat streaked down the long beach. The gazelle splashed through the rill, trying to escape up slope. The cross-bred cheetah crashed into its bounding victim, locking jaws on the gazelle's throat in a flurry of dust and slim limbs, holding the kicking animal in a relentless suffocating grip.

Devereux's wounded leg sobbed with sympathetic pain. Unwilling to watch the gazelle being throttled, he turned back to Arkas and his daughter, who were still kneeling, hands pressed together, ignoring the thrashing gazelle, speaking in intimate tones. Djemdet Nsar drowned out whatever they were saying. "So Lord Arkas bred this daughter solely to consummate an alliance with the Prince Griffin of Ursa, Lord Rous' rebel nephew. The Prince Griffin is a perfect son-in-law, weak and dissolute, as well as a hereditary enemy."

Devereux despaired of hearing what was said on the beach. "Why? With that recommendation, Arkas would hardly want the Prince Griffin for a footman."

Djemdet Nsar expressed surprise at the Outworlder's artlessness. "Because the Prince Griffin can never be the threat that his uncle is. Once Rous is replaced by his nephew, Amalthea will be Arkas' weapon in the Prince Griffin's camp."



The breezy way Djemdet Nsar spoke of war after the wedding made hairs crawl at the nape of Devereux's neck. The Prince Griffin had returned from exile deep in Ursa Sector, intent on overthrowing his uncle. He had brought several shiploads of hardened mercenaries, who swaggered about the pleasure groves and brothels, as ready to shoot as spit. People acted as if the war with WX Ursa would be a bit of royal honeymooning. Devereux doubted it would be so easy. Not if Lord Rous was half as wily as advertised. He stared hard at the kneeling pair—father and daughter—goldskinned and radiant. At a distance they made a great case for cosmetic breeding. Devereux had sunk every bit of credit he could beg or borrow into this project, then crossed 20 light years in space and time—only to find he had picked a perfectly ghastly system to trade in. Somehow he had to turn a profit off these beautiful, deadly parasites.

*And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard
from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!*
—Coleridge

DAUGHTER OF THE STARS

The wedding was a frost. Devereux was did not enjoy standing on a game leg, one mote among

many, while trumpets blared Verdi over the throng. Half of Arkadia had come—workers from the outlying moons, SuperChimps shipped up from the refineries in Lycaon's atmosphere—all having a good grovel. (Heaven knows what the Chimps made of the show, but there they were, doused with primrose, adding panted hoots to the applause.) The ritual was performed on an immense scale in a sphinx-shaped hanger used to build the barges that hauled water and organics up from Lycaon's stormy atmosphere—Devereux estimated the ceiling was a good quarter-kilometer overhead. The hanger had its own climate control, and the floor had been washed beforehand by warm lotus-scented rain. Half the towering interior was taken up by a monstrous new barge being readied for her maiden voyage—Lord Arkas adored heavy symbolism. The silver lifting-body hull was too big to be seen from a single angle; an entire orchestra sat on one stubby control fin, sawing its way through the triumphal march from *Aida*. Devereux had seen bigger ships—but always against the infinite backdrop of space, where even the stars seem small—never anything so colossal contained by walls and a ceiling. The kilometer-long berth beside it was vacant. The combination of titanic object and vast emptiness gave a

feeling of power scaled to inhuman proportions.

The name of the barge was scrawled on the forward hull in ornate characters several stories high, using the local pre-Universal language—an amalgam of Spanish, Arabic and Pushtu. Devereux asked a foppish retainer to translate. (The man's harness had enough braid for a grand admiral, but he was probably a butler.) Arching a painted eyebrow, the courtier read it off; "Daughter of the Stars."

The bachelor dinner and drinking bout that followed the wedding was not a notch better. Arkadian custom called for the unmarried men to make sure the groom was properly blasted before staggering off to the bridal bed. Arkas was absent, along with the married lords, making room for Devereux at the high table. Places were set bachelor fashion, a bottle for each plate and cold meat within easy reach. Robust, earthy scents filled the hall.

Greenskin food tasters got first crack at each dish and bottle. A lord's natural lifespan was well over a thousand years, but assassination cut the average considerably. Devereux's life was in real peril, still it unnerved him to have someone silently eating off his plate, set to die in his place. His taster was a young woman, wearing nothing but three large white scallop shells. Watching

her work took the edge off his appetite.

He tried to bury himself in business. Seated within hailing distance of the happy couple, Devereux gave the Prince Griffin a glowing description of commerce with Alpha C and the Home Systems, while alluding to the difficulty in attracting trade and tourists into a war zone. It was the boy's wedding night—and Devereux felt as welcome as a new and different venereal disease—but this might be his final chance to make his case. The tight wire he walked with these people had shrunk to a filament, with nothing on the far end. "Eventually I mean to get Arkadia on the Grand Tour, but flinging nukes about makes the average visitor nervous. They can get that sort of thrill from feelies."

"No nukes," Malory assured him, with cheerful ferocity. "At least not big ones. We mean to have WX Ursa intact."

The Prince stayed drunk and distracted, but Amalthea graded Devereux with a cold gorgeous stare, her gold curving body neatly packaged in a meter of silver fabric held together by a pair of lapis clasps. On Arkadia young women did not go to their wedding overdressed. Her fierce green eyes and strong features reminded him of one of her father's hawks. She wore a more subtle version of Lord Arkas's favorite scent, musk and heliotrope. Devereux thought it an odd twist to have the bride at a bachelor party; no doubt she had orders from papa not to let the Prince out of her sight.

"Why would *commoners* from the Empire pay to come here?" Amalthea sounded as if she planned to paint the tourists green and put them to work in the pea fields.

Devereux had wanted to hit up the prince, but his highness was punishing the booze pretty severely. The wine was heady and subtle, spiked with something stronger than alcohol. Devereux noted that Amalthea's eyes were clear and keen. Among people who made sex and drugs into a religion, she seemed unnaturally alert, very unconcerned about her wedding night. Whatever heinous chemicals

were in the wine, Amalthea had the antidote.

So he put his pitch to her. "Arkadia has a raw excitement no longer found in the Home Systems." (Thank goodness.) "Ursa Sector is challenging and, well...." (He avoided 'barbaric' and stumbled around 'savage'.) "...Special."

"Really? What do we have that Earth or the Empire would want?"

"It is all around us," Devereux raised his goblet and thumped the table. The cup was handcut tinted crystal. The table was carved from a single block of aromatic wood, bordered by a frieze of masked faces with tongues protruding—ancient symbols of sexual union. "Handmade artworks are unheard of in the Home Systems; cheap reproductions have robbed us of the skills."

"We are not so poor that we have to sell off the family silver." Her admonishment was both matter-of-fact and menacing.

"Not your best work," he assured her. "Collectors will pay fortunes for your cast-offs." He turned the goblet in his hand; it was cut expressly for the wedding, like the table, never to be used again. The stem design was an Arkadian sphinx mating with a griffin in flight—too garish for the discriminating collector, but these weren't the only single occasion sets. There must be warehouses full.

Amalthea examined her goblet, unembarrassed by the design. "Machines could copy this." She had her father's wits—neither as rash as Malory nor as thick as Maitland.

"Artworks can be faked," Devereux admitted. (For the right price we will fake them ourselves.) "What cannot be faked is this sector, its worlds, its peoples. You are unique." Unique was wild understatement. To make his pitch Devereux had to lean past Skene, the commander of the Prince Griffin's mercenaries. The killer had horny plates grafted under his skin—shielding his head, chest, and upper arms. This disfiguring armor gave Skene a terrific torso, and the face of a flat-nosed crocodile. His green skin was pitted like the surface of some barren moon, and his scent

was the rank musty reek of decay. An huge assault-pistol hung under his armpit, in case anyone missed his message. Whenever Devereux leaned past he felt the villain stiffen. Mere talk of peace and prosperity was making Skene intolerably ugly.

Trying to ignore the ogre, Devereux plunged on into his pitch. "First we create the market. A media campaign, 3Vs, feelies, making people conscious of Arkadia. Museums and serious collectors will come to us. Not just for crystal and furniture; people will pay for tapestries, jewelry, and old-fashioned armor—particularly if its been used (or has just sat around a palace.) Each piece will have a history, a story to sell it. Our pieces won't bring what you get for ancient pre-atomic works, but Old Earth has been mined for centuries. The best stuff never comes on the market anymore."

Everyone bristled at the notion that their used crockery would not bring Wedgewood prices. Skene gave the Prince Griffin a baffled look, as if to ask, why don't we just shoot him and be done with it?

"People will love you," Devereux hastened to add, before they turned murderous. "Look, you have tournaments, mermaids, unicorns. Hell, all you need is dragons to make the place really romantic."

"Alas, we have no dragons." Malory gave the greenskinned Skene a sarcastic glance—the grim mercenary would have made a good gorgosaurus.

"No problem," Devereux assured them. *Nothing* is ever a problem when you are pitching a project. "We can get dragons wholesale. Portal System has embryos from the Prehistoric Preserve in Centauri. Megalosaurs and tyrannosaurs may not breathe fire, but they'll grow great in this gravity." (Arkadia had a relaxed pull of 0.3 g, a point tourists always appreciated.) "By the time the first tour gets here they will be thirty meters long—dragon enough for anyone."

Amalthea snorted, "We don't see ourselves as quaint or romantic..."

Just superior, though Devereux.

"...just superior."

"How long before we see these wonders?" Malory hadn't the patience to watch dinosaurs grow. "Decades," replied Devereux. "It will take me a dozen standard years to go to Portal and return. From there it is almost forty years to Alpha C and back. If I convinced Centauri Lines to extend its routes immediately, it would still be half a century before the first packet arrived." They gave him glazed looks. Devereux might as well have been speaking in tongues, trying to explain career building to people born to the best. As his time scale sank in, interest waned. The Prince Griffin was not about to plan for the next century. He was going to have serious difficulty plotting a course to bed. Amalthea looked down at her goblet. Even Skene relaxed, seeing there was no rush to shoot Devereux.

"It will happen," Devereux insisted. Doctored wine made him go on despite mounting disinterest. "Human Space is expanding. Right now Portal is a gateway to nowhere, but civilization *is* coming to Ursa Major Sector. We can ride that wave. But Arkadia needs to *move*, if it wants to be the way station. Shipping lines could go straight to 11 Ursa Majoris, or the Twin Systems."

He had lost them. Maitland began to bore everyone by talking hawks and dogs. Defeated again, Devereux sat back, drained by the whole sick tableau. Listening to Maitland's drunken baritone, he watched the dinner turn into a roaring party; a bunch of gay blades, singing, laughing, and staggering up to pinch the tasting girls and puke in the corners. The Prince Griffin talked in loud adolescent tones of the coming battles, and the executions he would order afterwards. Devereux should have known the lad would be a washout. Coming back from years of exile deep in Ursa Sector, all the boy brought with him was a lizard collection like Skene and his merry mercs. Amalthea seemed small and brave among the men, but for all the emotion she showed, her wedding might have been an overfamiliar ballet.

At last the Prince tottered to his feet, reeking like a winepress. They toasted him one last time, suggesting the boy buckle down to business. Exit bride and groom. Devereux decided he had no reason to remain, not with Skene's death mask at his elbow. Amalthea had been the only one worth lingering over.

He tried to disengage quietly, but Maitland shouted, "Devereux, don't go." Face flushed, hair tousled, the younger clone leaned forward. "We found a female for you. We may not have dragons, but we're damned romantic anyway."

Hoots of delight came from the drunks about the table, cries of "Good deal!" and "Very decent." Devereux wanted to damn them all and go, but he needed to duck out diplomatically. They were twisted enough to beat him senseless, then happily tossing him into bed with a brawny genepliced hermaphrodite. Or a dozen tiger-striped hours, with long nails, husky voices, and pointed fangs. It was that sort of party. Among these lords sex was a weapon, wielded to cement alliances, reward the faithful, or to punish the unruly. Mutations were bred for every conceivable erotic combination and culmination.

He thanked them, but complained that his leg was black and blue from the last female they found for him. That set them laughing.

Pleased with his newfound knack for groveling, Devereux slunk away. Dignity bruised but body intact. Mostly intact. His leg still ached when he neglected to sedate it. Heavy blast doors opened for him, and closed behind him. The air in the palace gardens was hot and dark, smelling of jasmine. Both suns had set, so it was night outside as well as under pressure. Devereux hated worlds that did not cool off at night. Arkadia did not need to be such a hothouse; the place cooled down smartly enough when Lord Arkas was in a wintery mood. Canals froze over and snow fell in the lofty hangars.

In the shadow of an obelisk, he fumbled through the folds of his blouse, damning the drugged wine.

Numb fingers made everything difficult. Finding his medi-kit, he dialed an anti-intoxicant to clear his head, then fished out his mobile remote, a rounded plastic insect the size and shape of a large scarab beetle. Fitting on his goggles, he released the bug. The remote scurried off down the avenue.

He waited, giving the bug time to trace the path to the dock. Behind him the pyramidal palace dwindled to an apex somewhere high in the night, outlined by lit terraces and open balconies. Two such step-pyramids rose on either side of the sphinx-shaped hanger, doubling as flank towers. Somewhere atop the nearer tower Amalthea and the Prince Griffin must be banging away. Devereux doubted they would enjoy it much.

A soft buzzing told him his scarab had spotted something.

Goggles and audio pickup showed a party of costumed revelers at the docks, arguing with a gondolier, who refused to ferry them down the Zanja Negra—the "Black Ditch" that connected the back of the gardens to the Grand Canal. Nymphs, sprites, and jesters waxed indignant. A purple-green harlequin threatened to dunk the stubborn boatman, but was restrained by his fellows. A wise precaution—the gondolier was a genepliced giant with bulging muscles. He could have used the thin harlequin to pole his boat. Devereux dismissed this semi-excitement. His bug was programmed for suspicion. Its high-strung software was easily alarmed.

He set off through formal lawns and gardens, sprinkled with autoguns, induction sensors and smart mines. It paid to stick to the paths. Domes and tunnels had turned transparent. Lycaon lay embedded in the horizon. At this latitude the gas giant filled a quarter of the sky. Bands of streaming clouds and storm eddies shone like a million full moons, casting long brown shadows, streaks of dried blood staining the other sward.

Devereux wished he could drop Arkas and his whole miserable moon into Lycaon's deep atmosphere. You would barely notice the splash.

No matter how he turned his problems about, this trip to Arkadia seemed a truly brilliant farce. Begun in brash innocence, his maiden assignment was shaping into a monumental folly that would bring his career crashing down before it had even begun. He had dared Centauri Lines to find out just how good he really was. Now they would know. There were reasons why no one had opened Ursa Sector to commerce.

Nearing the docks, he called in his bug. The mechanical scarab scuttled out from under a fever tree, hopping into his hand. Pocketing the remote, he scanned the waterfront. Tall, fragrant eucalyptus cast black reflections on the glassy waters of the *Zanja Negra*. The band of merry-makers had gone off disgusted. The gondolier stood in the stern of his vessel, leaning on the steering oar. Normally the *Zanja Negra* hummed with palace shipping: pleasure barges, traveling boats, cargo lighters, and tiny ketches. But Wedding Day was a 30-hour holiday no one on Arkadia aimed to miss. Aside from the dark double-ended gondola, the only craft at the wharf were the small shallow skiffs tied to the docks for public conveyance.

A drunken couple approached the gondolier, wearing black and white checked costumes trimmed with beryl pom-poms. They got the same gruff treatment from the gondolier, but took it with better humor than the harlequin. Staggering over to one of the public skiffs, they managed to cast off, and were soon splashing about in the canal, laughing and making little progress. The gondolier, sitting idle at the dock dismissing customers, seemed even a worse businessman than Devereux. Resigned to paddling a skiff, Devereux stepped out of the shadows.

The big boatman hopped out of his gondola doing a quick salaam. "Buenas noches, huzoor, sit yourself down, drink in the sweet night air." He did not look like a gondolier, or even an Arkadian. He wore tight starship's trousers, and his bull-like body had the flat grayish tint of synthaor-mor. Two small horns poked out of

his matted curly hair. His scent was a vague musty odor, conveying no special message.

Tired and dejected, Devereux was tempted to take a seat in the boat—despite his hard appearance, the gondolier was polite, and apparently unarmed. But why refuse two sets of customers only to cater to Devereux?

"Do you know who I am?"

The gondolier grinned. "A big tipper, huzoor?"

Devereux smiled diffidently. "I'll use a skiff. For sake of exercise." He selected a skiff, noting that the gondolier gave up amiably, going back to his boat, not in the least out of sorts. It was possible to push caution too far.

The light shallow skiff was propelled by a combination pole and paddle. Like most simple technologies, Devereux found it nearly impossible to master, but he shoved off, paddling a shifting course along the canal's left bank, past the drunken couple thrashing about in midstream, shouting hilariously. Over his shoulder he saw three ninja-black shapes separate from the shadowy eucalyptus grove and cross the dock to the gondola. As they boarded, the gondola slid away from the dock and headed down the left bank, plowing over his crooked wake.

No doubt now. They wanted him. Thievery was virtually unknown on Arkadia. Internal photosynthesis and the system of canals made food and transport available to all. Lord Arkas ran a command economy where money was easy to come by, and utterly worthless offplanet. Mayhem was another matter. Arkadia had a hardworking chapter of the Assassin's Guild, which had just petitioned Lord Arkas to toss the Prince Griffin's mercenaries offplanet—blaming them for bringing prices down with a spate of cheap killings.

Guild assassins or offworld amateurs, he had no hope of distancing them—the gondola's induction engine beat his best efforts with the paddle-pole. The high prow loomed closer, cutting the night air. Devereux loosened his pants and eased himself

over the side into the dingy water, bath-warm and reeking of algae. He filled his lungs and pushed off, sending the skiff drifting down the canal while he dived under the oncoming gondola. Wet clothes dragged him down. The gondola's keel stirred the murk above him. He tried to kick free of his trousers, meaning to make for the far bank of the *Zanja Negra*.

Suddenly slim bodies surrounded him. Hands helped him pull down his pants. Struggling in panic, he surfaced.

Gulping air, he saw other heads dotting the canal surface. Mermaids had been drawn by his fumbling. A slender playful arm flourished his pants, trying to entice him into a game of keep away. But Devereux was already absorbed in a deadly round of hide-and-seek. The gondola's occupants were examining his skiff—and barking questions at the mermaids.

He dove again. Swimming as hard as he could in the direction for the far shore, he tried to take full advantage of the priceless cover created by the mermaids. Lungs bursting, he bumped into the sloping canal bank, coming up among the riot of plants lining the waterway.

Head spinning, Devereux lay gasping, half in the warm water, half in the hot air, swearing that if he survived this night he would never leave the safety of his ship. He hated worlds where coming home from dinner was an ordeal. Hearing nothing but his own panting—and the drunks splashing in circles upstream—Devereux scrambled onto the bank, lying prone, peering through the leaves and vines of some peasant's melon patch. The mermaids were swimming off, flourishing his pants—a useless trophy; their legs were grafted together at the knees.

Melons were slim cover, but there was no time to find better. Rolling gingerly onto his back, he took out his remote and released it. The fat plastic beetle disappeared into the vines and creepers, scurrying in the direction of the gondola. He lay waiting, heart hammering. Something dug into his back but he dared not

make himself comfortable. From far off came the incongruous beat of band music. A pleasure barge must be coming down the canal. If the gondola dutifully searched the left bank, he might slip away when the barge went between them. The syncopated beat drew closer. First mermaids. Now a barge and a band. Half of Arkadia had come to see Devereux die.

The remote buzzed him. Through the scarab's electronic eyes he saw the gondola passing along the right bank, close inshore, not far from where he lay. His long swim had been for nothing. Not fooled in the least, the shadowy assassins were headed straight for him. Stomach tensing, he drew his stinger, laying the weapon across his chest, snout pointed towards his pursuers. Seconds blinked by on his wrist computer.

A silent black shape swept over the remote, blocking his view of the gondola. Someone had stepped onto the scarab, and was standing above the beetle, blinding him.

Devereux locked on the stinger and squeezed the firing stud. A metal hornet hummed off, guided by the remote.

The figure staggered and toppled out of sight, giving him a clear view of the gondola again. The minotaur was working the steering oar; another shape was hunched in the bow wearing half-armor and holding a grenade launcher. Devereux locked on both targets, releasing two more fire-and-forget hornets. They hit home. The gondola commenced to drift, banging aimlessly against the shore then swinging out into the channel.

Three out. Odds were down to one to one. Devereux set the scarab on a search pattern and lay back, barely breathing, waiting for the bug to find the fourth assassin. Something dug into his spine again. Having the remote was a tremendous advantage. But would it be enough? He had to score four for four. And so far the bastards had been onto him like psychic bloodhounds. Knowing where to wait, which bank he swam to, where to search for him....

What an ass he'd been! Devereux rolled over, tearing frantically

through folds of cloth. He found it. The thing digging into his back was a transmitter, pinned to his tunic. He tore it loose. A museum piece, incredibly primitive, mostly power source, no visual sensors, merely an audio tracer, clumsy and stupid compared to his scarab. But not half as stupid as he—the bugger bugged, with a Bronze Age remote that Ramses might have used to find Moses. He remembered all the times he had leaned past Skene in useless attempts to attract the Prince Griffin's attention. What a child they must think him! A simpleton, secure in his technical superiority.

He hurled the bug as far as he could.

A recoilless assault-pistol flashed into mad action a few meters from his head. Magnesium-bright tracers roared through the night, blinding him, crashing into the underbrush, bursting melons, cutting a trail behind the thrown bug. His stinger hummed in reply, sending a sonic wasp streaking towards the source of the firing.

The assault-pistol fell silent. Eerie calm settled over the canal, broken only by the oncoming band music. The scarab waddled over and sounded the all-clear. Brushing off shredded leaves and shattered twigs, he crawled to where the firing had come from. The fourth killer was stretched out among the melons, the hypodermic wasp buried in his wrist. Devereux removed the spent insect. The assassin was not dead, but he would be doing nothing strenuous or exciting. The man looked hideous; his entire upper torso was thick and leathery, his face had big bony plates. A wicked horn divided his nostrils. Devereux did not find the tattooed dagger on the palm that marked a Guild Assassin—the rhino-faced monster must be one of Skene's mercenaries.

Working his way to the canal, Devereux found that the gondola had swung full circle and was back scraping the bank. He stepped aboard. Water in the bilges had a rotten sump, open-grave reek. He plucked hypodermic armed hornets from two sleeping forms. The man in half-armor

lying beside the minotaur looked almost normal. Neither had tattooed palms. Then he saw the real gondolier, a small green-skinned Arkadian, wearing only a skirt and wrist bangles, stuffed under a seat with her neck broken, one limp leg pressed into her face. He felt sick. There was no need for this. Guild Assassins made it a point of honor, and good business, not to kill bystanders. Skene's people apparently worked cheap and easy.

Maddened, he stalked over to the sleeping minotaur, picked him up and rolled him into the canal. One-third g made vengeance simple. The syntharmored killer sank like a statue. He picked up the other man, not sure how far he wanted to carry rough justice.

The minotaur had taken the dead woman's place and tried to lure Devereux into the boat—but what had this other one done? How many murders had the man in his arms committed? Skene's mercs must have left a trail of mayhem stretching for light years. Someone close to the crown had ordered this, so there could be no question of deterrence, and turning the killers over to the law would be insane folly. But Devereux had not come here to play offworld avenger, purging the double system one evildoer at a time.

The flap-flap of a flier's blades cut through the approaching band music. Devereux dropped the man he was holding, leaping out of the gondola onto the bank. He squirmed back into the vegetation, lying still among the leaves. Flying low over the water came a patrol craft: a double-ended flitter supported by two contra-rotating props, one atop the other. The design needed no tail rotor—perfect for canal work, with gun shields and searchlights at either end. This might be a regular patrol, but its appearance was too pat, coming minutes after the attempt to abduct or kill him. Besides, there were three comatose killers and two bodies that Devereux did not want to think about, much less explain. ("Si, huzoor, I drowned the royal Prince Griffin's man, fearing the royal family would never punish him.")

The flitter dropped lower. Prop wash flattened melon plants and lashed at black water. Spray flew from the chop, hitting him in the face. Twin shafts of light cut back and forth through the blackness, converging on the gondola. Behind the patrol flitter's searchlights came the pleasure barge, floating midway above the waves. Devereux saw that it was a leviathan dirigible drawn by magnetic fields, practically filling the space between the canal surface and tunnel roof. A maze of balconies, stairs and terraces, climbed the aluminum sides of the airship, leading to a promenade deck where the band played directly under the dome. Perfect acoustics, no need for amplification. Lying in the melons, Devereux could make out every note.

The patrol flitter started to methodically probe the bank beside the gondola, searchlights working together, one swinging wide to spot for movement, the other sweeping the ground meter by meter. Devereux cursed such dedicated thoroughness. The system was bound to spot him, and his stinger was useless against the flitter's enclosed cockpits. He pictured the gunners in their all-body armor, crouched behind gunshields, tracking along with the lights.

The band music mounted as the pleasure barge swung closer, blotting out the stars. Galleries of open windows looked down on dark waters dancing with reflected light. Devereux gathered his legs under him. As the airship passed over the gondola, the flier had to swerve from its search pattern, moving up the bank to keep from brushing the big silver dirigible.

Devereux leaped. The nearest balcony was meters off, but in Arkadia's slight gravity he soared. Fingers caught the rail and he vaulted over, landing on the aluminum decking. The band banged above him. His leg throbbed and complained, but the curving bulk of the airship hid him from the patrol flitter.

Leaning out, he saw the flier drop down into the barge's wake, resuming its careful search. They were looking for a fugitive, not a human kangaroo. He held hard to the rail, chest heav-

ing. Fear drained away, leaving him feeling hollow. Absolutely empty. He shuddered.

"Ola! How did you get here?" The slurred words came from out of the dark behind him.

Giving a guilty start, Devereux spun about, gripping his stinger. Before him was a slim Arkadian woman with large dreamy eyes, wearing a wig of copper leaves, and a dress made of gold vines and tendrils. Beneath the shining foliage she was naked as a wood nymph; a dark triangle showed between her legs, smelling of *fitnah*, the aphrodisiac perfume made from mimosa blossoms. Her luminous eyes looked him over. He realized that he was standing weapon in hand. With no pants, wearing nothing but a sopping blouse with limp sleeves. Wet fabric clung to his chest and hips.

"You may call me Zelee," the green-gold nymph held out her glass. "Wherever you came from, I adore your costume."

*Through wood and dale the sacred
river ran,
Then reached the caverns measure-
less to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless
ocean...*

—Coleridge

THE SUNLESS SEA

For a token fee Djemdet Nsar confirmed there was no Guild contract drawn on Devereux—for all the Assassin's Guild cared, he could live a thousand years. Determined to do just that, Devereux kept to his ship, living like a high-tech monk behind heavy radiation shielding, parked on the Plain of Pebbles, a blast scarred field not far from the palace. His ship was a stubby Proxima Pelican, a gravity drive boat with a lifting-body hull, able to land in atmosphere (indispensable in the Outback where surface shuttles were bad to non-existent). He kept up a futile charade of doing business via 3V channels. Splendidly pointless. Tours visited the Outback for a taste of wild adventure. But Centauri Lines would not extend to a

world where it wasn't safe to set foot outside your ship. ("See the airless moons of Callisto system!" 'Meet your death among the cruel and charming natives!' Marvelous copy.)

Without a hope of showing a profit, honoring his contracts, or paying off his debts, Devereux was in no hurry to rush home and inform his creditors that Ursa Sector was (still) not ready for civilized contact. He'd do better to keep moving, point the Pelican into the unknown, plunging deeper into Ursa Sector. Maybe check out Alkaid, or Nu Ursae Majoris, the mysterious orange giant and green companion. Running off meant breaching his contracts, committing fraud, felony default, and abuse of a pilot's license—but somewhere in the deadly, beautiful Outback he might turn up a real treasure. In a short trip, ship time, he could reach M97, the Owl Nebula, huge and unexplored. By then law and creditors would be 26 centuries behind him.

But he kept putting off that leap into the unknown. Abandoning human civilization was a big step. And Devereux hated to think of himself as a failure; naive and reckless perhaps, even devil-may-care, but never a failure. To pass the hours, he had the Pelican's computer break every code and cipher in the double system, getting 3V updates on all the local scandals (like Lady Hera inventing new positions with her husband's favorite hermaphrodite) and glumly watching Lord Arkas and the Prince Griffin launch their combined fleet at WX Ursa.

Somehow Djemdet Nsar divined that the Pelican could unscramble 3V visuals. The gossip spy became Devereux's semi-permanent guest, filling the ship with obscure fragrances. He even sold a ringside seat at Devereux's stereo tank to a local xeno, the Eridani Hound who represented the Pilot's Guild. After so many bizarre Arkadian mutations, Devereux found it refreshing to keep company with a real xeno. The Eridani Hound resembled an upright baboon with the head of a short-faced hyena, but it did not bother Devereux. All Hounds looked like that. Djemdet

Nsar chain-smoked *hasheesh* and handicapped the coming battle, while the Hound watched over his guild members, who piloted warships on both sides. The pair could be crashing bores. (Sharing a dirigible with Zelee the wood nymph was more Devereux's idea of diverting company. Zelee had shown him how enticing a shaved and perfumed body could be.) But Devereux welcomed the illusion that someone was on his side—though the spy was only faithful to the highest offer and so could hardly count a xeno as a friend.

Denouement came faster than expected. The Prince Griffin was rich in mercenaries but poor in warships, so Skene's hooligans were parceled out aboard the Arkadian fleet. The Prince would have been wiser to have come home with a cargo of botanical curios rather than so many ready-handed killers. At a prearranged moment, Skene's men turned their guns on the Arkadians. Djemdet Nsar did not even pretend to be surprised. He raised an admonishing finger, "Penury never pays. I would have warned Lord Arkas, but Skene outbid him."

With horrified fascination Devereux watched the 3Vs as fighting tore through the fleet. The battle was completely internal—Lord Rous' armada was still billions of kilometers off, getting set to fight the Battle of WX Ursa. Arkadian ships turned their weapons on each other at zero range as mercenaries stormed the fire control stations. Devereux saw one heavy cruiser launch shaped-charge chemical rockets at its own laser turrets, something he thought was impossible.

Armed with surprise, and a ruthless disregard for his losses, Skene seized control of Lord Arkas' flagship. He attempted to end the battle by broadcasting his triumph to Arkadian loyalists holding out in the remains of the fleet. Riddled by grenades and handguns, the flagship no longer held pressure. Shirt-sleeved bodies floated about the burnt-out bridge. Survivors all wore armored vests. Devereux saw the Prince Griffin, Malory, Maitland, and Lord

Arkas kneeling in the depths of his stereo tank, all in a line, unable to move, their pressure armor welded together at the wrists and ankles. Skene ordered a 3V transmitter panned across their faces to show everyone his catch was complete. The Prince Griffin was near to tears, Malory defiant, Maitland uncomprehending. Lord Arkas stared straight at Skene's hideous face.

In zero-g the greenskinned gargoyle swam down the line of kneeling victims, opening stopcocks on their suit air systems. As the air rushed out they died. The Prince Griffin pleaded when his turn came. Maitland moaned a curse. Malory made no sound, merely flopping about as his v-suit deflated.

Skene saved Lord Arkas for last. The Lord of Arkadia had not flinched at seeing his sons die before him, but as Skene reached for the stopcock Arkas opened his mouth, shouting a single word, full of command, bravado, and compassion. "*Amalthea!*"

The stereo tank went blank.

Devereux jumped to adjust the pick-up. No coherent signal came in. High volume expletives poured from the Hound's speaker. Devereux had never heard a Hound key his speaker for so much feeling. He saw the xeno flip through the ship's sensors—longer wavelengths were filled with static; deep radar and visuals showed blank, but x-rays and gamma radiation registered surges far above background.

The entire Arkadian fleet had been blasted into expanding spheres of very tiny particles.

Djemdet Nsar nodded sagely, "Lord Arkas' ultimate deterrent. Every warship had a nuclear device deep in its arsenal, triggered to a transmitter implanted in Arkas' head."

Readings swung back to normal. Skene, Arkas, the crews, the mercs, the ships, the servants were all obliterated.

"Nothing worth taking will fall to Rous." The spy stood up, snorting in disgust. "Arkas was a fool to keep his deterrent hidden. For a suitable fee, I would have seen the secret got to

Skene. A simple leak, and calamity could have been forestalled." Shaking his head, Djemdet Nsar set about gathering his things, dousing himself with frankincense, a traveling scent.

"Where are you going?" Devereux guessed the spy's departure warned of worse to come.

"*Huzoor*, it will not stop here. Such devices are everywhere. Aboard ships. On offplanet stations. Buried under nodal points in the canal net. Beneath palaces and *landing fields*." He put delicate emphasis on that last location. "Everything will be destroyed as soon as Lord Rous' people lay hands on it."

"But Arkas is dead, blown to protons."

Djemdet Nsar gave him a sad, sorry smile, "You heard his last words?"

"*Amalthea*." Devereux had been touched. Crying out for his daughter was the one human thing he had ever seen Arkas do. Otherwise the man was a monster, and not to be missed.

"Exactly. He named his successor. Each family member has a similar transmitter. *Amalthea's* is now active." So much for fatherly love.

The Hound switched off his recorded expletives, "You, I imagine, have a bolt hole—a hiding place unlikely to explode?"

Djemdet Nsar jerked up on the lock lever. "Failing to take full advantage would be a waste of hard won information."

"Wait." Devereux stopped him. "Is there room for three?" The concrete landing apron beneath them probably concealed a nuke—he had been eating, sleeping and bathing atop a bomb, thinking he was safe when he had merely been fooled.

"*Huzoor*, It would be unwell for you to join me."

"Why not?"

The Hound's speaker switched to patient explanation. "He means he would sell you to Lord Rous. Don't feel betrayed human, it's only business."

"Betrayal is business," replied the spy primly.

"I thought we were friends?" Devereux protested.

"Oh, but we are." The ferret-faced informer looked honestly pained. "Am I not betraying my own plans to you—*free of charge?* *Huzoor*, you have been a generous host, an important player, a man with plans and interstellar contacts, a guest of the royal family. Alas, your plans are shattered, your contacts broken, and the royal family has dwindled to one. Your current value is whatever Lord Rous cares to offer. And I understand Urza considers you one of Arkas' most valued assets."

At last someone appreciated him. Perhaps he should have gone to WX Urza instead of Arkadia, and worked with Rous from the start—but right now Devereux did not want to become a prize of war. The Guilds might restrain Rous, but the Association of Spies and Informers was the wrong guild to appeal to—they were enthusiastic subscribers to Callisto's cannibalistic "eat the crippled" ethic. He desperately needed time to cut a deal, and something to bargain with. "How long before the bombs go off?"

The spy spread his hands. "Ask Amalthea. As you see, I am wasting not a nanosecond. *Via con dios, huzoors.*" Opening the hatch, Djemdet Nsar disappeared as briskly as if he had never seen the two of them before and just ducked in to ask directions.

Devereux turned to stare at the xeno's evil wolf-like face. "What will you do?" Despite years of dealing with aliens, Devereux was not entirely free of the xeno mystique, the feeling that intelligent aliens were immune to human mistakes. Perhaps they were, but they always had ample follies of their own.

The Hound moved his shoulders up and down, imitating a human shrug. "I have Pilot's Guild protection, and no need to share a hole with a human weasel. A suitable ship will lift me to a guild habitat, free from Arkas' doomsday devices. Lord Rous needs the Guilds. We pilot his ships, market his goods, produce his playthings."

"I am a pilot," Devereux suggested, "how about getting guild protection for me."

The xeno bared his fangs, mimicking a smile. "The Pilot's Association would be supremely honored. After a short probationary period, you could sign on as a pilot's apprentice. A second run as a copilot, and you could claim Master's status, with full Guild protection."

"Couldn't my application be rushed?"

A sorry note slid out of the xeno's speakbox. "We are not so desperate for dues that any rocket jockey can join. And Lord Rous would seize on any irregularity, claiming that you were promoted *merely* to secure protection from him."

Devereux tried to salvage something. "How would your guild like to own a Proxima Pelican?"

"This ship?" The xeno's speakbox expressed surprise. "With you tucked away as supercargo?"

"No, just the ship. I will sell to the guild for a nominal fee."

"How nominal?"

Bargaining with Hounds was always a delight, since they despised human sentiment. "Enough to cover my cargo—antiques, recordings, and curios. Add a clause saying the Guild agrees to ship the stuff to Portal System free of charge."

"And your project lives on after you are gone. Very noble, human." His speakbox hit the proper somber note.

"Not that noble, I intend to stay a step ahead of Rous. I only have to figure out how. Keep the sale quiet for now and the ship's yours." The Hound's speakbox drew up an audiocontract, registering their voice prints.

The Hound departed. Devereux had bought some immunity for his ship and cargo. But he still had to save himself. He flipped through his uncensored channels. Even gravity drive warships took time to accelerate and cross the double system, so Rous could not arrive for hours. But Arkas' court—trained in formality and furtiveness—went into immediate meltdown. Cynical spokespersons pleaded for calm, passing off outrageous lies, claiming Arkas was alive—though half of Arkadia must have seen Skene's broadcast. On private chan-

nels the court was in hysterics, expecting Rous momentarily. There was a panicky summons for Devereux to present himself at the palace, *without delay*. Devereux replied he would continue conducting business aboard ship; anyone wishing to see him, from Amalthea on down, could come to the Plain of Pebbles. He cut off communication.

The first guests to arrive from the palace were two troops of armored *mamluks*—assault guns and mobile artillery—followed by four companies of royal *panzenars* in full battle armor. The reinforced battalion spread out over the Plain of Pebbles, ringing the ship. Next a pair of hulking SuperChimps cut through the lock with an anaerobic torch. They frisked Devereux, removing his remotes and stinger, and tried to stuff him into a v-suit, intending to haul him off to the palace. It was pointless to argue; all Arkadian Chimps were mind-blocked. There was a short tussle in the tiny cabin, which the 200-kilo Chimps won rather handily—but Devereux did manage to send a message to their handlers: "Damn you dumb bastards, there's a bomb aboard—drag me outside and I will blow the whole ship to salvation." An argument Arkadians apparently understood. The Chimps relaxed, no longer trying to hustle him out the lock.

Devereux got a hands-pinned, private interview in the Pelican's cabin with the cricket-like Herald and high toady.

Despite the disaster to his house, the courtly gaffer looked chipper, more in charge than ever. With Arkas obliterated, and a teenager at the helm of state, the Herald must have been wielding unaccustomed power. Glum tones could not conceal a senile smirk of satisfaction. Devereux was told to take Amalthea into deep space, somewhere outsystem, beyond Lord Rous' reach. "Our Daughter shall be a sword hanging over Rous' head. As long as she is alive and free we can rally the Guilds, holding Arkadia and Lycanon hostage."

Devereux nodded agreeably. *No problem*. He was not positioned to

argue, sandwiched between a pair of overmanned SuperChimps. He merely pointed out that the Pelican was built for four, "Aside from me that leaves space for three." Two others besides the Princess.

The old fox gave a dry, "Tut, tut," saying, "You won't whittle us down so easily. Pressurize your cargo space; that should make room for an adequate retinue." Devereux recognized a one-way ticket to *Die Götterdämmerung*, with Amalthea and a boatload of overmuscled extras. Rous' warships would easily run him down. He pictured the cruel final act, somewhere out among the stars: Amalthea screaming defiance at their pursuers, sending the signal to vaporize half the double system, then ordering him strangled as a prelude to committing mass *sepukku* along with her loyal retainers.

They waited. The lock cycled. Old greenskin stepped solemnly aside, eyes brimming with sentiment. Enter Amalthea. The Beast Master was with her, looking wary, fangs and claws fully extended. She held tight to the hybrid, as though he were some hideous overstuffed toy. Gold-skinned beauty and mutant beast—the cabin was crowded with enough oddballs to start a small circus. She seemed more fragile than ever, shrunken with pain, the ghosts of her family haunting her face. Had she seen her husband and brothers executed? And heard her father call her name as he committed suicide? Devereux guessed yes—given the system's insane commitment to personal authority. Would she join her father, turning Arkadia into a fireball before giving in? You betcha. He was looking at a hair-trigger, with her safety off, wired to hundreds of H-bombs. Her condition was understandable, if unnerving, but Devereux needed to know how much *more* trauma she could take. Things were only going to get worse. "I must to ask your Highness a question."

The Herald looked aghast, starting to object. Amalthea raised a weary hand. "You may ask."

"Do you want to live?"

Amalthea glared. The officious old Herald hopped about in indignation, but Devereux needed to know—if the girl was bent on dying like her father, there was no hope for them. "Do you *truly* want to live?"

"Of course, you impertinent idiot. I mean to live, and triumph."

Pleased to see her full of inbred fight, Devereux declared, "Then let's get at it." He sounded more cheerful than circumstances warranted. Amalthea scowled. Devereux managed a lunatic smile. "Because, the cat's out of the bag." That was a code phrase to his computers. "They'll be down on us like mad *hornets*." The code word.

Golden metallic homets swarmed out of the Pelican's ventilators. Each seeking a target other than Devereux. In seconds his guests were anesthetized, heaped beneath a buzzing gold cloud that continued to dart about, searching for new intruders. Devereux hit the drive levers. The Pelican leaped skyward—followed by a hail of projectiles, energy bolts, and laser bursts from the heavy battalion spread around the field. But a ship designed to hurtle through the hard black rain at near-light speed is not dented by normal means.

The Pelican did not have far to go—the haven Devereux sought was working up in close orbit. He effected a quick rendezvous, and docked. Dismissing the hornets, he activated the Pelican's autobeacon, so the Pilot's Guild could find their new ship and take possession. Before leaving, he looked down at the still tableaux slumped about his control deck. Huge SuperChimps and the muscular Beast Master were a ponderous contrast to Amalthea and her bony Herald. He stepped in among the limp forms, knowing he could only take one of them. Devereux had no trouble picking Amalthea. Left behind, she was a ticking bomb, ready to take out most of the system. Someone had to try to save millions of Arkadians—Zelee and her friends, family, and neighbors, did not deserve to be burned, blasted, or asphyxiated. He hardly needed the job, but there was no one else to do it.

In the ship's simulated .3g Amalthea's slim body weighed less than nothing.

She awoke sitting across from him, blinking and looking about, the antidote spreading under her gold skin. They were alone in a small cabin—half lounge, half control deck. A tiny chart table sat between them. Walls and ceiling were hidden by an electronic collage of switchboards, view screens, readouts and indicator panels. Big semicircular pressure doors enclosed either end of the cabin.

"Where are we?" she asked. The cabin could have been a starship's bridge or a bomb-proof command bunker. But it was neither. Devereux smiled. "Don't you recognize the crude sturdy construction? You own several of these."

"No, I do not recognize it. Why are we not aboard your ship?" She did not bother to ask about her loyal entourage, still sleeping it off in orbit around Arkadia. Amalthea acted as aloof and commanding as anyone could be who wakes from drugged sleep in a strange confined space. Her father's training showed.

Devereux unsealed a flap in his trousers, digging out a brandy flask and a pair of silver shot glasses. He poured two drinks. "We aren't aboard the Pelican because that plan was sure death. We cannot outrun Rous. He'd have hunted us down, then you or he would have blown us up."

She watched the liquid go from flask to cup. "You might have just said so. *But where are we now?*" Her gaze flicked to the gauges and consoles, trying to glean information.

He pushed the silver jiggers towards her. Close up she was all princess, gold skin showing through her costume, a gilt-trimmed silk skirt, topped by an elaborate blood-red bodice-necklace that draped down over her breasts. Any museum would bend its budget for the necklace, and he knew a dozen private collectors in Centauri who would bid on the jeweled clasp pinning her skirt, no questions asked. "If I don't tell you where we are, then you can't blow us up."

That got him a spoiled, angry glance. Her head might be sufficed with the go codes for cobalt hellburners, even planet busters. But if she did not know where she was, Amalthea had no hold on him. She shivered. "You are a cold, odorless man."

Devereux had turned the cabin temperature down to a tolerable level. He saw no reason to sweat just for the sake of perfuming himself. "Look," he leaned on the chart table, "do you really want a safe haven? Where we can cut a deal with Lord Rous?"

"Yes," she hissed as if she meant it.

But Devereux took nothing for granted. "What about revenge? Your father? Your brothers?" He could not afford to go easy. Her reasons had to be convincing before he trusted her with information.

"Skene killed my family, not Rous," she shot back. "And Skene is dead. Lord Rous is my uncle-in-law." She made the miserable botched attack that had cost thousands of lives sound like a family spat. "Look, you barbarian dimwit, I mean to live. I carry the future of the House of Arkas." Her words would have sounded absurdly confident coming from Arkas. Devereux did not know what to make of them coming from a teenage orphan in a silk sarong and ruby bra.

He indicated the shots of brandy. "Here, take your pick." They did not have food tasters, so he meant to give her the choice, then drink his first.

"No," she shook her head, as if there was no end to Devereux's mad impertinence. "I told you I carry the future of Arkas."

"Damn," He took the silver thimble nearest to her. "It's not poison. It's Imperial cognac. The real stuff from Tau Ceti, damned expensive and not bad tasting."

"Imbecile, I mean I am in the first stages of pregnancy, and avoiding all alcohol, *poisoned or not.*"

Devereux sat there, mouth open, the brandy halfway to his lips. The Prince Griffin, poor bastard, had not wasted any time. No bulge showed under her sarong. He downed the shot and reached for the second. "Maybe

you are serious about life. I'll have to chance it. We are aboard your newest barge, *Daughter of the Stars.*"

She glanced coolly about, "But this is not even a deep-space vessel. It's nuclear-thermal powered, far slower than your ship."

He patted the console. "She's got the gallop of a pregnant whale, but she'll take us to a place where Rous will never find you." Devereux was again feeling smug, getting over Amalthea's surprise motherhood.

"Where?" She turned her hard stare back at him.

"There," he thumbed a switch. Screens blazed into life, filled with tremendous brown-white bands and whorls. Cloud eddies the size of continents looked into the little cabin, like titanic eyes floating in Lycaon's upper atmosphere. They were decelerating, dropping towards Arkadia's primary. Amalthea took a small breath, mesmerized by the enormity of the gas giant.

"Lord cricket face was only half wrong...."

"Lord cricket face?" She stared at the screens, tracking the great rivers of gas and twisting cyclonic storms.

"Your Herald."

"He's hardly a lord."

"Whatever." Just another uppity butler, pinching the Amontillado and planning to rule the planet. "He was right about needing a place to stash you—while we cut a deal with Rous and the Guilds—but he was wrong to pick interstellar space. Too empty. Here we could hide all of Arkadia, *no problem.*" Not much of a problem anyway. "None of Rous' ships are designed to navigate in a gas giant's atmosphere."

She gave him a long, liquid methane look. "So you stole this ship, and took it on yourself to kidnap me?"

Devereux shrugged, finishing off the second jigger of brandy. He'd always considered himself the enterprising sort. "Hijacking was simple—your locks are so primitive." Arkadia's lack of thievery made it easy. The kilometer-long barge had been mothballed by the crisis, its comput-

ers running test routines. "As for kidnapping, I don't do my best work with armed apes sitting on me. And you *need* my best." He was betting his life that he had the skills to pilot them to safety.

She sat there, utterly lovely, absolutely icy. "I have only to think it, and this barge is blown to extremely small pieces."

"Perish the thought. Really, you have to stop threatening to blow people up when you don't get your way. Civilized beings don't do that." Not all the time anyway.

Her chill melted a degree or two. "But we Arkadians are savages. That's our charm, *remember?*"

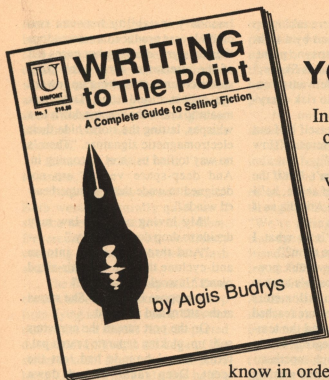
"Of course," he grinned extravagantly. "And since we're to be partners, please do call me Devereux. 'Imbecile' and 'barbarian dimwit' sound so needlessly formal."

LYCAON: Largest planet of Callisto (WX Ursa Maj B); mean diameter 125,000 km; sidereal day 9hr 55min; gravity .9g....

—Systems Guide
Ursa Major Sector

Crossing the invisible boundary layer of gas molecules hundreds of kilometers above the cloud tops, Devereux spiraled in, keeping the g forces from knocking Amalthea flat on her fanny. (Did she have to be pregnant?) She sat across from him, grimacing in silence, white knuckles on the arm rests. The accelerometer never climbed above 3gs, nothing much to Devereux, but that was *nine times Arcadia normal*. High-pitched bumps and grinds shook the ship. (Few things are squeakier than a 95% hydrogen atmosphere.) Screens showed only the intense corona flaring off the hull.

Barreling past the first white wisps of ammonia cirrus, Devereux diverted energy from the reactor to the hydrogen in the ship's gas cells. The cells expanded, driving out the colder, denser atmospheric hydrogen. Outside temperature, at one atmosphere—150 degrees below freezing. Slowed and buffeted by thicker air, *Daughter of the Stars* began to develop



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buoyancy. The fiery envelope faded. Devereux had piloted through pressure before, everything from scramjets to a saucer in a Syrtis Major sand storm, but like any real vacuum hand he hated working in atmosphere. In vacuum a ship acted reasonably, obeying simple laws of celestial mechanics. In atmosphere nothing was simple, or reasonable—not with friction, winds, currents, changing density, murky visibility.

Semi-intelligent software moved the fins and fine-tuned the gas cells, but Devereux gave direction. Maintaining useful buoyancy was not just a matter of matching densities until the ship weighed the same as the gas it displaced. A light ship tends to bounce about, but a heavy ship at least knows where it is going: *down*. The barge was most stable if it was a trifle heavy, relying on forward propulsion for aerodynamic lift—flying rather than floating.

"This is hell," gasped Amalthea. The accelerometer stabilized at 0.9 g, Lycaon normal—less than Devereux was used to at home, but three times what Amalthea was born under.

Busy piloting, he could spare only perfunctory sympathy. "Your SuperChimps work in this. It won't kill you. When we reach the refineries, they'll have low-g chambers with Arkadia-normal conditions." Spaced about the immense planet were floating atmospheric refineries, extracting liquid water and industrial organics (mostly methane, ethane, acetylene and propane). "Those refineries are the closest thing to a sanctuary anywhere in this system. Lords and ladies may slaughter each other for revenge and recreation, but if Rous jeopardizes the flow of organics, his pilots will desert him. The Guilds will cut him off at the knees," or so Devereux hoped.

"Then get me there." She struggled to be imperious through clinched teeth.

"Not until we shake Rous' ships." He angled the port screen upward, to show the action in orbit. Rous' main fleet was closing in on Arkadia, while a detached squadron dropped deeper into Lycaon's gravity

well. Two corvettes were taking up low polar orbits, backed by a light cruiser hanging at a geosync point. "Rous is not as reckless as Skene," Devereux decided. "He wants you, but not badly enough to risk everything."

Amalthea pulled herself half out of her seat to study the screen. "How can he know I am here?"

"Hopefully he doesn't. But if the man has an angstrom of sense, he'll treat every ship leaving Arkadia as if you were aboard."

She sank back. "It is what I would do. Can we dodge them?"

"We have to," Devereux pondered the problem. Lycaon's atmosphere was thousands of kilometers deep—at bottom the pressure reached 3 million atmospheres and the temperature topped 9,000 degrees, crushing hydrogen into a liquid, superheated metal. "The trick is to find a hiding place without being flattened and fried." Devereux did not aim to end up as overdone Peking Duck.

He cut power, bleeding the forward gas cells. *Daughter of the Stars* began to sink. Devereux ordered hard down-elevator, fighting the ship's tendency to nose up as she sank statically. Layer after layer engulfed them. Each had its own physics and chemistry. Each darker and hotter than the one before. Clear hydrogen. Bright ammonia crystals. Brown clouds of ammonia hydrosulfide. At ten atmospheres, liquid water and ice formed at Earth-normal temperatures. Light penetrated in patches, through breaks in the cloud tops, piercing the water layers in pale blue columns. Beneath them lay the dark sunless sea, billions of cubic kilometers of compressed hydrogen covering the super-hot core.

Devereux traced a course on the chart table for Amalthea to see. "There are currents down deep that cannot be found from orbit." The atmosphere was a 30,000 kilometer layer cake wrapped around itself—only the topmost bands showed up as vast cloud rivers in the upper troposphere. The incandescent streak left by their descent was fraying, torn apart by 500 kph winds. Ahead of them,

boundary instability between two cloud layers produced a tremendous thermal gyre, drawing hot gases out of the interior to form a towering storm column stretching up toward the tallest cloud tops. Devereux meant to crank the reactor down to a whisper, letting the storm hide their electromagnetic signature. "There's no way to find us short of coming in. And deep-space vessels are not designed to wade through superheated winds."

"My loving uncle-in-law may decide to drop down anyway."

"And throw his ships into an anti-cyclone the size of a fair-sized planet? It would be suicidal."

"I suppose it would." She stared at the storm and shivered.

On the port screen the corvettes split up, picking separate search patterns. Rous' hounds had lost the scent. Deep radar probed down through the cloud layers. Dials leaped, registering the whisper of contact. Devereux released his ECM programs—borrowed from the Pelican, superior to any used in the double system. Signals rode the returning beams, blurring the message, blending them into background, turning the giant ship into an eddy in the storm.

Suddenly needles nearly flew off the dials, indicating a huge electromagnetic surge. Seconds later the little cabin shook as shock waves spread through the gathering storm. "Thermonuclear explosion," Devereux hissed between teeth held tight together. "Not far off."

"They've found us!" Amalthea squirmed in her seat.

"No!" He shook his head sharply. "They would have homed a warhead right onto us." Rous was sowing a pattern into the storm. "You seem godawful nervous for someone who means to blow planets apart."

She grimaced, but did not respond. Another leap of the dials. And another. Shock tremors rattled the ship. The time between radiation pulses and the speed-of-sound shock decreased as the pattern tightened around them.

"Hold on," Devereux warned. "We need to go in deeper, on mini-

mum maneuvering power." He cut back the reactor. *Daughter of The Stars* sank towards the base of the cloud column, sucked down by the whirling turbulence. Screens showed a cloud of boiling gases forming above them, rent by violet lighting, blotting out their view of the corvettes.

Amalthea exhaled hard, "I want to scream."

"Feel free. They cannot hear us." Both were unnaturally quiet, as if silence would somehow hide them. Devereux's lips moved, wordlessly counting off seconds between flash and shock.

The ship suddenly upended. Devereux clawed at his console to keep from flying across the cabin. This was not explosive shock. An unexpected downdraft lurked at the edge of the storm system. *Daughter of the Stars* hung tilted at an angle for half a heartbeat, then began to plunge. Sickened, Devereux fixed on the depth indicator. Digits tumbled. He could hardly get an accurate reading. Red lights winked—expand the gas cells. His hand hovered above the reactor switch. How deep could they go? Pressure mounted, topping 200 tons per square meter. His skin prickled. But if he brought the ship up under power, they would rise right into the search pattern.

The cabin shuddered. The shock wave was milder, farther away. Whoever, or whatever, was planning the bomb pattern did not dream *Daughter of the Stars* would dive so deep.

Thirty atmospheres pressure. More than 330 tons per square meter. Devereux winced, hearing a high-pitched ping, watching a light wink from green to red. Somewhere a valve had failed. Pressure worked at the cabin's weak points. His finger on the reactor control, Devereux fixed his gaze on the depth gauge, willing the numbers to stop. The downdraft had to have a bottom.

The numbers stopped. *Daughter of the Stars* stabilized, floating in the deep dark pressure oven. Amalthea was ashen-faced, her gold skin a pallid yellow. The sarong hung wet and limp between her legs. Devereux's

own blouse and trousers were sopping with sweat. He saw her eyes turn upward, as though she could see through metal and plastic. Through hundreds of kilometers of atmosphere.

No nukes rained down from above.

Slowly, notch by notch, the depth indicator began to creep upward.

"We've turned the corner," Devereux exalted. They had dropped through the bottom of the down draft. "We're riding a gyre upward." He massaged the tip of his finger. "Our friends will have a hell of a time finding us." The gyre would bring them up far from where their trail ended. As they rose, light filtered down to meet them. Screens showed an immense sulfur-ammonia storm front spreading over the tops of water-ice clouds, ending in a light band of crystal-clear hydrogen. As long as they stayed under the front, there was no chance of the corvettes spotting them through the electromagnetic interference. Amazed at how easy it had been, Devereux plopped down in the seat across from Amalthea. Her costume, never much to begin with, was in total disarray. A golden nipple peeped out from between a pair of rubies. Devereux decided to break open the brandy again. Too bad she did not drink. A victory party was obviously in order.

As he started to pour, the cabin took a lurch sideways.

"Damn!" Devereux's brandy splashed over the control console.

"We're going down again!" Amalthea was right. The depth indicator was in free fall. This time Devereux did not hesitate; he hit the reactor switch hard, pouring energy into the gas cells. He was not going down into Lycaon's inky basement again, not if he could avoid it.

The *Daughter of the Stars* kept right on diving.

None of this was supposed to happen. They were in the grip of an unbelievable downdraft—a great sucking gale ten times stronger than the first. Dense gases flooded into the hull intakes, making it impossible for the gas cells to expand. High-pitched

creakings sang through the cabin. Thousands of tons of pressure compressed the living space. *Daughter of the Stars* screamed in protest.

An electric sizzle blanked the screens. Cabin air filled with ozone. Only an electric short, but Devereux had no time to deal with it. His gaze stayed locked on the depth and pressure indicators. Amalthea breathed hard behind him. He did not need to ask a computer, or toss the *I Ching*, to know he was in trouble.

Alarm bells sawed around him. A row of lights went red. Cell number nine was gone, popped like a balloon. The ship lost trim, teetering drunkenly. Devereux commanded the computers to trim ship, and give him up-elevator. Then he slammed the reactor into full power forward. "We're caught in some huge suction. Have to climb out."

"What about the corvettes?" She stared at the screens—a pair of blank tombstones waiting for names and dates.

"Damn the corvettes," Devereux muttered, "we got troubles of our own."

The depth indicator danced. Up, down, then steady. For a moment they were poised on the tip of an arc, rolling like a raft in frightful seas. Then they plunged again, falling incredibly fast.

He poured on power. The stricken ship slewed about into a corkscrew spin. Devereux was yanked sideways, pitched against a bulkhead, pinned by g forces. Readouts became a dizzying blur. He could feel the hull vibrating under the insane torsion. A millimeter at a time, Devereux crawled along the quivering bulkhead towards the controls. The rudder was jammed over, bent from fighting the storm. He had to cut power and stop the sheering action. Kilometer-long barges were not meant to spin like loose gyros.

Amalthea watched his progress, pressed into her seat, her face a mask of fear and motion sickness. The g forces were three times as terrible on her.

His hand caught the edge of the main control console. A hellish grating shivered through the hull and

down his spine. Taking a firm grip on the red plastic reactor switch, he dragged the lever back, cutting power.

There was an incredible booming crack. Controls went dead in his hand. The keel had snapped, shattering the superconducting cables. He heard an eerie feminine wail as the *Daughter of the Stars* broke apart under intense pressure. Red lights winked. Cells ruptured or were ripped away. The cabin leaped upward like a shuttle lifting off, slamming Devereux to the deck. Half stunned, head spinning, he lay gagging, emptying his stomach, expecting tons of hydrogen to come rushing in drowning and crushing. Alarm bells kept clanging.

Realizing the cabin bulkheads had held, Devereux raised himself up. One elbow rested in vomited cognac. The best Imperial brandy. Almost the whole board had gone red—only number one cell showed green. The depth indicator flashed upward at a racing clip.

"We're going up!" Amalthea sounded astonished.

Wiping vomit off his cheek, Devereux summed up the ghastly situation. "We're still attached to the forward most gas cell, and it's dragging us up."

"Can we still use the reactor?"

"There is no reactor." It was gone, along with most of the hull. "That spin pulled us apart. All that's left to us is this cabin and one gas cell." No rudder, no reactor, no control fins, they were free ballooning through Lycaon's troposphere. Devereux drew his legs underneath him, leaning back against useless controls. "Hear that alarm? Someone has to come get us."

"Like those two corvettes?" Now she sounded cynical. He could hardly blame her. Plans had gone spectacularly wrong. Everything Devereux had done so far translated out as a total mistake.

"It's a sonic signal," he reminded her. "Those corvettes are above atmosphere. We just have to pray your loyal SuperChimps are listening." Even without screens he pictured the small cabin rising up

through clouds of ammonia crystals. This rise was only temporary, *but why tell Amalthea that?* She was relaxing again, taking quiet breaths. He noted how she never appeared self-conscious, though she was alone in a cabin with him, half-naked and newly widowed (not to mention pregnant.) Having a world of your own must do wonders for the ego.

She returned his stare. "When do you expect help?"

"Soon." It was pointless to expect help to come too late.

"How many hours in 'soon'?"

He shrugged, stealing a glance at the depth indicator. Rate of climb had slowed noticeably.

"We should call the nearest refinery, let them know how vital it is," Amalthea said.

Must not leave your princess blowing in the hydrogen wind. Devereux shook his head. "The same storm that hides us makes electromagnetic communication impossible." The spin and break up had stripped away all exterior antennas.

She stiffened, realizing what else that meant.

He grinned, "Puts us on the same level." The transmitter in her skull could not hit the long wavelengths needed to penetrate the storm, and the bomb aboard the *Daughter of The Stars* had probably gone down with the reactor. Her sword of Damocles was blunted. "Thought of course you are still a lady."

"Princess of Arkadia and Protectress of Lycaon. You think you are so awfully clever with your high technology and your little bugs."

"No. A real genius would not have ended up drifting through freezing hydrogen in less than half a ship."

"My sentiments precisely." Her gaze strayed, ending up on the depth indicator. "We're starting to drop."

He glanced over his shoulder. Meter by meter, they were sinking. "We couldn't keep going up forever. Loss of the hull and reactor lightened us a lot, but...."

"But we are going down."

Devereux sighed. "The hydrogen in our gas cell is losing heat, shrinking, so we'll keep losing buoyan-

cy...." In fact, the farther they fell the faster the gas would contract.

"...Until we sink so low that the walls around us crumple into a tiny ball." She was sharp enough to finish the sentence for him. The admission that they had begun the long last fall was a conversation stopper.

The small cabin stank of sweat and stale scent.

One hundred, two hundred, three hundred atmospheres. Devereux watched the pressure mount. Over a thousand kilometers below the cloud tops and still falling. Four hundred atmospheres—4400 tons per square meter. Groans echoed through the cabin. Help had better come quick. Devereux felt a nervous breakdown coming on, his ninth since hitting atmosphere.

Pockets in the torn structure gave way with loud reports, jolting him into action. Devereux scrambled over to the semi-circular pressure door leading to the outer lock. Making sure the pressure was equal, he flung it open. "Come on, we're going into the airlock."

The Lady of Arkas gave the dingy lock a distasteful sniff. "It smells cramped. I am far more comfortable dying here."

Plaintive groans were replaced by a high singing whistle.

"Look," he pleaded, "these cabin walls have too many holes—they're breached by communication cables, sensors, control channels— heaven knows what all. The lock is nothing but a pair of pressure doors designed for maximum resistance. It's got to be ten times as tough. Trust me."

She shrugged. "How could I not?" Despite the gallows humor she gave in. Devereux hustled her through the pressure door, securing it behind them, pushing aside a pair of v-suits to give them a place to sit. The suits were for vacuum work, utterly useless under hundreds of tons of pressure—but the lock itself was a nice, tight little tomb, smelling of plastic and solvents. The mad screeching faded. The scary ping of failing connections sounded farther off. And there was no disturbing depth indicator. Perfectly peaceful.

Amalthea hunched against one wall, hugging her knees. "Do you know what is superbly ironic?"

"No, tell me." A little irony would be welcome.

"Remember my wedding night?"

Devereux nodded. He was never likely to forget the drunken bachelor party and the attack on him in the canal.

"That night I tried to have you disposed of." The admission was wonderfully matter-of-fact.

"I thought the late lamented Skene was the monster behind that!"

"His men bungled the actual attempt, but I ordered it. Once the Prince and I were wed, Skene's mercs became mine."

A terrific compliment, really. A teenage bride, on her wedding night, and she took time to think of him. "Why?"

"It seemed a satisfactory way to be rid of you. The irony is that now you have managed to kill both of us. Terribly clever, even for an off-worlder."

"I mean, why me?" Recriminations seemed pointless. He did not mean to spend his last hours raging at the person he was imprisoned with. "All you succeeded in doing was killing one of your own." He mentioned the boatwoman lying in the bottom of the gondola.

"Skene was overzealous. No one but you was supposed to be harmed."

"But *you* trusted in Skene—a splendid choice."

She set her jaw. "Skene was a weapon that turned on our hands. He has been amply punished."

"Skene was a snake, a goddamn disaster set to go off." The gossipy nincompoop, Djemdet Nsar, had known more than the high and mighty House of Arkas. "Trusting him cost you your husband and family—maybe your life and baby."

Amalthea glared at him. "Still trying to sell to me? You don't give in easily."

"Can't afford to. If I gave in easily I'd never have gotten where I am."

She laughed, with bitter but real amusement. "I suppose that's the reason I wanted you dead. I am not



much used to strangers who will not give in. You scared me with your plans and certainties."

"Damn it, I only meant to bring a breath of air into this stuffy system."

She smiled ruefully, "Don't worry. This tour of Lycaon has driven the terror of paltry old Devereux right out of me. If I survive, I doubt that I will ever fear anything again."

Devereux tried to decide if he needed to be relieved or insulted.

The terrible singing ceased. The alarm stopped ringing. Devereux did a pressure check. Gas pressure was equally high outside either door. The cabin had ruptured. He had made the proper move, drawing the end game out a bit longer. All that remained of the *Daughter of the Stars* was this small lock, falling deeper into the hot vice. He found a metal wrench clipped to a suit and started beating on the outer door—not wildly, but rhythmically, repeating a distress signal.

"Stop that," Amalthea glared at him.

"The alarm gave out. If anyone is ever going to find us they need a signal to home on." Help *could* be just outside the lock's plasti-metal skin, probing for them.

"Stop that inane hammering! I order it!"

Devereux kept beating out his remorseless signal. "You are not a princess ordering her Chimps about."

Tears formed in her eyes. "No, but I am a person. I have lost my father and brothers. My baby is doomed. And I am going to die in a place that smells badly of plastic, beside a man with vomit on his shirt." She put her head between her knees and sobbed, setting aside pride, not bothering to hold anything back. Devereux stopped beating on the lock door and sat down beside her, putting his arm over her shoulder. Playing the Lady of Arkas to her pathetic doomed court—she had probably never been able to give in to her grief.

She shielded away, though in the cramped space there was nowhere to go.

"Sorry," he told her, "I meant to comfort you." He kept his arm on her

waist. Amalthea was fairly comforting herself. Her hip bones felt delicate beneath her gold skin, and there was a patch of downy fur at the base of her spine. She pushed her head up proudly, drying her tears on his arm. "No man has held me before. My person is semi-sacred."

"Well, the Prince Griffin must have. I mean you managed to get pregnant." He noted her husband was the one person she had not cried for.

She looked shocked. "Don't be vulgar. My ovum was fertilized in a pipet, to get the proper chromosome match. The embryo was surgically implanted. You don't expect we would thrash about in wild rut, like dockworkers on their day off?"

"Only if you're lucky."

"But who would control where the sperm went?"

He shook his head. "Look, you said you wanted to live. So let me work." He went back to beating on the lock. "The deeper we go, the better the sound will carry." Temperature mounted. He pictured the lock sinking like a silver pearl through heavy, stilled layers of hydrogen. And he was trapped inside, with a beautiful pregnant virgin—he had to get out just to tell the gang back in Portal System.

Without warning Amalthea's hand was on his arm. A ghost of a smile shone in the glow of the lock's emergency lights, "Let me take a turn." It was half an order, half an offer.

He handed her the wrench, "Three short, three long, three...."

She cut him short. "Oh, idiot, what do you think I've been sitting listening to?" She raised her arm and began to bang away, matching his beat perfectly. Her thin golden back was absolutely bare, glistening with sweat. Devereux realized this was the first time he had seen an Arkadian Lady or Lord doing any work whatsoever. When she could pound no longer, she handed back the wrench. "I would like to die thinking you don't despise me."

"Heavens no," he took the sweaty wrench and began to beat. "I rather like your intelligence and

determination—its perfectly wrong-headed and willful—but I am pretty willful myself."

"Not to mention wrongheaded."

The third time they changed places there was a scraping sound, followed by a bang from the far side of the hatch. Devereux nearly leaped out of his skin. Deep in the hydrogen sea, it was eerie to see the lock begin to open without their touching it. It swung wide. A SuperChimp stuck its hairy face into the lock, looked them over, then keyed its speakbox:

"You called, My Lady. What do you require?"

They scrambled through a short pressure tube into another barge cabin, bigger and heavier, equipped for repair and salvage work. Amalthea turned to him, a glow of wicked triumph on her face. She was not only alive, but mobile, and in contact with her bombs sprinkled throughout the system. Here on Lycaon, thousands of psychotically loyal Chimps awaited her commands. "Do you know what this means?"

Devereux gave his head a wary shake.

She flashed him a megawatt smile. "Now you must trust me."

Trusted? Hardly. But Devereux did feel something like mutual need developing. And not before time. Devereux had done his damndest to become the indispensable man. By taking Amalthea to Lycaon he had not only saved her life, he had also frozen all the pieces in place. Amalthea was alive, served by slavishly loyal SuperChimps, but unable to leave the huge planet. She had to cooperate, or spend the rest of her life locked up on one of her least pleasant possessions.

Lord Rous was hardly any better off, hanging over Arkadia, afraid to take possession. So long as Amalthea lived he dared not set foot on any worthwhile piece of real estate for fear it exploding beneath him. All he could do was disrupt trade, blockading Lycaon, and throwing the Guilds into an uproar. With no hydrocarbons for industry, no nitrogen and oxygen to expand agriculture, prices went

ballistic. The double system's economy fell into fast decay.

Devereux reveled in the chaos, finally transformed from obnoxious outsider to the voice of reasonableness—the only man who could talk to the wild and vengeful Amalthea.

Secreted in one of Lycaon's refineries, he carried on negotiations by 3V, washing down chilled paté with spiced wine. It was a deep, quiet refuge—green curving bulkheads, still depths, carpeted decks, the heavy dank odor of SuperChimps—all he lacked was a social life. Like a concubine or two. From this high-tech monastery cum monkey house, he relayed messages to Lord Rous and the Guilds. "No, I don't know where Amalthea is. Lycaon is a big place. (Easily a thousand times bigger than Earth.) But she is here somewhere. Listening in. Ready to blow things up if she does not like what she hears."

Holding Amalthea over them like a hammer, he offered peace and prosperity. For a price. Rous would get restrictions on any rebuilt Arkadian fleet, to keep his loving niece from ever threatening WX Urna. Plus a whopping war indemnity—paid for out of trade concessions with the Guilds. The Guilds would get trade with the Home systems, and the peace they needed to turn a profit. Devereux would get a cargo to take to Portal System. Something for everyone. Or they could deal with Amalthea.

It worked. Rous accepted his indemnity, withdrawing his main fleet with a curt little bow. Cool as liquid helium, he even sent condolences—through Devereux—to his poor bereaved niece-in-law. Pointing out he had no quarrel with anyone. He was the one attacked. (Or at least threatened—the Arkadian fleet had self-destructed before ever getting to WX Urna.) The Guilds fell all over themselves to make up a cargo of trade goods, filling the Pelican with antiques, curios and Arkadian oddities—appointing Devereux acting Captain. The Pilot's Guild was pleased to lower its standards, now that the war was over and there were profits to be made.

All that remained was to deal with Amalthea.

They said goodbye in a villa garden on a Guild habitat. Neutral ground. The truce with Rous allowed them to leave Lycaon—but it was not yet safe to settle back down on Arkadia. Rous' guard ships lurked in orbit, "enforcing the peace." It would have been unwise to tempt him. A single warhead would make Lord Rous undisputed ruler of the double system. Forcing him to issue more condolences—but neatly solving the problem of power sharing.

Amalthea was lying upon a heap of cushions in her terraced garden, cooled by perfume spray from an inlaid fountain. White light streamed down the long axis of the habitat. Tiled roofs and palm tops curved upward, hugging the thin blue sky. Ages ago the habitat had been a generational slow boat, used to settle the double system. Now it was a world unto itself—a pair of stubby contra-rotating cylinders several kilometers across, each spinning at about one rpm.

Devereux could see that Amalthea found the spin gravity and curving sky disorienting. Worst of all, this world did not revolve around her. The Guilds had done their best to cushion the shock, with a villa, servants—all the necessities. But this was still their world, not hers.

He gave his best deep sincere bow. With all her faults, Amalthea was still beautiful, clever, and astronomically wealthy. A combination that many men might be immune to—but not Devereux. And no one could cheat death side-by-side with someone so attractive without their instincts kicking in. He noted that teenage pregnancy became her. Rounded out, she looked more like a lovely gold-skinned young woman, less like a spoiled dangerous child. Now that it was safe, he began to have maudlin thoughts about his return. Six years standard time to reach Portal System—a year or so to arrange trade with Alpha C—six more years to return. Given the Pelican's acceleration, it would seem less than three years to him—just

enough time for sober reflection. But it would be much longer for her. When he got back, Amalthea would be a mature woman with an almost-grown son. And most likely unmarried—she had no need to share authority with a husband. No doubt she would have a stable of lusty young guardsmen and well-endowed eunuchs to amuse her. Callisto was light years ahead of civilized worlds when it came to fun and fornication. But she might still have a soft spot for the brash stranger who saved her life and set her back on her throne—the one man she did not either own or despise.

He straightened up, giving her a whimsical presumptuous smile. "Lady Amalthea. I am glad to be going, yet honestly sorry to be leaving you."

She looked away from him, towards the landscape overhead. Such studied indifference did not fool Devereux. She was sorry to see him go. Sorry she no longer had the power to stop him with a curt command or armed invitation. Her golden toe dug into the blue Bokhara carpet brought all the way from Earth. "I had supposed you had seen enough of our savage ways."

Devereux bowed again, half in apology, saying, "I never called you savage." (Not to her face anyway.)

Looking up, he added, "We did not do badly, with our backs to the bulkhead—forced to trust each other. I know you think my notions are silly, but they include a real fondness for you. I am looking forward to meeting again." He added to himself—grow up while I'm gone. Become your own woman. You will never be the female clone your father wanted. Not anymore. The world is too different now.

Amalthea smiled at him, her proud face framed against the spinning well of stars at the end of the habitat's long axis.

"Go then," she commanded. Then she smiled. "And have a safe return."

An hour later he was pointing his Proxima Pelican towards Portal system. ■

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THE GENTLE READER

David Ira Cleary

Illustrated by Russell Morgan

She went to camp. She learned a lot.

Twenty-one girls were on the bus going from Pasadena to Camp Mojave. Twenty-two if you counted me. There were twenty rows of seats and since I was the last on, I had to sit next to somebody. My parents were reading my thoughts that day so I was careful. I sat next to a girl whose discipline bracelet was colored popbottle green.

"Hi, I'm Dian Humvar," I said as the babychoker strapped me in.

"I'm Tess." She was freckle-faced, her broom-cut blond hair streaked black. "That's short for Tesla." She put out her right hand to shake.

I looked at her bracelet, hesitating. Green light's wavelength is 5000 angstroms. You get it if you're very good.

"Embarrassed about something?"

"No." I reached out to shake. Red badlights crowded my own bracelet like ulcers stuck in amber. Our bracelets clinked as our hands touched.

There was something squishy-wet at the center of her palm. I flinched my hand away. Shiny flesh came with it, part of Tess's palm. I screamed.

Tess laughed. I saw why. The squishy thing was a pair of frog legs, stretch-wired to an inductor pasted to her palm. The legs squatted on my hand, little muscles flexed. I could see the fragile bones beneath the wet green skin.

The legs hopped off my palm onto the top of the seat in front of me. "This is Mr. Cassidy," Tess said.

She made the legs hop the length of the seat. "Want to try him?"

"No, thanks," I said. I couldn't sit here. I hit the button on the armrest but the babychoker stayed tight across my chest. It was too late to change seats now; the bus had started moving.

The girl ahead of us turned and said to me, "Better not get that in my hair."

To me. I got mad, and started counting Fibonacci's sequence.

The week before, my parents had upgraded my discipline plug and bought portable readers, complete with bright red punish buttons. They told me they'd be reading my thoughts themselves while I was at camp, instead of letting our house arti do it. They told me it would keep us close while I was gone.

But I didn't want to be that close. I couldn't trick them quite the same way I could the arti, which was to start thinking numbers whenever I felt a bad thought about to come. They'd figure out the pattern. What I had to do was think numbers lots and lots, even when my train of thought was a thousand cars this side of good. Then there wouldn't be a pattern.

My parents said they might start reading my thoughts permanently, depending how the week went.

"Hey! What are you mumbling!" I looked at Tess. "Nothing."

My bracelet added another notch of red and I got anxious. Of course. I'd lied. I'd been enumerating primes.

"Look at this," Tess said. She was opening a pocket screen; she didn't seem to care I'd lied. She twanked the keys on the edge of the screen and a picture started playing. A pretty man was dancing on a desert. Big red rocks rose behind him. He pulled off his shirt. His chest was tanned and hairless. He pushed down his pants. He wasn't wearing underwear. His penis was long and he started twirling it like a rope. I looked away, embarrassed. Three, five, eight, thirteen. "Hey, it's just a guy," Tess said. "They shot the picture just outside of Camp Mojave. I thought you'd be interested."

"It's obscene." I looked her in the face, trying not to see the pocket screen.

"No, it isn't." She snapped the screen shut. "The human body's beautiful."

"Sometimes it is."

"Yeah? What about like this?"

And then Tess leaned forward and pushed her hair up. Her skinsplit was in the middle of her neck, just beneath her hairline. It made a sucking sound as she spread it apart with her fingers.

I could see the black nub of her discipline plug.

I turned away quickly, looked out the window. I saw the passing industrial parks with their stands of orange trees, and I thought thirteen, twenty-one, thirty-four....

We got to Camp Mojave at noon and shuffled off the bus. It was hot for March, at least twenty-five; the average high is supposedly twenty. I headed for the long adobe-style building marked Camp Office before I could get a headache.

"Hey, soldier!" someone shouted. I turned. A woman whose thick thighs were tanned almost as dark as the shading in her sunglasses was pointing a screen-pen at me. "You need to get your stuff off the bus!"

"Kay," I said.

I hate being shouted at. I was careful, though: I did some pi as I joined the other girls. —One four one five one nine—

"All right! Let's get some order here!" It was the thick-thighed woman again. She pushed through the girls clumped around the storage bin. "Everybody stand away, and I'll pass your stuff out."

We backed up from the bus. The woman started pulling out suitcases and packs, and calling names.

"What a bitch."

It was Tess, standing next to me.

"She seems—" I started.

"Last year we had Angie. Angie was neat; you knew it right away. This one'll be a bitch."

Bitch, I said to myself. Just echoing what Tess said, but my parents didn't know that. Two, four, eight, sixteen, I started. It didn't matter. A red notch grew inside my bracelet, and I started feeling anxious. What if this woman shouted at me my whole week here?

"—Dian Humvar?"

"Huh?"

My rucksack hit me in the chest then fell to the ground. The other girls laughed and the woman said, "You'd better learn to pay attention, Humvar."

I picked up the rucksack. My chest hurt. I kept doing numbers: thirty-two, sixty-four, one-twenty-eight.

"I'm Megan Septi. You can call me Meg," the thick-thighed woman said. We were lined up in the Camp Office's lobby, standing at attention. Tess was next to me. The floor was red tiles, hard and uncomfortable. The lobby wasn't air-conditioned, only a little cooler than outside. The woman, Meg, was pacing back and forth in front of us as she talked. She'd depolarized her glasses. "I'm the Camp Hostess. I'll be your Activity Coordinator for the next seven days. We'll take field trips, work on crafts, learn hunting and survival skills. You'll learn to appreciate nature and—I hope—get a little stronger emotionally and physically."

"Great," Tess whispered. "Woman on a mission."

"And I'll also be your friend." For a second, she looked me in the eye, then she looked down the line.

"Camp can be hard, especially if it's your first time. If you have problems, don't hesitate to come talk to me. Any questions?"

There were a couple of silly questions, like where's the bathroom and is there a virtual-suit hook-up. Meg answered them, then brought out a cardboard box that made a metal jingle. "Keys for your cabins. Two keys to each. You'll each have a roommate."

Meg went down the row, assigning keys and roommates on the basis of who you were standing next to.

My roommate was Tess.

Our cabin had canvas walls but otherwise it was okay. Wooden floors, an electric light bulb, a pair of beds, a pair of dressers. Tess was digging through her pack, tossing stuff on her bed and humming. I was putting clothes into my drawers. Seven pairs of socks, five shirts, a sweater—

"What do you think about boys?"

Tess said.

"Huh?"

"Do you like them?"

"Um, some of them're okay."

"I like them a lot. Which was bad for me last year. I'd just started having sex, and there weren't any boys here."

I blushed. I recounted my socks.

"But this year I'm prepared. Look."

She pulled something red-brown out of her rucksack. I gasped; it was an erect penis, blood vessels greenish, rising from beet-like testicles. I got a little dizzy.

"Relax," Tess said. "It's not real." She pushed it against one of the two-by-fours that made the frame. It stuck there, angling up at sixty degrees. "It's warm, though. Want to feel?"

"No, thanks," I said. I stared at the thing. Now I could see it was plastic, or maybe biosim. But that didn't make it any less horrible. I thought about wars and accidents with combines. Then I caught myself, too late. My bracelet had ulcerated. I got anxious and started counting. Two, four, sixteen, two-fifty-six.

"Hey, what is it with you?" Tess said.

"Huh?"

"You're always fish-facing. You got a decoy?"

"A what?"

"You know, a thing to keep bad thoughts away. Like I knew a boy once who always thought about food when he was afraid his thinking was going to get bad. He thought about zucchini soup for sex stuff, and chocolate soufflé when he got mad. What's your decoy?"

I knew what she meant but I couldn't even think about it. No cogitations, no inner dialog. I stammered, then threw her question back at her. "What's your decoy?"

She laughed. "I don't need one. My parents let me think whatever I want. They just got me a system so I wouldn't feel dimpy. Hey." She looked at her watch. "I'm hungry. Let's go to the cafeteria."

"Okay." I said, glad she'd changed the subject.

As I followed her outside. I noticed the penis had climbed an inch and a half up the two-by-four.

Tess started a food fight in the cafeteria. Six girls threw fried chicken legs; five threw pigs-in-a-blanket. I stopped counting when I got hit with a ketchup-covered mass of French fries. I got out of the cafeteria, washed up in the communal bathroom, then went to Meg's office.

Meg was sitting behind her desk, sharpening a foot-long knife with a black stone. "Have a sit, soldier." I sat on a metal chair in front of the desk. There was a mosaic on floor. Cowboys driving cattle through a storm. Copy of a Remington painting. Meg said, "So what's up, Dian?"

I cleared my throat. "Could I have a different roommate, please?"

"Why? Problems already?"

"She's out of control." I got anxious; I'm not supposed to speak badly of people. I kept talking anyway. "She started a foodfight. And she keeps trying to upset me."

"How?"

More anxious. "She's shown me...things."

"What kind of things?"

I shook my head. I thought the word "penis" and though I didn't say it out loud, my bracelet blistered.

"Well? Cat got your tongue?"

I pointed at my bracelet.

"Discipline systems." She scraped hard with her stone and made a spark. "How are you going to learn to be independent?"

Two point one five one nine...I gasped out: "Can't I have a new roommate, please?"

"No, you can't." Meg pushed aside the knife and rested her feet on the desk. "It's bad enough that your parents are stunting your emotional growth. I'm not going to compound your problems by coddling you. Stick it out with Tess. Don't let her know she's getting to you; you might come out on top. It'll be a good learning experience."

"But she's bad."

"No. Just a little wild." Meg winked at me. "I think you'll do okay."

We spent that afternoon and the next two days hiking, studying cacti, sagebrush, and arroyos. Meg showed us how to make a solar still and how to identify lizards by the stripes on their backs. At night, she pointed out constellations while we ate chem-pack heated marshmallows. It was still hot, but I was having a better time. Meg was keeping us so busy that Tess seemed to forget about upsetting me.

Things got worse on Wednesday night.

We were having a bonfire. Simulated yellow flames rose pollution-free from a Carlson generator. Nearly everybody was sitting around it, but not too close; it made a lot of heat. Tess wasn't there; she'd left the circle a few minutes before. Meg was trying to teach us a song:

The Mastodon's massive, not a mastiff

*He has two tusks and a trunk
You got to bring him down real careful*

or you'll make a pile of junk!

Everybody giggled, maybe because Meg sang with a screechy soprano. "Here's the next verse," she said.

He's covered with thick wooly fibers

Made from recycled kelp—

"Hey," someone said. It was Tess. She pulled on my shoulder. "Want to see something?"

"Sure," I said. I was determined to be tough.

I got up and followed her away from the campfire. She led me to one of the tent-cabins. Not ours. We went inside. Two other girls were there, Salome and Kyrie. Salome was holding a reader with an empty cache slot. Her face was tinged metallic blue as she stared at the screen. What could she be reading, the display options menu?

She smiled at me as I sat by Kyrie.

Kyrie looked at me. She had purple crescents annealed to her eyelids. She said to me, "You suck."

"You—" I started. My eyes watered. "Why'd you say that?"

She smiled, showed me her bracelet. A red ribbon was unspooling inside it. "My Daddy can screw himself."

My heart raced as I did trivia. The population of Mare City is 8002. The speed of light through glass is 200,000 km a second.

Trying to suppress the bad echoes.

"Hey," Salome said. "The thing's welching out. I'm getting numbers."

"Fuck the thing," Kyrie said. "D'you get that?"

"How could I miss it? No wonder your parents read you." Salome fingered the patch at her throat. "Got anything stronger?"

"We're not here to get nuked," Tess said. She started pulling stuff out of a hip pocket. "We're here to experiment."

"Experiments, shit," Kyrie said. She waved her bracelet, red through like chardonnay. "Shit, shit, shit!"

The Great Pyramid is 481 feet tall. The Reagan Monument is 1224 feet. The Banjabar Obelisk is—

"Here, Dian," Tess said. She had a patch in her hand.

Its underside was round and rubbery, like the sucker on a leech.

They leave red circles on people's skin—I remembered facts. One percent of the people trying them get potentially fatal reactions. Repeated applications are associated with decay in the microstructure of the epidermis.

"Take it," Dian said. "It's not going to nuke you, or anything."

I took it, shaking. "What good is it?"

"I've figured you out," Tess said. "You think your parents make you anxious, don't you?"

"They do. They send signals to my brain."

"Bullshit!" Kyrie shouted.

"No," Tess said. "All your parents do is light up your bracelet. It's *you* that makes yourself anxious. Your parents have you conditioned like a pigeon."

"I don't believe that," I said.

"You believe this?" Kyrie showed me her bracelet. So red just seeing it made me anxious. "I feel good. How the fuck are you?"

I felt terrible; my bracelet was red; my numbers couldn't do anything to filter out Kyrie's profanity. I wanted to dissolve, leave the camp, be an adult and unpleased. I moved the patch toward my throat—

—and handed it back to Tess.

"No. I don't want it. I want to be able to fight my parents on my own."

"Chickenshit," said Kyrie.

"Well, you don't have—" Tess began.

"Look at all these numbers!" Salome said.

"Let's see." Kyrie yanked the reader from Salome. "Goddamnit, if you've welched the receiver..."

I looked at the screen. I saw the things we'd been saying scrolling upward. And I saw primes, cubes, Hellas irrationals between the lines. My thoughts.

MY THOUGHTS appeared screen-bottom.

YOU'VE GOT A READER appeared as I said it. THEY'RE NOT LEGAL FOR MINORS.

WHAT A DIMP YOU ARE. NOT my thoughts: Kyrie smirked.

Panic. FIVE TWENTY-FIVE THIRTY-ONE TWENTY-FIVE.

IT'S YOU! "Tess!"

FIFTEEN THOUSAND, SIX HUNDRED TWENTY-FIVE MY GOD IT SEEMS LIKE I READ IT—

—before I say it."

Tess put her hand on my shoulder. IS THAT—

—you?"

THINK HARD. SEVENTY-EIGHT THOUSAND—

"It is—"

—YOU! YOUR DECOY.

NUMBERS FOR A DECOY? HOW FUCKING DIMPY DIMPY DIMPY.

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-FIVE. I pushed the reader away, pushed myself to my feet, screamed. For they had no right to read my thoughts. They had no right to know about my numbers.

My numbers.

I ran outside, crying.

Now my parents would know, too.

A night is a long time. Eight hours, 480 minutes, 2880 seconds. And a million thoughts and images. I tried to keep the thinking to a minimum. No parents, no numbers, nothing verbal. I didn't sleep. Maybe because I was upset. Or maybe because I didn't trust myself asleep. What kind of words could my dreams produce?

I stared. At the pink-glow penis, which had crawled to the joint between the roof and the wall beams, then stopped. At Mr. Cassidy, who was hooked up to a battery and hopping around on Tess's dresser. At my bracelet, dark but impossible to distinguish red from green.

I listened. To the other girls singing Meg's stupid songs. To insects. To Mr. Cassidy's tiny feet.

Long after the singing stopped, Tess came in. She whispered, "Are you asleep?"

"No."

She sat on my bed. She touched my cheek; I flinched. She moved her hand away. "I'm sorry about what happened. Kyrie wasn't such a bitch before we drugged her."

"It's not just her," I said. "It's—" I stiffened, pointlessly started Fermat's Second Sequence, said, "They know."

"They?" She said. "Oh." She sat quietly for a while. Then she said, "So why don't you want to try the drug?"

Go away. "Cause it's not the drug. It's my parents."

"But it's not. You saw how Kyrie changed. The patch turned off her anxiety."

"I don't want it." Go away.

Tess stood. She started taking off her clothes, brush of ceramics against skin. She jumped down on her bed. "I know!"

"What."

"Why don't you pull the plug? Pull it out of your head. Disconnect yourself from your parents. Then you'll see it's not them."

I groaned. I moved my fingers to the back of my head. I felt the rubbery false skin at the base of my skull, the hard plug within the skin-split. My heart raced, my sweaty fingers pulled my hair. I thought bad things. I wanted to scream.

I moved my hand away, panting. If Tess was right, there'd be no point in pulling the plug anyway. There'd be no—

"Hey, Dian. Your breasts started growing yet?"

I plugged my ears with my fingers and tried to think in pictures.

Next morning we went hunting. Meg, wearing sunglasses and desert camouflage, spent an hour showing us how to operate our laser rifles safely. I missed most of what she said. My brain was foggy from lack of sleep.

I was too tired to be very anxious.

About ten we set off northeast from the camp, in groups of two or three. I thought Tess would go with Kyrie and Salome, but she came with me instead. "Kyrie's in a bad mood today. She wants another patch, but I can't give her one. Don't want to get her hooked on them, you know?"

"I guess," I said. I looked across the desert. It was hot here but the blue mountains in the distance were tipped with snow. Closer by were dry, red-wrinkled hills. I looked hard

for the constructs we would be hunting today, tiredly expecting to see their heads sticking above the crests of hills like sea monsters above waves. I didn't see them.

The constructs we were hunting were called Baluchitheria. They were like rhinos but bigger than cement trucks. They'd been extinct for thirty million years.

"Come on," Tess said. She wasn't wearing her safety polarizers. She started hiking. I followed. We crossed a flat stretch covered with sage and purple-thistled bushes. Tess shot her rifle sometimes, making brief bursts of red light on dusty rocks and cacti. No smoke or flame, though. I wasn't sure how the laser would kill the baluchs. I'd been welching out while Meg explained.

While we climbed the first red hill, I noticed a funny set of sounds. Clink, scrape, clink, scrape. I was puzzled for a long time, then I realized I was scraping the muzzle of my rifle along the ground. I stopped and checked out the muzzle. The black exterior had new white scratches, and the bore was plugged with dirt. It looked bad.

Meg wouldn't like this.

I broke a stick off from a bush and poked it into the bore. I dug out a little dirt. I pushed the stick in further to get the rest of the dirt.

The stick broke.

I stared at the bore. It looked like a weird inverse eye: brown pupil in black iris. I poked at it but couldn't get it out.

"I ruined it," I said.

"What's the matter?" Tess said.

I stared at her in a panic. I'd ruined the rifle. Meg would be pissed. Meg would tell my parents and they would—

Sixty million people in Mexico City, fifty million in Shanghai, I started thinking. Stopped soon enough.

They knew about my numbers.

I stared at Tess, trying to find something else to think about. Her sun-reddened face, the length of hair sweat had pasted to her cheek. It didn't matter; I couldn't stop verbalizing. And it wouldn't matter if I could, anyway; now that *they* knew about my numbers, they'd probably know everything else, too. If I concentrated on the sky or on Tess or on my fingernails, they'd know I was just trying to hide; maybe they could read my thoughts directly now, stick the muzzles of their telemetry below my subvocal cognitions and figure out every feeling, every emotion, every futile hope I hadn't even voiced to myself.

"Dian, you okay?"

I flinched at her touch, stared at the white globe of sun. It was probably burning through my eyes, lighting up my wicked thoughts.

The desert did a dance around me. "Hey, come on." She was holding me up. "There's a shady place over there."

She helped me across the red hillside. We crossed some gullies, some bare ridges; I wondered if we were climbing around the convolutions of my brain. Then we were in the shade, next to a mantle of stone. "Sit down," Tess said.

Panic. "Wait! My rifle!"

"I got it." She was carrying both rifles beneath her right arm. "Sit down," she said.

I sat down, lay on my side. The rock was cool against my cheek. My bracelet looked purple in the shade.

I slept.

I dreamed a wave crashing slow-motion upon a beach, foamy top like curled glass, roar drawn-out and peaceful. I woke.

And saw the unijet setting down twenty yards away, red dust spouting up, loose rocks sliding down the hill. The unijet's bugarms clamped onto the ground, the jet powered down, the pilot pushed back the cab's plastic bubble, then climbed out.

I yawned and sat up.

Meg climbed up to us. "Hey, soldiers. Something wrong?"

I noticed I felt fine. "Nothing."

"Then why have you two been sitting here the last two hours?"



"We've been waiting for a construct to lumber by," Tess said.

Meg sighed. "No." She pointed at me. "Ms. Humvar's been sleeping. And I told you this morning the baluchs spend most of the day resting in the shade. They're not going to come to you. You've got to find them."

"Maybe we don't want to," I said.

Meg took a step back. "Wha'd you say?"

"Maybe we think hunting's a big waste of time."

Meg stared at me. I stared back. She said, "You've been a lot of trouble since you came here. I ought to send you home right now, let your parents deal with you."

"Go ahead," I said.

She pointed at my bracelet, smiled. "Maybe I was wrong about discipline systems. Your parents can deal with you long-distance, can't they? You can sit on your ass all day, for all I care."

"Maybe I will."

Meg kicked at the dirt, then turned. As she walked away I felt my throat. There was a rough patch there.

As the unijet thrust into the sky, I tore off the patch. "I told you I didn't want one."

Tess grinned. "But you were great! You practically told the bitch off!"

"Still, I didn't want to be welched."

"But you don't feel better?"

"I feel pissed."

"But you're always pissed, deep down inside. Doesn't it feel good to let it out?"

I fingered the welt on my neck. Deeper down my muscles were relaxed. My brain seemed relaxed, too, despite my anger. "Maybe so."

"Good." She handed me a rifle. It was mine, its bore scuffed but its muzzle cleaned. "Let's go hunting."

From the top of the hill we saw a pair of baluchs. They were sitting at the base of a rusty-red cliff. Even resting they looked like lumpy brown supertanks. They were in the sunlight, maybe too stupid to move with the

shade. I squatted down, steadied my rifle on a hunk of granite, flicked off the safety, aimed—

"Too far away!" Tess said.

"But it's a laser. Lasers shoot—"

"Doesn't matter. It acts like a ballistic weapon. Park sensors take wind, gravity, all that stuff into account. Didn't you hear Meg?"

I shook my head. I'd been sleeping when she talked.

"We need to be within a couple hundred yards before we shoot. You climb down to the right, around the ridge. I'll go down this draw. Shoot if you get close enough, otherwise flush 'em out, and I'll shoot as they go past the draw."

We split up. I switchbacked down the eastern side of the hill. At the northern corners of the switches, I could see the baluchs: big, dumb, motionless except for the flicking of their man-length tails. Before, I'd wondered why Mojave Park had bothered reconstructing dead mammals. Today I was excited. I wondered if I'd been excited before, but too anxious to notice.

I got to the bottom of the hill. I squatted maybe 150 yards from the baluchs; I was behind a pair of twisted pine trees. I got a better look at the beasts. They had little eyes like elephant's but heads shaped like those of giant horses. One was a little larger than the other.

I shifted, cracked a stick.

The bigger baluch raised its head, looked around.

I held my breath, didn't move.

The big one made a noise like a fire hopper's siren, then lowered its head.

I wondered where Tess was. Was she going to signal me? Or was I supposed to fire when I was ready?

I didn't know. My heart started pounding.

The laser didn't look like it would scare them anyway. They weighed like twenty tons. The thing to do would be kill them with a single shot: they probably had a light-sensitive skinstrip in their platinum heads, or over their polymer hearts. But I wasn't sure where that strip would be. I'd been zoning when Meg explained.

I was probably going to screw this up. Get Tess pissed at me, welch it bad. God, my parents wouldn't be impressed.

—Twenty American tons is 2000 pounds or 32,000 ounces times twenty and that's how many grains—

I heard what I thought was the soundtrack from an old wildlife show, realized it was the beating of my heart. My shoulders stiffened, the rifle's plastic stock started slipping through my hands.

The drug had worn off.

I couldn't wait any longer. I pushed between the trees, shouldered the rifle and fired. A holographic explosion flared five meters to the right of the baluchs. I fired again. "Run, you stupid things!"

The big one squealed. I think I hit it in the leg.

They charged me. The earth shook beneath their hooves. I looked into their eyes and tried to calculate how far I'd be thrown.

Force equals mass times acceleration.

They stiffened up and fell. Their big horse heads clanged metallic on the hard red dirt. I stood there two meters away, still staring at their eyes.

"That was a good shot," I told Tess when she'd run up to me.

She was breathing hard. "That wasn't a shot." Breathe, breathe. "They were programmed to freeze up if they got too close to you."

"Oh," I said. I wanted to say more but I was thinking about Meg. I'd been bad to her, very bad. And I'd been stupid to try using my numbers. Everybody knew about my numbers now.

"Why're you standing there?" Tess said. She'd caught her breath, was pulling something from her hip pouch. Brown felt case. She pulled a carbon-edged knife out of the case. "Come and help me."

"I've been, I've been, I've been," I said. *Bad.*

She climbed on top of the larger beast, straddled its wrinkled neck, started cutting above its ear. The

knife was thermoelectric; the baluch's plastic skin smoldered as she worked. She cut out a square, rolled it up, and stuffed it in the ear. Then she pulled out a plug. Four-legged, nylon-coated, six centimeters long. The baluch's control remote.

She waved it in the air, smiling at me. Her bracelet was the color of the ocean in my dream.

On Friday, everybody but Tess and me got a free day. So while the other girls were horseback riding, swimming in the sun-heated pool, anodizing their nails, or whatever, Tess and I were working in Meg's office. First Meg had us pry up all the tiles that made up the Remington on her floor. There were over a thousand of them. Then she mixed them up, gave us a can of industrial adhesive and two plastic putties, and said, "Glue them back. Maybe you'll learn what happens to bad little girls."

"I'm the one who autopsied the robot," Tesla said. "Don't punish her for what I did."

Meg polarized her lenses with a finger-flick to their frame. "She could have stopped you. Could have said something, at least. But she didn't. In my cache, a sin of omission is as bad as a sin of commission. Get to work."

She walked out, closed the door.

"The bitch," Tess said. She picked up a handful of tiles: storm-cloud gray, lightning-gold. "We ought to smash them. That'd show her."

My hand shook as I picked up a tile.

"Or even better, we should smash the signal booster. I know where it is. Then your parents wouldn't know what you're thinking. Nobody's would!"

"Don't talk about that," I said. I shook so much I dropped the tile. It landed painted-side up. It showed a horse's staring eye.

"I'm sorry," Tess said, touching my arm. I kept myself from flinching. "The patch helped you. I saw. But the bitch confiscated my supply."

"I didn't want one anyway," I said. Which was a lie; I did. My bracelet flared and the horse kept star-

ing as I tried not to remember how good I'd felt yesterday.

Fifty tiles, sixty tiles. My numbers were no good. Eighty tiles, ninety tiles. The adhesive putty looked like cookie dough, smelled like rancid meat. One hundred tiles, two hundred tiles. Sunshine through the window in the afternoon, generator firelight at night. Three hundred tiles, four hundred tiles. I was very tired. Four hundred and twenty tiles.

My numbers were no good.

I slept and dreamed that Tess had finished the picture, only she'd done it crazy: tiles randomly placed so that pieces of cow fell from the sky and drops of rain spouted from the earth. I told Tess to fix it only she wasn't Tess anymore; she was Kyrie, and she moved the tiles so that they spelled out HELL SHIT DAMN.

"Come on, wake up." Somebody shaking me.

I was in Meg's big chair, comfortable. I snuggled. Meg was a hard woman but she had a soft chair.

"Get up." Tess was shaking me. Her hands were layered with dried adhesive. "Come on, we're going now."

"Oh." I got out of the chair, yawned, looked at the picture. It was two-thirds done, all but the sheet of rain in the upper left corner. "It's not done yet," I said.

"It's Saturday. The bus is here. It's time to go."

"Okay," I said. I stepped toward the door. Then I turned, pointed at the posters on the walls, the shiny desk. "We ought to trash her office, don't you think?"

"We ought to," Tess said. She kept going, though.

We went to our cabin and packed our things. I felt dreamy, loose, serene. I pulled down the penis from the center wall beam. It was cold, U-shaped. I handed it to Tess.

"Thanks," she said. She smiled. "How're you feeling?"

"Real good. I'm—" I frowned. Then I touched my throat. I didn't feel any patch. "How?"

Tess put the penis in her bag, pulled out a cylinder. It was black, four-legged, a centimeter long. I pushed my hair aside, felt the back of my neck. My skinsplit was empty; bared nerve endings tingled as I touched them.

I was freed from my parents.

We were last in line putting our bags on the bus. Meg was pushing packs into the storage compartment. "If I had another week with you guys, I'd show you how to stuff a bus," she said to another girl.

Finally it was our turn. Meg took my bag. But she didn't put it in the compartment. Instead, she sat on the metal fold-down door, holding my bag in her lap. After a while she said, "Part of my job is to monitor your health. That includes your mental health. And though I personally don't think discipline plugs do snake's piss for your emotions, I'm under contract to see that your brains get the same treatment here they'd be getting at home. So why don't you put your plugs back in."

"No way," I said.

"What are you talking about?" Tess said.

"I'm not stupid, girls. Now, you'd better put your plugs back in. Otherwise I'll send the bus home without you."

"Go to hell," I said.

"I'll put mine in," Tess said.

"What?" I said. I looked at Tess. She was smiling. She brought out the two plugs from her bag, handed one to me. It looked like a black beetle in my hand.

"Go on," Meg said. "I'm losing my patience."

Tess smiled, and put hers in. I took a breath, pulled back my hair, levered open the skinsplit with a fingernail, inserted the plug. Tess handed her bag to Meg, then I followed her onto the bus.

There were lots of empty pairs of seats; people had made friends over the course of the week. I sat next to Tess. "You know what?" I said to her. "I still feel fine."

Tess stared at me. She wasn't smiling. "Would you...."

"Would I what? What's the matter?"

She grimaced. "I gave you my plug. And put yours—" She clenched shut her eyes, like talking hurt. "I put yours in my neck."

"That was stupid. Why'd you do that?"

"To show you. That it's associations that make you anxious. Not your parents."

"But you're anxious now. You build up associations pretty fast."

"No. You were right. It's parents. Sending signals. Please. Please." Her face got ugly, contorted with anxiety. "Please...."

She wanted me to pull her plug. She was too anxious to do it, even say it herself. But I pretended to misunderstand her. Because I liked the way things were now. She could keep my plug, and I keep hers. She deserved it, anyway, for pulling such a stupid stunt. It wasn't parents that caused anxiety with the signals. And it wasn't associations, either. It was the plug itself; there had to be an art inside it. How could she have been so stupid, not to have figured that out?

I was free. I waved my bracelet. It glowed green in the sunlight streaming through the windows. ■



OUR AUTHORS

Cathy A. Ball has had two previous stories in our magazine. She refers to "Greenhouse" as 'actually, Rosemary's story': it was inspired by her friend's, Rosemary Swift's, description of a funeral for a work colleague who died of AIDS. All funds from the sale of this story will be donated to AIDS research. **Algis Budrys** is an editor. **David Ira Cleary** has had stories published in *Asimov's* and *Full Spectrum III*, as well as *L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of The Future*, Vol. 6. He lives in San Francisco and is currently making the final revisions on his first novel. **Shira Daemon** has sold stories to *Tomorrow*, *Splatterpunk II*, and *Xanadu III*. She is a reviewer for various prestigious magazines. Her fantasy plays for puppets and actors have been performed at King Richard's Renaissance Faire. A working actor/director, she lives in New York. "Blood Bonds" was her first professional fiction sale. **Kim Fryer** is an editor in New York City, living in Bloomfield, New Jersey. At one time, she attended Clarion. She is usually too busy at her work to favor us with her fiction. **R. García y Robertson** was born in 1949, has two daughters, and a Ph.D. in history from UCLA. He has taught at UCLA and Villanova, but gave it up to write full time, shortly after winning the *Writers of The Future* contest. He has published several articles on history, but he has sold many SF stories for top markets, and an increasing number of novels, of which two forthcoming titles are *Siren's Song* and *The Virgin And The Dinosaur*. **Brooks Peck** is a New Yorker who came to Iowa for the university and stayed. His fiction has appeared in *Life Among the Asteroids* (an Ace anthology), *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, and *Back Brain Recluse* in England. He teaches a correspondence course through the University of Iowa, a historical survey of science fiction. **Michael H. Payne** is another product of *L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of The Future*. He lives in California and is beginning to produce a remarkable series of stories, which we will be bringing to you. **Norman Spinrad** was born in 1948, and turned to writing full time in the late 1960s. He is a writer of the first rank, with his novels including *Bug Jack Barron*, *The Iron Dream*, and *The Void Captain's Tale*. He lives in Paris. This story originally appeared in the hard cover *Pulphouse*. **Joye R. Swain** began as a circus acrobat and a dancer. Later, she taught French, Spanish, and English as a second language. She has written professionally since the 1960s, producing feature and travel articles and, in collaboration with her late husband, Dwight V. Swain, two books on writing. She has been in a bewildering number of places, and been published in a bewildering variety of media. But this is her first published prose fiction. **Elisabeth Vonarburg** was born in 1947 in France and has been a full-time writer since 1990. She resides in Canada, where she has written copiously, and received many awards. The largest part of her writing is in French, but she is beginning to appear in several English-language publications, including this one. ■

OUR ARTISTS

Paul Lehr, over the years, has done hundreds of paperback and magazine covers, including several for *Tomorrow*. His most famous single cover was probably for the first paperback edition of *Stranger In A Strange Land*. His work has been exhibited at numerous prestigious museums and galleries. His work hangs, as well, in the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. Now semi-retired, he paints for his own pleasure, frequently with scenes of human contention and conflict. We are always glad when he favors our pages with a spectacular cover painting.

Kandis Elliot is any number of things, including biological illustrator for the University of Wisconsin, and science fiction author and artist, appearing frequently in *Asimov's* and *Tomorrow*. She is president of The Institute of Implied Science, and also Production Manager of this magazine. **Roger Gerberding's** work has appeared in *The Penthouse Forum*, *Weird Tales*, *The Chicago Reader*, *The Minneapolis City Pages*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *Midnight Graffiti*, and other magazines too numerous to mention in the U.S. and Europe. He studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Chicago Academy of Fine Art. **Kelly Faltermayer** was born Salvador Frank Bermúdez in El Salvador. He moved to the U.S. at the age of 15, and 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. He works as Promotion Assistant for a chain of weekly newspapers in Houston. **Michael Kennedy** is an Oklahoma City comic book artist. Like Cathy Ball and Joye R. Swain, he is donating the proceeds of his appearance here to AIDS research. **Judith Holman** lives in New Jersey. She has an MFA, but refuses to give details. She chuckled all that to illustrate science fiction. Her many prestigious shows continue to add to her luster. **Russell Morgan** was born and raised in Northamptonshire, England. He has spent most of his 31 years trying to be a good artist. He has only been seriously illustrating since 1990, with most of his work appearing in *Interzone*, *Exuberance*, and *Angries*. **Margaret Baliff 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, among others, in the Carol Nelson Douglas books from Tor. She feels, however, that her outstanding achievement is her charming young daughter. ■

JEEVER'S LOST WORLD

Algis Budrys

Illustrated by Kandis Elliot

One day was very much like the next. Then the spaceships came.

Jeever lay in splendor on the moss, naked and happy, inhaling the perfume from a blossom that grew in the entangled mosses and vines that weathed his building. In a little while, he would harvest some of the fruit that grew upon the skeletal structure, and split the skins to have his breakfast drink and his breakfast, but for now he was simply living, in quiet joy, and inhaling the sweet odor as a prelude to a day that was, exactly, like the day before. A peaceful crap over the side of the building, a little run around vacant rooms of the

building, a trip outdoors, provided the spirit moved him, and quiet.

Not literal quiet, of course. There was usually a wind, thrumming through the hanging gardens for which the building was a trellis, and sometimes there was rain, but rarely enough to cause Jeever to shift to a bower farther away from the edge of the floor. No, not literal quiet. But the quiet of accustomed sounds; of a peaceful, essentially invarying background to the various thoughts chasing themselves around Jeever's brain.

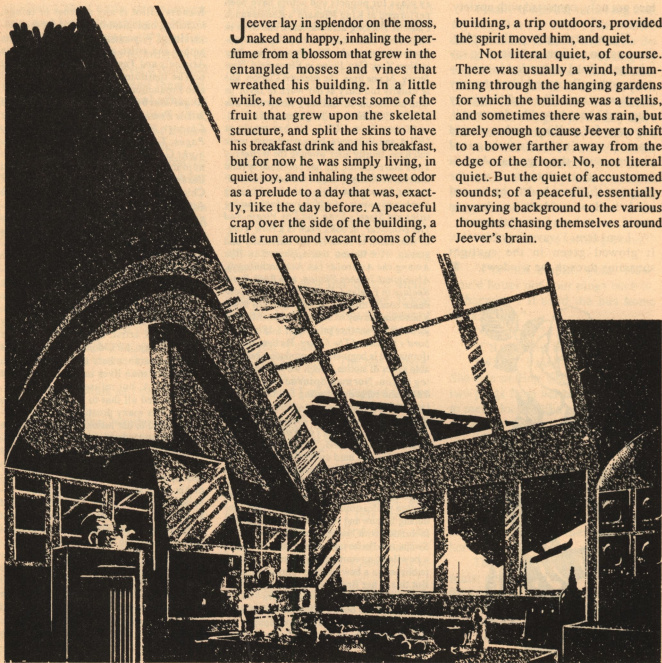


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Which were not much, as he well knew. No large and ponderous thoughts; there was nothing to be large or ponderous about. There was eating, there was defecating, and there was thinking thoughts like 'Should I trim my nails today?' as he would do every nine or ten days, chewing them short. Or there was thinking about what thoughts to think. Jeever was the last of his kind; the last in all the world, and in the rest of the Universe, as well. They had simply run down, his people, after a long and sometimes exciting history, and now they were reduced to one individual, who had realized very early that history—and almost all the other things his people had once prized and argued over—was irrelevant.

Except today was different. His extended senses were suddenly picking up a mother ship in the space adjacent to his planet, and voices in conversation, and the dispatch of a number of scout vessels. Jeever put down the blossom. "Aw, chuck!" he said and stood up in annoyance.

They had not found him yet, in several days of overflying the city. He waited, warily. Perhaps they would not. They tracked endlessly over the city, photographing the vine-covered buildings, the remains of a complex metropolitan culture, the ships sunk in the bay. But perhaps they would tire of it. Jeever did not know enough to hazard a guess; they were new people, from a young culture, and they might do anything. They were very excited about their find; their conversations now were loaded with discovery and wonder. But they might, he comforted himself, tire of it. The city was not really different from any abandoned city; there was little left in it to reward search, really. Perhaps they would realize that.

But they did not. Several more days passed, and the flights continued. And in the middle of this particular day, they concentrated on his building. The conversations suddenly said they had detected a spot of heat.

Jeever. They could not see him, yet, but they were closing in on him, and in a little while they would send a landing party down. "Fut!" Jeever said in disgust. "Aw, feel!" He went to the central core of the building, scraped aside the lichens, opened a small door, and pulled down the red handle inside.

The conversations became thunderstruck as the building converted the vines into window glass, the mosses into carpet, the lichens into paint, the fruit into power and light; before their eyes, the building flourished into full bloom, standing tall and suddenly clean in the sunshine. The new people were thrown into confusion; many conversations flew back and forth between the scouts and the mother ship. The upshot was that one scout would land on the plaza in front of the building, while the others covered it from the air. "Chuck!" Jeever repeated.

The scout touched down. And as Jeever had known would happen, the city's defenses fully came on. With a crackle and a rushing, a rumble and a great singing noise, the red handles came down automatically in every building in the city, and the city changed into what it had been, very, very quickly. And robots poured out of the building entrances, scuffing the sidewalks with the soles of their feet, raising their hand weapons. The scout ship fired, in a panic, and vanished. The rest of the scout ships vanished. The mother ship had time for a single syllable of protest, and it, too, vanished.

The city lay under the sun, bare and new, and the robots put up their weapons and went back inside. Jeever stared out at the landscape with no joy. Now he would have to eat in a kitchen, with prepared food. Now he would have to use a bathroom. And now he would have to inhale synthetic odors, which would no doubt be identical to the real flowers. He would have to do this for centuries until the blessed desuetude crept over the city once more, except that he strongly suspected he would die first. He thought of the ship and growled. ■



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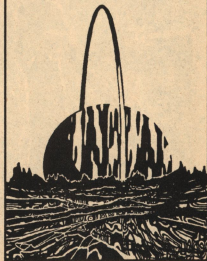
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Good-bye; we liked
having you.



ALONE, TOGETHER

Joye R. Swain

Illustrated by Darla M. Tagrin

Through gestures and close proximity for a long time, they came to a sort of understanding.

Here they sit. Two elders. Alone, together.

So different. Catherine, the human; Treg, the local.

Their vocal structures produce sound patterns so different that they can only communicate in the most general terms. There's no subtlety possible. Although, through gestures and close proximity for a long time, they have come to a sort of understanding.

Their backgrounds so different that even if they could communicate more completely with words, they probably could never truly understand each other's motivations and drives and philosophies.

Catherine comes from a people who believe in dominating nature and changing it to fit their needs; Treg, from a culture that believes in adjusting to nature as it is and adapting to its forces rather than attempting to change them.

Naturally, when John and his crew arrived, they began to modify the planet and adapt the natural environment to meet their needs. Treg's species watched in horror, but they were unable to control the arrogant march of the humans through the flora and fauna. John and his crew felt they had a right to dominate and control, and they became violent when opposed. Treg's culture's passive resistance was rapidly overcome.

Catherine led the movement to colonize the countryside. Settle the countryside, cultivate it, tame it, transform it to meet her culture's needs, she preached. Catherine felt that humans must cultivate their own food to become independent of the mother planet. Only in that way could

they truly control their destiny. It was necessary to become farmers.

And they conquered the land. Or at least they transformed it from a disorganized natural state to a plowed and organized form.

But the young, the young—both John and Catherine's children and Treg's offspring—they fled from the country to the cities. They were educated in the ways of the humans and they wanted the bright lights, the entertainment, and the easy life of the city.

Time went by. Catherine's beloved spouse died. Treg's partner also died. Their children came back to visit less and less frequently.

So now, they two, so different, sit alone, together, on the veranda of the old country house and watch the sunset.

Even though they cannot truly understand one another, they have come to seek out each other. They sit together—quietly, unable to talk, unable to express their feelings, and unable to share their ideas.

Nevertheless, they draw together in search of companionship and support. Perhaps it is a form of love.

Alone, together, they gradually begin to seek warmth and togetherness and consolation.

And now, as the sun disappears over the horizon, they both arise, go inside, and prepare for bed.

In the large bed, Catherine snuggles close to Treg and Treg responds in answer to their mutual need for contact by moving close. They press their bodies tightly against each other, and Treg embraces Catherine with six fuzzy articulated limbs.

It feels good. ■



D.M. TAGRIN © 94

FAMILY VISIT

Kim Fryer

Illustrated by Kandis Elliot

Deedee brought a caramel, but Diane let it fall in the grass.

For a moment Diane considered walking away without letting Deedee know that she had come—and ending it right there. She could just make Deedee out, standing on the crest of the hill, her oversized tee-shirt fluttering in the wind, a bicycle resting against one leg.

Although she couldn't see the girl's face clearly, Diane pictured Deedee biting one lip as she squinted into the gathering dusk. She wouldn't budge until Diane showed up—or until her dad made her come in from the pasture.

"Ah, well," Diane muttered, knowing she didn't have the nerve to leave without speaking to the girl. Waving away the mosquitoes that were swarming about her head, Diane started up the path. The hill wasn't steep, but before she was halfway, she was panting and beads of sweat

were crawling through her hair. She stopped for a moment, leaning over, holding her side.

As she straightened, Deedee shouted her name.

Both feet on one pedal of the bike, Deedee coasted down the path. As she reached Diane, she jumped off, letting the bicycle wobble forward and crash a little beyond them.

Diane imagined she could taste the dust from the county's dirt roads, filling her mouth as it used to when she'd ridden the rusty bike. She coughed, her chest aching.

"I thought you'd never get here!" Deedee cried, hugging her with wiry arms. "Boy, you're getting bony! Why'd you take so long? Do you like my *Aliens 3* tee-shirt?"

"I can't really see it—there isn't enough light," Diane said, enduring the embrace for as long as she could, then

gently pulling away. "I'm a bit late because I got tied up at the hospital."

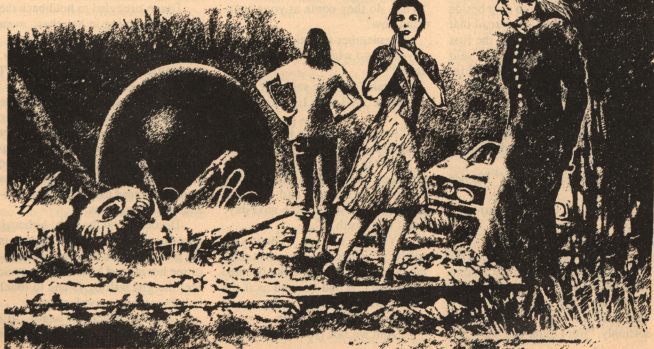
"But this is my day!" Deedee said petulantly.

"Be nice to Dee day."

"Yeah! You got that right."

Diane caught the quicksilver flash of Deedee's grin through the dusk and smiled herself.

"Look, I brought you a caramel," Deedee said, taking her hand and pressing the block against the jagged scar on Diane's palm. "Grandma had them at my party this afternoon. Ronny pigged out and got them stuck in his braces. I just died, I was laugh-



ing so hard. He could barely open his mouth."

Diane rolled the candy in her hand a moment before letting it slip from her fingers into the weeds. Tempted as she was, she wasn't sure if her teeth could take it. "Ron, Jr.?"

"No, dufus," Deedee giggled, "he's the only one. He came with Auntie Inga and the twins and their boyfriends. Even Dad's side of the family came. Everybody except you."

Diane said nothing. Deedee fell quiet, too, shifting from foot to foot in the dry ankle-high grass beside the path.

After a long moment, Diane said, "Sorry." She looked away at the horizon, where the last stream of reddish sunlight had pooled. "Happy fourteenth."

"Hmph. Why don't you ever come to the house to see me? They won't even let me talk about you anymore. Even Grandma." The teen sighed.

"Well, why don't we forget it for now and go for our walk?" Diane suggested, although she didn't really feel up to tramping through fields. "Just leave your bike here."

"Okay," Deedee said, smacking herself. "Damn bugs. Oops, I meant darn."

Diane snorted.

"That's what I like about you," Deedee said, falling into step beside Diane. "I don't have to pretend that I'm still a kid. Oooh, sweat, the first star!" She caught herself and said self-consciously, "Well, it's no biggie. But let's make a wish anyway."

Diane knew that Deedee would be touching her nose with one finger, eyes squeezed shut, as she made her wish. Diane shook her head. Had she ever been that young?

"What'd you wish for?" Deedee demanded.

"Peace on Earth. A cure for cancer."

"No, I mean for yourself."

Diane shrugged, then realized that Deedee couldn't see the gesture. "What about you?"

"I can't say anything or else it won't come true," Deedee said solemnly. "But I think you know."

"Oh, it's okay for you to ask me, though," Diane teased.

Deedee was quiet for a couple of moments, then burst out, "I don't have anyone I can talk to. The kids at high school make fun of me because I'm so short..." She trailed off, a note of frustration in her voice. "And everyone at home still treats me like a baby."

"I know," Diane said quietly. Petite, Deedee looked closer to eight than fourteen. Although Diane was five-foot-seven, she remembered vividly the years of teasing and tears before her own growth spurt as a teen. Would she ever get a figure? she had wondered. Would she always be the smallest one at school? Would anybody ever listen to her?

Diane wanted to say something comforting to Deedee. But she didn't know what to tell her. No one had ever said anything to her as a child.

"I wish I was older and already graduated from school," Deedee said, snaking her hand into Diane's. The girl's skin was rough from chores. "I'd move near you."

Diane instinctively jerked her hand away. "Uh, how would you like to see a shooting star?" she said quickly, to mask her reaction.

After a pause, Deedee said in a hurt tone, "I guess." Then she added, "What, do they come at your command now?"

"Remember that night a couple of years ago when we were in that storm?"

"Yeah," Deedee said, her voice warming. "All that lightning and hail."

"And we thought a tornado was going to touch down."

Deedee laughed. "It was so excellent! We stood on the hill and watched everything and got just soaked. I was so sick the next day. But it was worth it."

"Yeah, it was fun," Diane said softly, remembering icy water skating down her skin as the sky boomed in her ears. It had seemed as if the world were coming undone and remaking itself around her.

"And we saw that light."

"A shooting star," Diane suggested, as she had that night.

"A traveller from another world," Deedee shot back.

"The *Enterprise*."

"The *Jupiter II*."

Diane thought hard a moment, then murmured, "The *Death Star*?"

"No way!" Deedee shouted gleefully. "Too big! But you know, it was kind of big for a shooting star. And it was storming when we saw it. Weird."

"Oh? You didn't think it was strange?"

"Well, I was just a kid then. Are we going over?" They had reached the barbed wire fence bordering the pasture. "The gate's too much of a pain to open."

Diane looked dubiously at the sagging tractor gate, which was merely a section of fence that pulled away from the rest at one end. By the light of the Moon poking up over the hills, the gate looked like a forced smile. "Maybe under?" Diane leaned against a post, glad for the chance to rest.

"Don't be a wuss," Deedee chided. Backing up, she made a long running leap over the fence. She cleared it easily, gracefully, landing on the other side in a crouch—only to trip when she started to stand. She fell hard on one knee, then sprawled face down on the path.

Diane struggled to hold back the laughter bubbling in her chest, even as her own leg ached in sympathy.

Deedee pushed herself up slowly, moaning as she examined her knee. "I think it's bleeding."

"It'll be okay," Diane assured the girl, lifting the loop of rope binding the end of the gate to the post. She let the gate fall back just enough to slip through, then struggled to pull the gate upright again and refasten the rope. She leaned against the post, rubbing her aching arms.

Deedee sat on the path. Although Diane couldn't see her face clearly in the gray-darkness of early evening—or see her injured knee—Diane could feel the girl willing Diane to touch help her stand, to comfort her.

Diane clenched her hands. "It's not much farther. Come on." She

walked past Deedee and started down the path without looking back. After a moment, she heard Deedee moving behind her.

Why do things have to be so difficult this time? Diane wondered. For the last three years, Deedee had accepted the parameters of their relationship, following Diane's lead, keeping an adoring distance. Now the girl was pushing for more, for a show of affection that Diane could not give. Maybe the teen was reaching out because she had just started high school. Maybe she was acting this way because she was on the cusp of growing up. Whatever, it was a mystery—Diane's memory of that time in her own life was a storm of emotions and expectations.

The girl limped up to Diane. "My dad's been telling me that you don't exist," Deedee said quietly, "and that I'm too old to be playing games. He keeps saying that my mom died when I was four. But, you know, I just figured that you left and he was still mad about it and wouldn't let you visit."

"I'm not your mother."

"Yeah, right. I saw that picture Dad keeps in the drawer in the nightstand."

Diane sighed. In the past, she had only feebly protested Deedee's fantasy. It had been too convenient.

"It was actually kind of cool that he thought you weren't real. Like you were a secret meant just for me or something."

Diane nodded. She knew well the girl's penchant for secrets—Diane played things close to her chest herself.

"But I dunno. You come to see me on my birthday, but you don't even act as if you like me any more. Maybe it would be better if I was just imagining you after all."

"The reason I've been coming to see you," Diane said, "is just over that hill. A shooting star."

"Maybe I don't want to see your stupid star."

"Maybe you do."

They walked on in silence. When they reached the hill, Diane led a limping Deedee down the path and around the hill's base.

"This way is longer," Deedee protested as she plowed into the waist-high stretch of weeds and dried grass. "My knee still hurts."

"What I have to show you is hidden. This is how we reach it."

The warm, dry scent of hay tickled Diane's nose. She coughed, a rasping sound that rattled her whole frame.

"You okay?"

Diane struggled to stop coughing, clutching her throat. It's not worth it, she thought. Nothing is worth this. The metallic tang of blood filled her mouth, and she turned her head and spat.

"Diane?"

"I'm okay," Diane said hoarsely, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "We're almost there."

The rising moon outlined a thick copse of trees ahead of them, nestled in a dell among the hills.

"We're not going in the trees, are we?" Deedee asked. "It's full of poison ivy. Dad used to dump old cars and garbage there."

"Uh-huh," Diane muttered, steering the teen towards the grove.

"It's too dark in the trees!"

Diane took a small light from her pocket and thumbed it on. She'd kept it in reserve to quell the arguments she knew Deedee would have.

"Oooh, sweat," Deedee breathed, stopping short when she saw the light. "Can I hold it?"

Diane handed it to her. The transparent tube was thin as a pencil and no longer than the girl's little finger. Deedee held it gingerly, the tube casting a bright halo of light in a wide circle around them.

"How does this thing work?" Deedee held the tube up to her eyes, squinting against the glare. "There's nothing in it. No bulb, no batteries, nothing."

Diane shrugged. "Someone loaned it to me. I'm not sure how it works." She walked into the copse, stepping delicately through the thick foliage, watching lest she step on a stray tractor part. "Be careful," she called over her shoulder.

"The light's not even warm," Deedee said in a wondering tone as

she caught up to Diane, flashing the light on the older woman's face. Then: "Oh, God, you look awful, Diane. You're getting worse, aren't you?"

"Yes," Diane said in a curt tone, touching her thinning hair self-consciously. Pasty-white skin, dark circles under her eyes—she knew she must look like one of the living dead, even though she was only thirty-four. The treatments were starting to take their toll.

"Look," Diane said, stopping. In front of her spread a small clearing, with the wrecks of blackened trees strewn about.

Deedee almost bumped into her. "Wha...?" Her eyes widened. "What is that?"

Among the rusting hulks of a Chevy pickup, a washing machine, an ancient VW bug and various pieces of worn John Deere equipment, was a rounded black dome. It was the size of a small shed, surrounded by churned-up earth.

Diane had often imagined what she would do at this point: say a few words of caution to Deedee, give her some notion of what to expect—or, perhaps, not allow her near the thing at all. But her lips were sluggish in forming silent words. She merely watched as the girl ran towards the dome, her limp forgotten as she leaped over obstacles in her path.

Deedee stopped beside the dome, staring at it, then laid her head against its side. She turned her head towards Diane so fast that her long, thick, dark hair sailed in semi-circle around her head.

"It feels really weird! It tingles."

She stared at her fingers, wiggling them. "They feel like they're asleep." She grinned. "This is way cool. Are we the only ones who know it's here? I don't remember Dad dumping anything that looked like this. Is it a meteor? No, wait, it's a spaceship, right?"

"There's something I need you to get for me," Diane said tiredly. "It's inside. I can show you how to get in." She didn't move towards the dome, but stood on the edge of the clearing. "There's an opening."

Deedee looked at her, puzzled, then at the dome. Slowly, she started walking around it.

"Right there," Diane called. "Put your hand on it, just a couple of inches above the dirt."

Biting her lip, Deedee did—and jumped back as a slit opened in the dome's side. "Oooh, sweat. It is a spaceship."

"Look inside."

Deedee bent, shining the small tube of light into the slit. "It's like crystal in there. Maybe it's diamonds." She reached inside, then quickly snatched her hand back. "My fingers are still tingling."

"You're small enough to fit through that opening. I can't—I'm too tall, my shoulders are too wide. I need you to go inside and get me a small black box. It's about as big as your fist."

Deedee wrinkled her nose. "I don't know if I want to. Maybe something's living in there."

Diane half-shut her eyes. It was bad enough that she was here at all, but having to persuade the girl...this was agony. "Nothing's living inside," she said in a monotone, afraid her voice would betray her. "Please, Deedee."

"Huh. Why should I?"

Diane took a deep breath. "Because you're the only one who can, right here, right now. Because it's the most important thing you'll ever do." The lie sat uneasily on her tongue, a broken tooth. But they were the right words.

"Okay, I'll do it," Deedee said firmly. "But you'll have to tell me some stuff. Like why you keep coming to see me and all about this spaceship."

"You'll know everything," Diane promised.

The girl smiled, then turned and squirmed inside the opening.

"Be careful what you touch," Diane called, but softly. It would do no good, she knew—nothing would, a fact she was just coming to accept.

Long minutes passed by. Diane watched a couple of clouds slide past the moon. Then, out of the corner of one eye, she saw a flash of white

light off in the trees. She turned her head sharply, staring at the rich blackness. "I know you're there, you old bitch," she called. "This isn't necessary!"

Silence was her answer. Clenching her fists, Diane shouted, "I'm doing it, aren't I? I'm here. It's what you wanted, damn it."

She heard a small cry and without thinking took a step toward the area where she had seen the white flash. Then Diane realized that the sound was coming from the dome.

Deedee was crawling from the slit, just her head and torso visible, the light clutched in one hand. She collapsed, half in, half out of the dome.

Diane ran to her, struggling to tug the girl out by her arms. With an effort, she managed to drag her away, toward the trees. Wheezing, Diane squatted beside her.

In one fist Deedee clutched the light. In the other, a small black cube. Blood seeped around the edges of her fingers where the cube pressed against her skin.

Diane gently took the light. "You did it," she said softly, sitting back, not touching the girl.

Deedee's lashes fluttered against her pale skin. "I feel funny," she said in a little voice.

"It'll pass."

Deedee sat up slowly. "I think there's somebody in there. But his face was all wrong and he was really tiny. He didn't move, but I think I heard him." She looked up at Diane, confused. "He was saying stuff, but it was inside my head. The cube was right beside him, and when I picked it up, I heard him. But I couldn't understand him."

"It's not alive now," Diane said carefully. "What you saw was only a husk. It was speaking to you from another time."

Deedee looked at the cube. "What is this thing? I cut myself when I picked it up." She tried to hand it to Diane.

Diane shook her head, pulling back. "I need you to keep it for me. I want you to put it in your jewelry box."

"My what?"

"The one your grandma gave you. The one with the leaded glass."

Deedee's eyes narrowed. "How'd you know about that? You weren't at my birthday party last year. I didn't see you until afterward."

"Bury the jewelry box in the backyard. Be sure you mark it."

"Huh?"

"You don't even wear jewelry," Diane said patiently. "You know you're never going to use it."

Deedee smiled a little. "Well, there's *unicorns* on the lid. I mean, *jeez*."

"Kid stuff."

"But what is that thing?" Deedee nodded at the dome. "What's inside of it?"

Diane rubbed her forehead tiredly, trying to remember what to say. "This is our shooting star, Deedee—that light we saw that night a couple of years back. It's been giving off some sort of mild radiation since it crashed here, but the level was too high for our safety. Not that the situation is much better now...but this was our last chance to get the cube before you grew and got too big to fit inside. And before the craft vanished." Diane pointed at the dome. "Remember, it's our secret. Bury the cube, and I'll come back and get it later."

"Why don't you just take it now?"

Because it's still too dangerous, Diane thought. Because I've done enough damage already. But she knew she couldn't say that. Instead, she said aloud, "This will be the link between us. Something wonderful will come of this, but it has to wait. You have to trust me—I can't tell you now."

Deedee's face darkened. "You're treating me like a stupid kid, just like everybody else."

"You're going to grow soon," Diane told the girl after a moment's silence, giving her what little she could. "You'll be as tall as the other girls in your class, and you'll be pretty. Not just the little tomboy anymore."

"Yeah, right."

"Talk to Bobby Tostensen."

Deedee stared at Diane. "I never told *anyone* that I like him."

Diane shrugged. "All you have to do is make the first move. Don't be afraid."

"Hmpf. Easy for you to say."

"This is all about communication," Diane said softly. "Things will be become clearer as you get older." The words were bitter; too often she'd been told the same, when her way wasn't clear at all and she could have used some guidance. But there just wasn't any more she could say at this time; she realized that now.

"When I get older," Deedee muttered.

Diane stood. "Just because I'm an adult doesn't mean I know that much more than you." She thought a moment, then reached down to help the teen up. The girl's palm was moist, sweaty, her calluses rough in contrast.

Deedee got shakily to her feet, then dropped Diane's hand. Diane was oddly sad.

"I don't feel good," Deedee complained.

"Remember betalzyn. Take it when it's offered. It'll be experimental and have side effects, but it'll help." Diane stood and turned, picking her way through the growth between the trees.

"Wait!" Deedee called, sounding almost panic-stricken. "You aren't leaving me already, are you?"

Diane said nothing and walked a bit faster, flicking off the light, hearing Deedee crash through the dry underbrush after her. Diane stopped behind a tree, trying to quiet her rapid breathing, and listened as Deedee made her way past, calling her name.

After several minutes, Diane emerged from the grove of trees. She stood alone in the clear moonlight. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a small black cube identical to the one Deedee had. Thumbing the pear-shaped groove in the top, she vanished in a flash of white light.

When she appeared in her hospital room, Diane found the old woman sitting in the room's only chair, waiting for her. The woman had no hair

left, and her limbs looked bent and frail, even though the comfit-chair had molded itself around her.

"You were there," Diane said tonelessly, dropping onto the bed. "I thought you were going to stay here and fool the sensors."

The old woman chuckled. "You saw me there, so I had to go. Besides, you don't actually need someone present to fool the room's monitors. The AI is quite stupid. I'll take the light now."

Diane handed the old woman the transparent tube. "I hate seeing you. I hate looking at the wreck you've become."

"You should take comfort in my age."

"Just how old are you?" Diane asked bitterly. "How much time do I have?" She dropped the black cube on the stand beside the bed and fumbled in the stand's drawer for the medication she'd been hoarding. As bad as the pain was day by day, she always felt much worse after these jaunts. With shaking hands she put the patch on her forearm and sank down on the bed.

"I am very old, and I am extremely healthy for my age. I've told you that before," the old woman said patiently. "That trip was the last for a while. Now you can concentrate on learning to use this to its fullest extent." She gestured at the cube on the stand. "There are still many things for you to discover."

"I could have avoided this," Diane cried, looking around the shadowy hospital room, at the silent, blinking machinery. "I could have said *something* to her and never wound up here at all. Why didn't I?"

"Because we didn't," the old woman said reasonably. "That's the way things are. That's what we chose."

"I was afraid," Diane admitted. "What if I hadn't done and said those things? Anything could have happened to me. Anything. And I wouldn't have known what to do."

The old woman shrugged. "What happens, happened. She'll put the memory of you and the ship aside as she gets caught up in the process of

becoming a young woman. She'll be very happy. She may have never spoken to Bobby if you hadn't encouraged her. So many good times."

"But it won't last. Her health will start to fail. The sickness she's incubating will eat at her body," Diane said bitterly. "Then Bobby will leave her. What's left after that?"

"She'll remember the cube. She'll dig it up when she will be mature enough to begin to learn."

Diane snorted. "And she'll get worse." Diane was beginning to get drowsy as the medication took hold. Standing with an effort, she took off her clothes and put on the hospital gown. The silky fabric was cool, making her body feel almost weightless. As she lay back on the bed, the bedclothes and mattress shifted gently around her body, cradling it.

"You never tell me anything," Diane muttered, hearing the echo of the teenage girl in her voice. "Why couldn't have someone else have found the alien?" She closed her eyes. "Is anything worth this much pain?"

"Yes." The old woman got to her feet. "I can talk to the alien now through the cube. Its race communicates through time—their concept of it is much freer than ours. The alien has told me many things." The old woman stood over Diane, brushing the hair from her forehead. "The answer was in my hands all along—I only needed freedom and time to learn to use it. Soon I'll be ready to share my secret with others."

Diane flinched, wondering how the woman could stand to touch her. The old woman's caress was comforting, though.

"You've spoken to the alien?" Diane asked sleepily. "When?"

"Hush, Deedee," the old woman soothed. "It will all come clear to you soon enough. And it will be wonderful, I promise you. Rest now, for we have much work ahead of us."

Deedee nodded, feeling the medication tugging her to a painless sleep. The last thing she saw before she closed her eyes was the old woman taking a black cube from her pocket and disappearing in a flash of pure white light. ■

GREENHOUSE

Cathy A. Ball

Illustrated by Michael Kennedy

It was a simple greenhouse. The survivors brought plants.

The man held the plant awkwardly, the way a man not accustomed to holding babies does; arms stiff, elbows bent outward, gingerly clutching the clay pot. He held it away from his body, as if afraid of the touch of its leaves. It should have been a man-eater, from his stance, or poisonous, or at least loaded with thorns or nettles. But it was just a houseplant, drooping and tinged with

light yellow from over-watering. He stood under the arch of the entryway and blinked. They all do, to adjust to the cool green light in the greenhouse.

I rocked back on my heels to ease the ache in my lower back. In the shade of the large bush I was tending, he wouldn't see me unless I moved. Or spoke.

He sighed softly. Then a muscle danced in his jaw and he squinted into the greenhouse as it stretched before him. He focused on me, to my surprise, in spite of the shadow,

in spite of the darkness of my work clothes and skin.

"Ms. Bellaman," he said.

Another surprise. A statement, not a query. I stood and went to him, caressing a broad, waxy leaf of Nathan's plant as I passed it.

The man didn't look any younger close up. Or any more comfortable. He thrust the plant toward me.

"You have to carry it yourself," I said. I reached out and touched the soil in the pot. "Too much water. You haven't been caring for this properly."

He flinched.

"As much as I could. Stupid idea," he said in a low angry tone. This is common.

I turned from him and started down the length of the greenhouse. After a moment, his footsteps sounded behind me. I hesitated by an open space on one of the newer racks.

"Not enough sun," I said and moved on. Next to the bonsai racks I paused again. Here and there, other houseplants were set amid the miniature trees, a patchwork of dwarfs and giants.

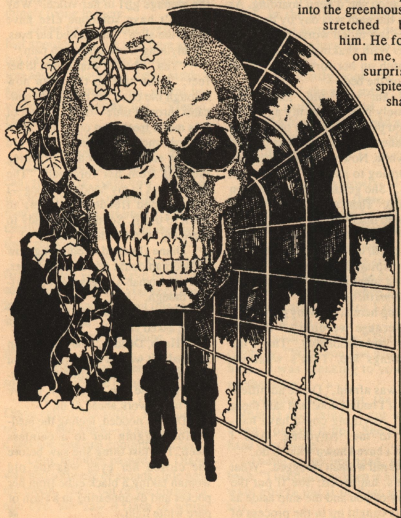
"How?" I asked.

"Does it matter?" he said. I looked at him.

"All the time," he said quietly. "I see death all the time. Business. Been a cop for over eighteen years. Dead is dead." He started to put the pot down. I restrained him with a touch.

"Did whoever you're doing this for ask very much of you?" I said.

"Nothing. Everything," he said. The muscle in his jaw was dancing again. He left the plant on the bonsai rack and turned to go.



"This is the wrong place for it," I said. "It will die."

"Then move it," he snapped. But paused.

"You have to carry it," I said. "It's one of the few rules."

He stood silent.

"If you leave before it's in the proper place, I have to let it stay there. Would its dying needlessly fulfill your promise?"

He turned back to me.

"Needlessly? A damn plant?" The anger radiated from him. "Needless death? What do you know about it?"

The greenhouse absorbed his words. The humid green light filtered around us and the silence cushioned us. His anger faded as I watched.

"All right," he said. "All right. Where's the right place for the damn thing?" He picked it back up awkwardly.

"How?" I asked again.

"Pneumonia," he said shortly. "Complications. From AIDS."

I nodded and turned to lead him further into the greenhouse.

"A friend?" I said. There was a long pause, broken only by the sound of his steps as he followed me.

"My son," he finally replied. I stopped by a rack of ferns, heavy, lush. There was a space high on the shelves where the plant could catch the early and late sunlight.

"This would be all right," I said.

He started forward, stepping up on the bench before the rack, and extended his arms to set the pot down. Before it touched the wood of the top shelf, he paused.

"But is it the proper place?" he asked. His gaze took in the healthy plants. The drooping plant in his hands looked even worse among them.

"It would be adequate," I said.

He looked on the lush greenness of the ferns. He drew the plant back down from the shelf and stepped awkwardly off the bench.

"I want the proper place," he said. "Might as well do it right." I shrugged and walked ahead.

"How long ago?" I said.

"Last month. Should have brought it in sooner," he said. I paused by a gathering of shrubs raised from the floor by a framework of boards.

"Excuse me," I said. "This will take but a moment." I knelt and began checking the bases of the plants. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other as he waited, relaxing his grip on the pot. The muscle in his jaw stopped dancing.

He touched one of the drooping leaves.

"Chris, my son," he murmured, "said I have a black thumb. Sudden death to plants. Can't keep pets either. Just not any good with things that grow." He held the plant away again self-consciously.

"Almost done," I said.

For the first time, his gaze rose from his immediate surroundings. He stood looking down the length of the greenhouse.

"Big place," he said slowly. "All of these...."

"All," I said. I rose and led him down the aisle. We walked a few hundred feet.

"Relatives bring them in?" he asked.

"And friends," I said. "Sometimes just people who were available toward the end."

"Chris's... friend brought me the plant. Brought it to the damn funeral, can you imagine? I wanted to leave it there, with all the plastic wreaths. Would have, too." He fell silent again. And then, softly, "But I promised. At the hospital. The one time I could make myself go. He never asked for anything before. That is, anything I was capable of doing. And a plant..." He trailed off again into silence.

The greenness lay around us, the plants lush and rich, the air lightly humid and laden with the smell of soil.

We reached one of the extensions of the greenhouse. I held the door open for him. It was cooler here, the light with less of the underwater feeling, the plants obviously recuperating. Here a philodendron

tentatively sprouted small twists of new greenery. An ivy, cut back severely of its deadness, lay curling over the edge of a rack.

"The proper place might be here," I said.

He surveyed the smaller room and nodded.

"Might be," he said. I watched him gently slide the plant onto the shelf near the ivy and center it on the rack.

"Will it be all right here?" he asked.

"We get fairly busy. Particularly of late," I said. "It should get as much attention as any of the others."

He reached out and touched the soil as I had when I first saw him. "Too much water?" he said. "Because the leaves are yellowing?"

"And the soil clumping like that. It should look more like this." I reached over into the philodendron's pot. He fingered the small pinch of dirt I handed to him.

"Busy, huh?" he said. "I'd hate to see... I guess I could take care of one plant. I think I'll take it back home for a while. Just until it's healthier. Have a better chance that way."

"I thought you had a black thumb?" I said.

"This, I can make live," he said, taking the plant back into his grasp.

"Help," I said. "Help live."

He looked at me in confusion for a moment and then smiled. It wasn't a big smile, but it wasn't a sad smile either. His lines of sorrow and anger were softened for a moment.

"Help," he said. "All I can do, I guess."

He shifted the plant so that the pot was in the crook of his arm, careful not to bend the leaves too much. I watched him go back through the door and disappear down the length of the greenhouse. Then I noticed that Daniel's ivy needed a bit more moisture and I spritzed the leaves with the humidifier. ■



ONE THIN DIME

Michael H. Payne

Illustrated by Margaret Ballif Simon

Someone had stolen the dragon's hoard, of dimes.

It was the thump-thump-thump of those paws on her chest that woke Donna more than the frenzied shouting: "Donna! I've been robbed! I've been robbed!"

"What?" Donna sat up with a start and felt the weight fall from her chest into her lap. "What?"

A breeze sprang up in front of her, two dots of red whirling into view. "Thieves!" the voice rang out in the darkness. "Thieves! Right here! In this apartment!"

Donna slapped at the lamp on her nightstand and squinted into the light that flooded the room. Above her blankets rustled the little dragon, his eyes spinning, his wings a green blur. As her mind began to focus, she managed to ask, "What are you talking about, Lance?"

The dragon zoomed into her face and held out a paw, claws extended.

"Five dimes from my hoard, Donna! Gone! Do you hear me? Stolen!" His eyes blazed. "You've been dipping in for bus fare again, haven't you! Haven't you!"

Donna swatted at the dragon, but he dodged. "I haven't even breathed on your hoard since you almost burned the place down the last time." She swung her eyes to the alarm clock. "Jeez, Lance, it's four o'clock."

"So my dimes just walked off, did they?" He was hovering in her face again, wisps of smoke jetting from his snout.

"Will you—!" Donna swung at him again, missed again, and fell back onto her pillows. "Lance, today is Saturday. On Saturdays I get to stay in bed all day if I want to, especially when I've been out with John till quarter of one...."

"Don't change the subject! A crime has been committed!"

"You've been reading too many mystery stories. They've probably just fallen into the fireplace again." Donna snapped the light off. "We'll look when the sun's up, okay?"

There was a moment of silence. "When the sun's up?" Lance's voice asked from somewhere above her.

"Uh-huh." Donna turned over and dropped back to sleep.

The next time the thump-thump-thump woke her, it wasn't so strident. "Donna? The sun's up. Can we start looking?"

She let her eyes creak open; the dragon was peering down from her chest. Rolling her head to see the clock, she blew out a breath. Seven thirty-two. "Okay, Lance, okay...."

The dragon whirred upward as Donna climbed into a sitting position,



then he settled down into her lap, his eyes a calmer gray color. "Sorry about last night," he said with a little cough. "I...I get carried away sometimes."

"Yeah, Lance, I know." Donna yawned and scratched at the fuzz along the dragon's back. "Believe me, if you weren't so cute, I'd've sold you to the nearest research lab years ago."

"Ah, but then I'd have to break out and hunt you down like the filthy human scum you are."

"That's true." She stood up, the dragon fluttering to her shoulder. "Well, let's have a look."

Sunlight spilled through the curtains and across the living room floor as Donna stumbled from the bedroom. She reached over the kitchen counter to flick the fire on under the kettle, then stepped around the sofa to the bookcase.

This whole corner of the room was filled with bookcase, it and its contents the only things she'd let her parents talk her into taking when she'd left home. Not that she'd had much choice: Lance had claimed the top ledge as his aerie years ago, and he absolutely refused to change.

Her old stuffed animals sat along the top, too: a musical bear, his wind-up key long ago pulled out, her gray squirrel, rubber bands holding his tail on after her brothers had torn it off—but they were there so Lance could pretend he was stuffed as well. Her friends loved it; the other secretaries at work even gave Donna dimes for him sometimes. Lance thought it was great and said she should have folks over more often.

Donna rubbed her forehead and yawned. "So tell me."

The dragon swooped up and settled with a jingle onto his hoard. "Well, I was doing some gloating last night, counting my dimes, running my claws through them, scooping them up and letting them trickle down my chest," his eyes were swirling faster, his claws clutched at the coins, "sliding my tongue over their gorgeous, serrated edges, thrusting my head deep into them and inhaling their sweet—"

"Lance? Hello, Lance? Can we focus a little, please?"

The dragon blinked. "What? Oh. Yeah. Anyway, I woke up when you and John were finishing your coffee, and after he left, I couldn't go back to sleep. So I counted my dimes, and five were..." he shuddered, flecks of red sparking at his eyes, "missing, I recounted, but..." He drew a ragged breath. "I panicked, I guess, but I felt so...so violated."

"Uh-huh." Donna got down and peered into the fireplace. "Did you dig around in here like I've told you to?"

Lance blew smoke at her. "Yes, I did, thank you so much for your concern. I even washed afterwards so I wouldn't get ash all over your carpet. I am considerate to my friends."

"Yeah, especially when you call them thieves and jump up and down on them at four in the morning." Donna picked up the poker and stirred the ashes till the kettle began shrieking, but nothing shone out in the gauzy sunlight. "Humph," she said at last. "Well, I'm going to get some breakfast."

"Excuse me?" With a whirl of wings, Lance settled onto the sofa above her. "The crime of the century, and you're thinking about *breakfast*?"

"Y'know, I'd always heard that mystery stories could warp weak minds." Donna stood and went into the kitchen. She switched off the kettle and got down the cups and teabags. "Come on; get it while it's hot."

Lance fluttered to the back of the couch. "Are you crazy?! I'm not leaving my hoard unguarded for a second!"

"It's Darjeeling..." She blew the steam toward him.

Blue flecks swirled in his eyes. "Darjeeling? Really?" He wavered for a moment, his claws kneading the sofa back, then snapped his eyes shut. "Thank you, no." He leaped upward and collapsed onto his pile of dimes.

Donna sighed, set the cups on the counter to steep, and there, shining up from the phone book, was a little stack of coins. "Oh, yeah. John

gave me some dimes for you last night." She poked at them. "Hey, looks like you broke even."

Smoke puffed from the bookcase. "What do you mean?"

"Guess how many dimes John gave me?"

"My five!" Lance hurtled across the living room and thumped onto the counter, his eyes whirling. "Are they my five?" He sniffed them, then kicked the phone book. "Damn!"

"What? You thought John had taken your dimes?"

"No!" Lance stalked across the counter top, his claws clicking against the tile. "I thought maybe he'd found them outside or something." He stopped with a jerk beside the cookie jar. "Now that you mention it, though...."

"What?"

Lance turned and held up a paw. "I no sooner lose five dimes than your boyfriend gives me five. Coincidence?" He arched an eye ridge. "I think not."

Donna blinked. "You've lost your tiny, reptilian mind."

"He was here! Think about it! It all adds up!"

"To what? John steals your dimes and then returns them?"

"Ah, but he doesn't return them! He exchanges them!" Lance waved at the phone book. "Those are not my dimes."

"You don't want them?"

"Of course I want them! But my five are gone, and I'll bet John knows something about it! Donna, the game's afoot!"

"Oh, God, not Holmes again." Donna opened the refrigerator and got out the milk. "I think I'll go back to bed."

Wings fluttering, Lance settled down by his cup. "Yes, this could be dangerous. John lives nearby, doesn't he?"

"Just down the way." She narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

"I thought I'd go take a look around."

"You? Uhh, excuse me, Sherlock, but aren't you a bit conspicuous? Or can you pass as some green, malformed crow?"

Lance gave her a sour look. "It's my only lead."

"Lead? Lead, it's a groundless suspicion."

"Nonetheless." He sipped at his cup. "Every possibility must be explored, no matter how remote."

"Or how stupid." Donna splashed milk into her tea.

"Okay. Fine. Be that way. I'll just go out by myself and track down the fiends responsible. I shouldn't expect a human to understand anyway."

"Oh, now, don't pout. Just let me eat, and we'll go snooping around John's place. Maybe I should introduce you two; you've got a lot in common."

Lance didn't say anything, but his eyes brightened; he even ate a corner of Donna's toast. Then Donna popped back into the bedroom and slipped on her sweats. "So," she called as she tied her shoes, "what's the plan, Sherlock?"

"Well, Watson," came his voice from the other room, "I'll go up the chimney and keep to the trees as much as possible. You stroll on over to John's, and we'll see what happens."

Donna had to laugh. "That's it?" She walked out into the front room. "That doesn't sound too dangerous."

"Ah, so it doesn't." Lance was settled on his hoard, smoke rings drifting from his snout. "But matters can develop with astonishing quickness. This case already begins to present certain features of interest."

"I swear I'm going to donate those Conan Doyle books to the library." She blew out a breath. "Can we get on with this? I've got loafing to do today."

The dragon arched an eye ridge, swooped through the fireplace screen and was gone. Donna shook her head, opened the front door and stepped out into the sunlight.

The sky was the off-blue of a California morning, sharp and hollow as a bell with just a touch of brown around the edges. Donna could hear sprinklers fizzing away, doing their best to keep the grass

green against a sun who was convinced this was all still desert. She stretched, yawned, and started down the concrete path between the apartment blocks.

Shrieking clouds of sparrows burst from the trees ahead; Donna winced, but she kept herself from looking up. She and her hidden companion wound between the smaller apartments to the inner circle of more expensive places. Donna had never understood why John paid so much more for a second story and a square of grass with a wall around it, but he did have a thing about barbecues—they'd met at one of his parties—and Donna had to admit he was just a bit of a snob.

John's apartment was the first one in the Mariposa block; Donna took a quick look around, then slipped into the hedge between his wall and the wall next door. Twigs poked into various parts of her, and she cursed silently as she crawled further in, the stucco of the walls catching at her clothing.

Branches rustled above, and a familiar weight dropped onto her back. "What are you doing?" Lance's voice whispered.

"Me? Me? This was *your* stupid idea, not—"

"But you're supposed to go in and keep him busy while I look around! Don't you know *anything*?"

Donna managed to turn her head even though she got several sticks in the face. "What?"

"Will you keep your voice down?"

"Why didn't you say something back at—"

"Oh, well, excuse me for assuming you had half a brain. Everyone knows you need a diversion when you—" He broke off and cocked his head. "Did you hear that?"

Donna bit back her next comment and listened. "What?"

"Voices." The dragon grabbed some twigs and climbed into the hedge till he reached the top of the wall. He motioned with a claw for Donna to stand up.

As quietly as she could, Donna inched to her feet against the stucco;

through the branches she peered and into John's backyard. The sliding glass door was open, and John was stepping out. He had a black bag in his hands, and something tiny came dartering after him, something Donna couldn't make out.

"You're sure about this?" John was asking. "I always thought you had to have dark, moonless nights for this stuff."

"That," came a reedy voice from somewhere, "is why you're not a magician." The tiny thing settled onto John's shoulder, and Donna heard Lance gasp. She squinted, but she still couldn't tell what it was: it had white wings and a white head with a beak, but its body was brown with four legs and a lashing tail. It perched beneath John's ear. Donna wanted to ask Lance, but John had stopped in front of the barbecue and was too close to risk it.

"Now, you're sure?" John asked again as he raised the barbecue's lid. "I mean, it's not like I got these from a real dragon or anything."

The thing on his shoulder squeaked a laugh. "Real? You have no idea about 'real,' human. But trust me; I invented this spell to work even on worlds as sick and stunted as this." It fluttered up to look John in the eye. "Or would you like to count yourself out?"

"Are you crazy?" John's glasses flashed in the light from the coals. "Magic? Dimensional travel? Live dragons and unicorns? If it's all as real as you are, do you have any idea what people will pay to see it?" He shook his head. "I wanna be right here on the ground floor."

"Good." The creature swooped into a position above the barbecue, its wings whirling the smoke into eddies. "Now!" it shouted. "Set it out now!"

John undid the bag. Donna was watching so closely, she didn't notice that Lance was no longer on the wall beside her until a green blur slammed into John's hands. "Hey!" he shouted. The bag hit the grass, and some sort of raw meat blorched out, five small disks shining up from it.

The bird-thing swarmed over Lance. "Quickly!" it yelled, and John bent down to scoop up the bag's contents.

Donna clutched the wall as Lance spun and dove, the thing a sharp little cloud pecking at him. "Stop him!" came the dragon's voice. "Don't let him put that stuff on the fire!"

For a moment Donna stood frozen, then she clambered over the wall, the stucco biting at her, making her slip from the top and fall into the grass of John's backyard. She scrambled to her feet, her hands stinging, and was just in time to see John drop the chunk of meat with its dimes into the barbecue.

There was a sound like a water balloon hitting a hot sidewalk, and something rose out of the smoke, something the size of a small dog, black wings flapping from a body of burnished gold. It screeched, and Donna saw it was a dragon.

The scuffling ball of white and green overhead tumbled into a tree across the way, and only the bird-thing streaked back into John's backyard. Donna stood and stared at the little thing swirling and cawing around the dragon.

John was staring, too. "It worked," he whispered.

"So it would seem," the dragon said, its voice like steam from a kettle. A golden paw flashed, snatching the bird-thing from the air. "Uerllmo! *Where am I?*"

"My goddess, my worship, my love and my queen!" the thing chirped as it hung from the dragon's claws. "To feel your touch again after so many cold, empty centuries—"

The dragon squeezed till the creature's voice choked into silence. She then flipped the barbecue closed with a hind paw and settled onto the lid. "I'm not in the mood, griffin." She let the bird-thing go, and it fell before her with a thud.

"My...queen...." It coughed, cleared its throat, then said, still sprawled in front of her: "This is the world of my exile, Majesty. After your banishment, I strove for years

after the spell that would free you. I had just gained its form when your betrayers found me and exiled me to this forsaken slag heap. Ah, but now, my lady, we are reunited."

"I see." The dragon looked up from the quivering creature. "And you, human. You assisted my minister?"

John's mouth hung partway open. "Wow..." he said after a moment. "I mean, yeah, yeah, I guess I did."

The dragon rubbed her chin. "I do not care much for the scale of this world of yours; in the real world, a human would scarcely be a pawful for me. I thank you, of course, for your part in freeing me, but now, I feel I must ask you to play an even more important role in my reawakening."

"More important?" John blinked. "Hey, just name it."

A black tongue flickered from her snout. "Breakfast," she said, and she leaped from the barbecue onto John's chest. Teeth flashed at his throat, claws shredding his shirt, and blood spurted up as the two tumbled back onto the grass.

The stucco of the wall jabbed at Donna's back, her eyes unable to close on the thing tearing wet and steaming strips from John's neck. After a minute, he stopped flailing, his head thrown back, his eyes still wide and staring. Donna could only watch the dragon slurp and nibble, and then she found herself looking straight into the creature's eyes.

They held that pose till the dragon blinked. "Uerllmo," she called, padding bloody pawprints across John's stomach. "It's been too long. You will have to assist me with this one."

Donna gripped the wall as the griffin fluttered to the dragon's side, but a green blur pulled her eyes away; Lance came streaking over the ivy of the opposite wall, a garbage can clutched in his paws. "Run for the house!" Donna heard him shout, and the can dropped onto the two creatures.

She jumped toward the open glass door, behind her a scuffling and

screeching and Lance yelling, "In! In! In!" Donna shoved the door closed just as something green flashed past her head, then she ran through John's living room into the hallway. Lance hovered by the front door. "Move! That won't hold them forever!"

Donna grabbed the knob and glass shattered in the other room, a screech echoing through the house. She threw the door open and sprinted down John's front walk toward the cluttered apartments. The planters blurred past, and when she reached her front door, she threw herself in, slammed it and bolted it.

Her stomach was a sharp and fiery mess; she rushed to the sink and retched her breakfast out. A turn of the faucet washed the stuff away, and she cupped her shaking hands under the stream to cool the burning in her mouth. The water almost choked her as sobs wracked her throat, and she slumped to the kitchen floor, her arms around her legs, trying to wash the whole red and pulpy scene from her eyes with her tears.

Lance's familiar flutter and thump sounded next to her, and claws poked at her side. "We've gotta get outta here."

Donna was shaking all over. "That thing," she finally got out. "Oh, God, John...."

"Come on, come on!" The claws dug at her, the pain shocking her head up and her eyes toward the dragon on the floor. "We got no time for this! We've got to get out now!"

She could only stare down at him. "Get out?"

"Get out!" Lance jerked a claw toward the far wall. "We hafta be away from here before sundown!"

Donna's mind wouldn't turn over. She wanted to know what was going on, but all she could think of was John's blood on that thing's snout. She buried her eyes in the damp knees of her sweat pants and pulled her legs closer.

"No, you don't!" A cold breeze slapped at her face, claws gripping her head. They forced her to look up, right into the little dragon's swirling

eyes. "That's the Dieph Tharka up there! We stay here, we're dead! Understand?!"

"Dead?" Donna could barely hear her own voice. "John's dead...isn't he?"

Smoke jetted from his snout. "Yes! And we're next! Now let's go!"

"Go? But...but where? And—"

"Anywhere! As long as it's away from here! We should—"

"And why? John, he...I.... Lance, what's happening?"

The dragon took his claws from her head and clenched them into fists. "Back home, my grandad used to go on and on about the Dieph Tharka; he'd been in one of her death camps just before the Court defeated and banished her. I was a hatchling when they tracked down Uerlmo and exiled him, and when I saw him on John's shoulder today...." He took a shaky breath.

Donna forced her mind to turn over. "But...but how? How did that thing get here?"

Lance sprang from her knees and paced across the kitchen floor. "It's the major punishment where I come from. Exile. The Dieph, she was a special case, and they sent her to the spaces between space, but others get sent to places like this. There's so little magic, it shrinks 'em down, and...I don't know, they probably get eaten by weasels or something."

She stared at the dragon. "You're a criminal?"

"No!" He shot her a look. "I came here to get away from all that magic garbage! Changing your wards twice a day to keep the curses out, going for a little flight and getting caught up in some wizards' duel...." A swirl of red came into his eyes. "People always stealing from your hoard for spell components...." He grabbed her leg. "Let's go! When the sun sets, it's gonna get real unpleasant around here!"

Her head throbbled as she wiped her eyes. "Unpleasant? John getting torn apart isn't bad enough for you?"

Lance waved a paw in the air. "No! It's just that major summonings aren't permanent till the summonee

sees its first sunset: that's what my grandad always said. Until then, the spell can still be—" He stopped and shook his head. "Look, we just don't wanna be here after dark!"

"Wait—what can the spell be?" Donna said forward.

"Nothing! Forget I said anything!"

"Lance, that thing killed John! If you can—"

"No!" Lance spun on her, his eyes glowing with sickly green specks. "Do you know what my grandad said? Do you have any idea what I'd have to do?"

Lance was shivering; Donna reached out and picked him up. "Whatever it is, Lance, I'm with you. Just tell me."

He tucked his head under her chin. After a moment, he said, "We'd have to go back up there and get one of the dimes. And then I'd...I'd have to...have to melt it down!"

Donna pulled the dragon away and looked at him. "That's it? Just melt one of the dimes? Jeez, you were making me think you'd have to tear your own head off or something."

"Well, it's almost the same thing!" Lance wriggled from her grip and hovered above her. "That hoard's not just a pile of coins! It's...it's my soul, Donna, more a part of me than these wings or these claws! Without my hoard to reflect, I'm less than a wyvern, just a...just a skulking, flapping little lizard! They stole a part of my soul, Donna, and I'd rather let them have it than...than have to destroy it!"

Donna's palms itched where the wall had torn them. "Lance, that thing killed John!"

"Don't you think I know that?" Lance was a green blur over the kitchen. "Uerlmo needed my dimes, and he tricked John into getting them! I should've known my hoard would be a beacon to any exile who knew magic! I should've had wards strung up, shouldn't've been asleep, should've kept myself—"

"Hey, hey, hey!" Donna leaped up and grabbed the dragon from the air. "Don't you lose it on me, Lance; don't you dare lose it on me!"

The dragon squealed and writhed, but she held on, and at last he went limp, his heart shaking her arms with its pounding. "God, I hate magic!" he hissed after a minute.

"Yeah." Donna took a ragged breath. "So what do we do?"

Lance's eyes still swirled a faint green as Donna let him flutter loose. "We'll need a distraction, something to keep them busy while I get into the backyard. The Dieph's still weak, so Uerlmo won't budge from her side unless it's something big, and to get her up and around...." He perched on the stove top. "Can you get inside that house and upstairs?"

Donna blinked. "Sure. John gave me a key. Why?"

"You need to be up there to drop things on the barbecue."

"To what?"

"The only thing that'll get 'em moving is to threaten the barbecue." Lance started pacing again. "The Dieph'll send Uerlmo out, and you duck out of sight. He'll do a sweep over the bushes, and I'll be waiting for him. You keep tossing things at the barbecue, and when Uerlmo doesn't come back, the Dieph'll come out to take a look. This time, though, you let her see you, and she goes up after you."

Donna stared across at him. "She goes up after me."

"Well, what else would she do?"

"I don't care about her! What am I supposed to do?"

"Well, run back downstairs, of course. You'll have a head start 'cause you'll see her coming. As soon as she goes in the window, I swoop down, get the barbecue open, grab a dime, and...and, well, you know." He swallowed. "The spell gets broken, and the Dieph goes back to wherever."

"What about the other thing? The griffin?"

"I'll already have eaten him when I—"

"I don't want to hear about it." Donna shuddered. "And what about...about John?"

Lance's eyes swirled, his voice barely a whisper. "I'm sorry. I...I didn't know, didn't think...I'm sorry."

Donna's eyes felt too tight. "Yeah, me, too."

Things were quiet, then Lance rustled into the air. "I'll go up the chimney again. Give me a minute, then head over. They shouldn't care if they hear the door open, but, well, you might want to be careful, just in case."

"I might want to, yeah." Donna looked at the little dragon. "See you over there."

"Yeah." A whisk of wind, a rattle of fireplace screen, and Lance was gone.

Donna leaned against the kitchen counter, the wall clock buzzing behind her. Outside, she could hear a TV chattering, a car starting up, someone's leaf blower coughing to life: regular sounds for a regular Saturday morning.

It made her stomach hurt. She pushed away from the counter and went out the front door. Along the way she picked stones from the flower beds; she had eight good-sized ones by the time she came to the path to John's place.

She took a couple quick breaths, then tiptoed up. After two or three tries she got the key into the lock, the sweat on her palms making her cuts sting. The tumblers clicked loudly as the key went in; Donna pressed her ear to the door and held her breath. She couldn't hear anything from the other side, so she put a hand to the doorknob.

The door moved easily. She nudged it forward an inch and listened at the crack. No wings rustled, no claws scabbled, so she pushed till she could just peer around the edge.

Ahead of her at the end of the hall stood John's coat rack, the little jog past it leading to the living room. On the left was the kitchen door, the stairs climbing upward to the right. Nothing squatted, waiting for her, so she crept inside and slid the door closed: not all the way, but just to the doorjamb. Then she was at the stairwell and slipping up, rocks cradled in her hand, eyes fixed on the coat rack below.

John had just put in new carpets; Donna could scarcely hear her own

footfalls as she rose up the stairs. The top floor had only three rooms, and Donna figured that John's bedroom would give the best view of the yard. She moved across the landing and pushed open the door.

The sight of that big, airy room made Donna's throat go tight again. She forced a swallow, closed the door behind her, and crept to the windows.

Outside, a couple feet of shingled roof sloped away to open air; below sat the barbecue at the edge of its concrete slab. Donna nudged the window open and set her rocks on the sill. She wiped a stinging hand against her sweatshirt, then took up a stone and tossed it over the little roof.

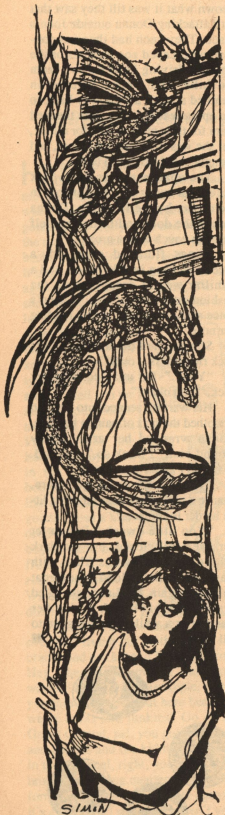
The clank as it bounced off the barbecue's lid seemed to echo from the scattered apartment blocks, and Donna held her breath. The response was immediate; a *caw* rang out below her, and a white streak dashed into the yard. Donna ducked behind the curtains and watched through them as a dot circled the barbecue, stopped by where the stone had landed, then slowly moved toward the ivy-covered walls. The hedge closed around it; Donna heard a scuffling, then nothing but the buzzing of lawn mowers and the croak of distant crows.

Donna waited a moment, then tossed her second stone.

The barbecue clanked nicely, but this time, nothing happened. She tossed a third, a fourth, and a fifth, and still nothing screeched up from the yard. Donna set down her sixth stone and wiped her hands. Was she missing something?

Then she heard a sound, soft, not the sort of thing she'd been waiting for at all: just a quiet little click, like a doorknob turning. And it was coming from behind her.

Donna spun around. The door clicked again and swung open, and the golden dragon was standing in the hallway. She seemed bigger now, and her black eyes sparkled as she cocked her head. "I thought I heard something up here."



SIMON

For a moment, Donna could only stare. The creature stepped into the room, reached back with a hind paw and pushed the door shut. "So we won't be disturbed," she said.

The door clicked, and Donna's mind finally snapped to life. She snatched up the rest of her stones and hurled them at the dragon, then whirled and clambered out onto the little roof; her tennis shoes skittering, she slammed the window behind her and scrambled for the corner of the house. Glass shattered, and she flattened herself against the shingles as something whooshed past her, the wind from its wings slashing through her hair. She rolled to her feet and sprinted along the slope, her eyes set on the saplings that stood tied to their supports along the side of John's place.

She knew the sound of swooping wings well enough from all the times Lance had ambushed her, and she leaped for the trees just as the rush from above burst down over her. Claws tore into her, knocked her sideways, and she tumbled off into empty space. She managed to grab one of the trees, but it came loose from its moorings and teetered over; Donna was sure the thing would crumple and send her crashing to the ground.

But the sapling snapped back, flipping Donna up and nearly smashing her into the side of the house. She kept her grip, and as her eyes refocused, she found herself staring down into John's backyard. Lance was perched on the edge of the open barbecue, his head drawn back, his cheeks puffed out, and a golden streak was dropping toward him. Donna was about to cry out when Lance's head

shot forward and fire licked from his jaws. Smoke poured up, swallowing the golden thing; Donna heard a screech like gears grinding, and only a dark puff of steam washed down over the barbecue.

Her side was screaming; it loosened her grip, and Donna dropped to the ground with a thud. Shapes swarmed through the bushes around her. "Donna?" they called. "What in the—"

Faces swam before her, faces she recognized as Ed and Marie from a few doors down. Donna forced herself to say, "Something's happened to John." Then she passed out.

She came to in a white room, a doctor standing over her, her side bandaged and throbbing. The doctor wanted to know what sort of animal had attacked her, and she said she wasn't sure: a hawk or an eagle or something. She had no idea how it had gotten into John's apartment, she told the police later; she had gone over this morning, seen the glass on the living room floor, and had run home, thinking a burglar might have broken in. She was going to call the police but had decided she'd better talk to John first.

When no one answered the phone, she'd gone back over to see what was happening. She'd gone upstairs, and there was this huge bird in his bedroom. It had chased her out the window, had bitten or scratched her or something, and that was all she knew. The police talked to Ed and Marie, and as evening came down, the doctor let them take Donna home with instructions that she was to come back in a couple days.

Ed and Marie took turns on the drive home telling her how they'd heard sounds all morning but hadn't known what it was till they saw that bird attacking Donna outside John's place. They each had theories concerning escaped zoo animals or the drought driving hawks down from the hills, and Donna listened in numbed silence all the way back to the apartment complex. She thanked them for their offer to stay for dinner, but she was tired, she told them, and thought she'd just go to bed.

The apartment was dark, dark except for two swirling dots off in the corner by the fireplace. Donna closed the door and folded herself onto the couch with a groan.

Wings fluttered overhead, a breeze wafting into her face, and a familiar weight dropped onto the cushion next to her. "Hey," Lance's voice said, his smoky breath tickling her nose.

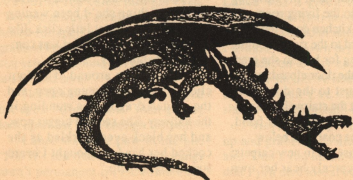
She reached out and found his back ridges. "Is it over?"

"Yeah." He nuzzled into her neck. "You okay?"

His warmth seeped into her and smoothed the jags of pain in her side. Donna wrapped her arms gently around him. "I think so," she said. "I'm sorry about your dimes."

"Yeah, well, I can get more. You're a part of my hoard that's a little harder to replace."

"You little dweeb." Donna let her eyes roll closed, but the dark behind her eyelids was filled with claws and John's blood. Her throat tightened again, but Lance snuggled against her, his breath drying her tears; after a while, she managed to fall asleep. ■



WHERE THE HEART IS

Norman Spinrad

Illustrated by Darla M. Tagrin

Everything was exactly in place, like a stained glass window in some crazy bag-lady church.

Hey gimme a buck, mister, and I'll tell you a story, yeah, you heard me, a dollar, hey Jack, it's worth it, when I get the airfare together, I'm gonna fly to Hollywood and sell it to the movies, and then it'll cost you six bucks to see it in a first run house, so it's a bargain, see, I used to be an agent, man, I ain't no bum, I'm in show business, I may be down on my luck and out on the street, but that don't mean I don't still know a hot property, look, you pay me a buck, I tell you the story, you follow the trades, and when *Variety* runs the item, you buy stock in the studio that bought it, make out like a bandit, this is gonna gross a hundred million, beats buying junk bonds from one of those real bums down on Wall Street, now don't it....

You don't believe me? You think everyone living out on the street's a crackhead cockroach lowlife zero? Hey, there's a hundred thousand worms like me inna Big Apple, right, you think we're all out here because we're bums and junkies? Go up to Grand Central, pal, you got mommas and poppas and the kiddies crashing in the terminal, right, you got stock-brokers bumming quarters from their former colleagues, real estate agents, it's a cold cruel world, or haven't you noticed, could be you in this doorway

next week, man, the GNP drops another two percent next quarter.

We got lives, we got hopes, we got dreams, some of us even got *powers*, you never know, mister, like I know this bag lady who was a witch, a real one, Jack, she put together a spell and rode it right out of here.

No man, she didn't have no broomstick, just the usual shopping

Your standard shopping cart momma, Jack, find twenty-five like her frozen stiff on subway gratings every Tuesday in January, right. I wouldn'ta paid her no attention either, pal, except for that vest.

Man, that was a *magic* vest. I knew it the first time I saw it. How? Well, for one thing, pal, it was *clean*. It was always clean. I mean

real clean, like she had it dry-cleaned twice a week.

Don't be stupid, man. Auntie Zuzu was too out of it to panhandle, never even saw her try, all she ever did was go through garbage cans, I mean I followed her for a solid week before I found her nest, she never had a quarter, she couldn'ta had the vest dry-cleaned no matter how crazy she was,

and besides, she *always* had it on. It was a *magic* vest. And when she—

Uh-uh, no more freebies, pal, look you give me fifty cents now, and I'll tell you the story, call it an option to buy, if you don't like it, you don't have to pay the back end. Come on, Jack, is fifty cents gonna break you? No, I ain't gonna spend it on booze, you can walk down to Walgreens with me and watch me buy a Milky Way and a Hershey bar, okay?

Thanks, man. The vest...? Oh yeah, Auntie Zuzu's vest.... Well, it



cart. They called her Auntie Zuzu, I don't know why, she was your usual big fat black bag lady, dry-cleaner plastic bloomers, peacoat covered with puke and dogcrap, scabs all over her arms, wore a showercap over smelly gray dreads, held long conversations with lampposts, you wouldn't have looked at her twice, wouldn't have looked at her once if you could help it, crapping in phone booths, pickin' crud out of garbage cans, you just passed a dozen like her on the way from the subway.

wasn't just clean, it was bright and beautiful. Was made of this light brown wool, that wasn't much, but the whole front of it was this kind of patchwork quilt thing, only it was a picture, each piece of cloth was cut to the shape of something, and kind of stuffed underneath, so the whole thing was kinda three-D, know what I mean....

Really simple-looking stuff, like a kid had maybe sewn it together. Bright blue sky. In the sky is this yellow sun with like rays coming off it. Three white clouds like speech-balloons inna cartoon. Two red birdies, just these little vees of cloth. A green sea quilted into these waves, and jumping out of it, a silver fish sewn out of some sequined stuff, with a big Happy Face grin. Below that, a beach done with gold lamé. Two palm trees—just these brown trunks with zig-zag green leaves. And between them, a big red heart with a stupid arrow through it.

Yeah, yeah, I know, it sounds dumb, but when you see it, I dunno, something hypnotic about it, like I say, a magic vest, all bright and clean where nothing but grunge should be....

Caught my eye right away. I'm over on Eighth Avenue near the Garden, rough turf fulla pimps and street scurve, but lotsa fast food joints and bars, so the garbage cans and panhandling's pretty good, when I see this bag lady going through a can outside the Pollo Mucho.

Nothin' to look at, right, only she's throwing away big pieces of hamburger buns, fried chicken bones with pretty good meat on them, even half a pizza slice, but sorting through the stuff real careful, like she knows just what she's after. And then she pulls out this piece of sawtooth green plastic, you know, like the kind of thing they wrap around a take-out piña colada or something, a little hula-dancer's skirt.

She straightens up, and her big fat old black face breaks into this incredible little-girl grin, and she drops the thing into her shopping cart, and her peacoat falls open, and I see the vest.

You hadda be there, mister. I mean, somehow, that vest, that grin, that stupid piece of green plastic, it was like I'm walking through this black and white newspaper strip, and all of a sudden it breaks into full color comic book cartoon.

Magic. I mean, living on the street's like boring, kind of all takes place in slow motion, in black, and gray, and dirty white. This was like a...like a Moment. In waddaya callit, Living Color. Of which there is not much out here.

So what can I tell ya? Nobody talks to bag ladies, right? But like this wasn't no bag lady, not right then, this was, I dunno, with that grin, and that vest, and all, like a *real person*, like a person realer than real.

So I talk to her.

"Hey, whatcha got there, lady?"

She looks at me real narrow like, and hunches her arms around her shopping cart like I'm about to rip her off. Only there's nothing in there that even a brain-burned crackhead's gonna rip off, not even newspapers and tin cans worth a couple bucks at the recycler. Pages from magazines. A rotten pineapple top. A broken red light bulb. A Yellowman album cover. Coke bottle. A piece of flowered cloth. Tropicana Orange juice carton. Bits of broken green glass. An Aunt Jemimah pancake mix box. Blue tinfoil. A cracked Christmas-tree angel. Yuban coffee can. A very dead potted plant.

"Make me homelike, mon, fly away summer skies every time of year, some day soon, remember Zion...."

She kinda sung it out inna cracked Reggae rhythm like bits and pieces of old records.

"Hey, where'd you get that vest, inna garbage can?"

She hugged her old coat back across her chest, covering it up.

"Hey, lady, come one, I ain't gonna boost it, it's a pretty thing, just wanna have a look."

She gives me this fish-eyed stare, just like you did when I asked you for a buck, pal, but then this change comes over her face, like there's this sunny little girl in there behind all

that shy old fat, just a smile, man, but with the whole face, the eyes and all, you know, and she opens up the coat like a Minnesota Strip hooker flashing you her tits, and I get a good clear look at the vest again, her smile, that silly cartoon....

"When I was just a little baby, my mamma she said to me, all my days you must sing its praise, bright green waters and de shining sand...."

Yeah, man, I know it don't make no sense, but you hadda be there, the vest, the smile, the babble, like I could hear this music, feel the warm sun onna beach, I mean not really, but.... Aw, man, I told you it was a magic vest....

Well anyway, she turns away, and goes on up Eighth Avenue, and I follow her for a while. Hey, pal, there ain't no TV out here, what else is there to do? She makes the rounds of the garbage cans, picking out all this weird stuff—magazine pages, bits of colored string, orange rinds, empty cocoa-butter shampoo bottle, imported beer can, dirty red snotrag, cardboard cigar box—all kinda useless crap, one or two pieces from each can, sometimes nothing.

Don't make no sense, but in another way it does, like it makes some kind of sense inside her own head, only no one else can figure it out. Anyway, I follow her for a while, and then I pass the corner where an apple-crate has fallen offa truck or something, and while I'm fightin' my colleagues for the proceeds, I lose her.

Couple days later, I run into her again over near Union Square, and she'd doing the same thing, man. I follow her around again for a while, but that's already getting old, like reruns of the same old TV show, you know.

Well, Union Square, there's lots of the gainfully unemployed—

Yeah, bums and street people, if you gotta be crude about it, mister. Anyway, I clock how the regulars are looking at her, like she's local color, you know, but sorta crosswise, like there's a power or something you don't wanna truck with.

So I ask around. The winos and weirdos and crackheads and brain-burn cases in the neighborhood ain't exactly coherent, Jack, and they babble in lotsa languages, some of which nobody else speaks, if you get what I mean, but I get the gist in bits and pieces.

"—Dat Auntie Zuzu—"

"—she got brujia coco—"

"—she some mojo lady—"

"—make them magpie motions—"

"—talk dat voodoo lingo—"

"—from some homeboy island—"
"—with her brain blowin' in the breeze—"

"—got to have some loa—"

"—'cause she ain't exactly walkin' where you can see—"

And all the while, they're like crossing themselves, lookin' sideways, twitchin' and shiftn' like some evil eye, you know, is maybe on 'em, don't pay to invite invisible attention, ma man....

Well, I ain't no superstitious jungle bunny, mister, don't hold with such stuff, I'm a New York boy, but, hey, I felt something off Auntie Zuzu too.

Only it ain't this black magic crap, nothin' dark about that vest, man, any power there's gotta be *bright*, you know, makes you feel this sun, see the palm trees, hear the music, taste that island rum in a tall cold glass, know what I mean.

I figure these shamblers been out on the street too long, bumper is as bumper does, right, and Auntie Zuzu, she's like me, she don't belong on these cold dirty streets, just a temporary embarrassment, you understand.

Like she's got a mission, a purpose, you know, like she's following this trail to somewhere, I dunno, well anyway, to cut a ten-dollar story down to your lousy buck, pal, I start tagging after her, why not, I got nothin' else to do, and somehow it makes me feel good, keeps me interested, like following some parade.

After a while, Auntie Zuzu kinda notices me, much as she notices anything, doesn't exactly talk to me maybe, but she'll hold up some piece of crap she's found and flash me that

smile, and she'll once in a while give me a big look at the magic vest, and I'll hear the music, kinda smell the warm sea, taste that piña colada....

I start to look after her, just a little. Give her a bite of hot dog. Sip of coke. Chase away a pervo slime or two. Like one of them Gardian Angel guys, you know.

What's in it for her? Hard to tell you, Jack. Magic vest. Mojo lady. Island music. Something gonna happen that I just gotta see.

Well, this goes on for about a week, and every day, when we get around 21th and Sixth, the Flower Market district, you know, she'll kinda stand there like forever if she had to, waiting for me to face away. First few days, I try to wait her out, but it's no go, like Auntie Zuzu's got some secret nest somewhere, and she just ain't gonna let me near it. So okay, if that's her thing, I follow her on her rounds till about sundown, and then I go off to my own cardboard condo, no Jack, I ain't gonna tell you where that is.

Until....

We're on Sixth and 22nd. Close to sundown, Auntie Zuzu's goin' through one last garbage can. This one's in front of some wholesale flower joint and it's got a lot of greens and crap in it, she likes this kinda stuff, and she's stuffing bits and pieces of this plant scrap in her shopping cart, when all of a sudden she freezes with her arm stuck deep in the can.

She makes this weird loud humming sound, like one of those Hairy Krishnas, you know, like the last beat of "A-men" inna gospel song, and slowly she pulls this thing out of the garbage and holds it high over her head.

Some kinda big red tropical flower, the kind that looks like it's made out of plastic, only it ain't. The stem is broken, one of the petals is torn, and the thing is covered with you-don't-want-to-know.

Auntie Zuzu looks right at me. Smiling like that island sun. Only she's crying, man, big fat tears rolling down her fat black cheeks,

and her coat is hanging open, and that magic vest of hers is like alive, or anyway that's how it seems, the fish is leaping, the birdies are flapping, the sky is as blue as the Fourth of July, and the big red heart is beating like a jungle drum.

"De flower from Jah, de heart from de star, de key to de car, de bye bye Babylon, de goin' home where de sun is a shinin' and de fish is a-jumpin' from d' foam," she says, and *kisses* the dirty thing, humming something I can't make out as she lays it real carefully atop the junk in her shopping cart.

No, man, I wasn't fried, wasn't like I really *saw* the stuff on the vest move, not hallucinating, just a feeling, like a Moment, like, you know.... Aw, how could you, pal, you hadda be there!

Anyway, Auntie Zuzu, she turns around and starts wheeling her cart downtown on Sixth, like I ain't there, like nothin's there, like she ain't there, know what I mean, and this time I *gotta* follow her, and this time, she lets me, or she doesn't care, or like I say, I ain't there, or she's somewhere else.

She turns onto 21st, heading east, this is like one of those blocks full of crummy old loft buildings where there's nothing but parked cars and overflowing dumpsters and crap after five, and about halfway down the block, she turns into this alley.

It's a narrow little alley between two buildings, you gotta squeeze past this dumpster, and then there's these garbage cans full of leather scraps or something blocking it. Auntie Zuzu shoves two of them aside, squeezes through. Then she turns, and it's like she sort of notices me, waits there for something.

I ease past the garbage cans, and she puts them back across the alley behind me, and we're in this little secret world, kinda, alley hidden from the street by the dumpster and the garbage cans, where nobody but Auntie Zuzu ever goes, judging by the dead rats and rotting pigeon bones, and piled up crap thrown out of windows and all, broken toilet bowl, even.

Smell is from stink city, mister, it's dark and gloomy like a subway tunnel, kinda sinister, you might say. I follow her down the alley to what looks like a dead end against the back of a building on the 20th Street side. But when we get there, there's a left turn, and we're in this, I dunno what you'd call it, courtyard, airshaft bottom, like an empty space maybe four yards by six between three buildings, like someone screwed up when they drew the property lines.

Auntie Zuzu's nest.

Not in New York, mister. Like this tropical hut in a jungle or onna beach somewhere. Square thing made of cardboard boxes with this triangle roof, like a kid's drawing of a cozy house, you know, at least I think it's made out of cardboard boxes, but I can't be sure, 'cause every inch of it's covered with like, well, garbage.

Pieces of tinfoil. Broken colored light bulbs. Flattened out cornflake boxes. Grapefruit rinds. Scraps of green plastic. Magazine covers. Coffee tins. Beer cans. Candy-bar wrappers. Ripped-up scraps of cloth. Heads off Teddy bears and stuffed parrots and mammy dolls. Album covers. Plastic flowers. Christmas tree tinsel. Old colored underwear and socks. Like somebody tipped over a dumpster onto it....

Aw, I ain't telling you right, pal, I mean, it was like kinda *beautiful*, garbage, yeah, but it sort of added up to something else, all that crap was in these bright tropical colors, like the fruit salad inna Hawaiian restaurant, like a travel poster for Jamaica, like...like the picture on Auntie Zuzu's magic vest. This was kinda magic too, Jack. Shinola from shit, know what I mean?

There was this doorway into the hut, and in front of it, like a front garden, kind of palm trees, and a flower bed, and maybe a vegetable garden or something, all made out of garbage, out of green plastic, magazine pictures, orange juice cartons, Hawaiian Punch cans, beer bottles, ice-cream bar wrappers, Spic & Span boxes, cigarette packs, all the tropical-colored magpie crap that Auntie Zuzu collected in her shopping cart.

You could hear that island music there, man, you could smell the sea, strong coffee brewing in a tin pot, nice big spliff, dark island rum, fish frying in hot pepper sauce. You could hear those breakers hittin' the golden sand, see some black kids divin' into the waves, seagulls squawkin', lazy summer afternoon inna travel poster, oh yeah....

Auntie Zuzu, she wheels the shopping cart into the beach hut, and I follow her inside. Both halves of the peaked roof have got lots of these patches of different shades of yellow cellophane stuck in the cardboard, so even down here at the bottom of the airshaft, it's kind of golden inside, like the sun going down into the Caribbean, man, all soft and smoky, the stars soon to come out over the ocean.

The inside of the hut is like the outside, the cardboard walls covered with tropical-colored garbage, and more of the stuff heaped all over the place, pineapple tops, and plastic ferns, molasses jars, candy wrappers, junk food boxes, heaps of broken colored glass and bright rags.

Except for the wall across from the doorway. That's the gray brick wall of a building. It's got like this mural thing on it, it's made of the same kind of garbage too, only it's like neat, precise, with everything exactly in place, like a stained glass window in some crazy bag-lady church.

Only it doesn't seem crazy. It's a pattern, you can feel it, and there's a power in that pattern, you can feel that too, better believe it.

Circles within circles within circles. A blue circle made out of bits of magazine ads, soda cans, cigarette packs, all kinds of stuff, bits of blue all stuck together so the different shades of of the pieces make it seem to shine and sparkle. Inside that, a yellow circle made of the same sort of stuff, a great big empty sun, with regular neat little triangular rays around it. And inside that, pieces of black garbage, making a black circle, with a kind of empty square space, where you know some final thing is supposed to go, 'cause the shape of

what ain't there yet is outlined in tinfoil.

And on the floor in front of it, there's like this altar. Some kind of old cracked blue bowl on a piece of dirty red velvet full of weird stuff, but another pattern, like some kind of bouquet from a garbage flower store. A heap of coffee grounds, sprinkled with what look like roaches from joints. Stuck in it, the top half of a pineapple, a paper cup from a tropical drink joint, a mango pit, a picture of Bob Marley clipped from a newspaper standing on end wedged between some fried banana chips. Whole bunch of other stuff I can't figure out.

Auntie Zuzu, she takes the big red flower she's just found, snaps off the broken stem, jams it into the coffee grounds just so, and somehow, it like completes this pattern, it's *just* the right thing in *just* the right place, you can feel it, man, you can understand why she's been rooting around all these garbage cans forever just to put this together.

She stands up. She takes off her ratty old peacoat. And then....

And then she takes off the magic vest. She roots around in a pile of crap and comes up with a glob of some sticky stuff you don't want to know. She smears this stuff on the back of the vest. I kind of want to stop her, it don't seem right, but I can't move, I can't say anything, I can't do anything, it's like I'm not there.

She sticks the vest to the empty space inside the tinfoil outline in the center of the pattern on the wall.

It fits perfectly.

She rummages around in another pile of crap and comes out with half a bottle of Myer's rum. She sprinkles all of it on the altar, like this priest with his censor, you know, solemn, and careful like.

And then....

And then she starts peeling off her clothes, layer after layer of this filthy crap, until she's standing there, all gross, and fat, and dirty, and incredibly disgusting, in these slimy gray panties and crummy old brassiere.

She stands in front of the altar, in front of the pattern on the wall, in

front of the vest, facing the quilted sky, and the sea, and the clouds, and the beach, and the palm trees with the red heart between them.

She's got a match. She lights it. She tosses it onto the altar.

"And how we sing when we remember Zion!"

The stuff starts to burn. The hut fills with smoke in the dusky island twilight. Smells like strong coffee, dope, rum, molasses, flowers, fish frying on an open fire, sunlight over the seashore. Steel drums and laughing guitars.

And...and....

And the vest starts to *move*, now it really does, man. The birdies flap their wings. The clouds drift across the quilted sky. The waves break

foaming against the golden sands. The fish grins wider, winks his cartoon eye, and plunges back into the cartoon ocean.

And as it does, a black girl, slim, and young and beautiful, your perfect island dream princess in a pure white bikini beneath a golden sun, skips down the beach, looks back at me once, flashes me a smile I'll never forget, and leaps through the beating red heart between the palm trees and into the tropical sea.

And there I am all alone in a cardboard box full of stinking garbage.

Nobody there but me.

Well what do you say, mister, is that worth a dollar?

Oh yeah? You think I made it up just to bum a drink? Well have a look, Jack!

Yeah, that's right, of course this is Auntie Zuzu's vest!

Of course, there wasn't no black girl in a bikini between the palm trees before, pal!

She went home, man, don't you get it?

Right where the heart's supposed to be. ■



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HOME BY THE SEA

Elisabeth Vonarburg

Translated by Jane Brierley
Illustrated by Darla M. Tagrin

"Is it a lady, Mommy?"

*Images of sorrow, pictures of delight
Things that go to make up a life (...)
Let us relive our lives in what we tell you
(Home by the Sea, Genesis)*

"Is it a lady, Mommy?"

The small girl looks at me with the innocent insolence of children who say out loud what adults are thinking to themselves. A skinny, pale, fair-haired child of five or six, she already looks so like her mother that I feel sorry for her. The mother gives an embarrassed laugh and lifts the child onto her lap. "Of course it's a lady, Rita." She smiles excuse-her-please; I smile back oh-it's-nothing. Will she take advantage of it to launch into one of those meaningless,

ritual conversations whereby neighbors assure each other of their mutual inoffensiveness? To cut her off, I turn towards the window of the compartment and look purposefully at the scenery. Heading north, the train follows the system of old dikes as far as the huge gap breached four years ago by the Eschatoi in their final madness. The scars left by the explosions have nearly disappeared, and it almost seems as though the dike were meant to stop here, and that the waters had been allowed to invade the lowlands as part of some official scheme. We cross the narrows by ferry, and are once more in a train, an ordinary electric train this time, suspended between the two wide sheets of water, to the west rippled by waves, to the east broken by dead

trees, old transmission towers, church spires, and caved-in roofs. There is a mist, a whitish breath rising from the waters like a second tide ready to engulf what is left of the man-made landscape.

It is a lady? You obviously don't see ladies like me very often in your part of the world, little girl. Cropped hair, boots, army fatigues, a heavy jacket of worn leather; and the way I was sitting, grudgingly corrected when you and your mousy mother came in—a real lady doesn't sprawl like that, does she, even when she's by herself. The *lady* actually likes to be comfortable, believe it or not, and in her usual surroundings she doesn't have to worry much about what people think. The lady, little girl, is a recuperator.



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But she couldn't tell you this; she didn't want to see your big, stupid eyes fill with terror. All the same, you don't get to see a real live bogey-woman every day. I could've told you a few things. Yes, I know. *If you're not good the Recuperator will get you, and he'll say you're not a real person and put you in his big sack.* As a matter of fact, we don't put human specimens in our big sacks right away, you know; only plants and small animals. Big animals are injected with tracers once they've been put to sleep for preliminary tests. If the Institute researchers discover something especially interesting, they send us back for it. I could've told you all this, little girl, you and your mother, who would probably have looked at me with superstitious fear. But who cares what recuperators really do, anyway? They go into the contaminated Zones to bring back horrible things that in other times might have been plants, animals, humans. So the recuperators must be contaminated too, mentally if nothing else. No, no one apart from the Recuperation Agency cares what the recuperators really do. And no one, especially not the Institute, wonders who they really are, which suits me just fine.

"Why did they break the dike, Mommy?" asks the small girl. She's sensed that it would be a good idea to change the subject.

"They were crazy," says the mother curtly. Not a bad summing up. Fanatics, they were—but it comes to the same thing. You see, they thought the waters would keep rising, and they wanted to help the process along: The End of the Damned Human Race. But the waters stopped. So did the Eschatoi, by the way; it was one of their great collective suicides. But this time there weren't enough of them left to start the sect afresh—nor enough energy in the new generations to be fanatic. The pro-life people have simmered down too. Even the Institute doesn't believe in its own slogans any more. The Rehabilitation of the Marvelous Human Race. But that's just it: the human race isn't reproducing itself

well or adequately. It probably wore itself out with its frenetic activity during the Great Tides and seismic catastrophes at the end of the last century. Now it's going downhill, although no one dares say so straight out to the Institute and its people. True, there are fewer earthquakes, fewer volcanic eruptions, the sun breaks through the clouds more often, and the waters have stopped rising, but that's nothing to get excited about; it's not a human victory. Just a blind, natural phenomenon that peaked by pure chance before destroying what was left of the human race. And I, little girl, I who am not human, I collect what the Institute calls "specimens" in the contaminated Zones—specimens that are also, in their way, what is left of the human race.

I who am not human. Come on, now, didn't I get over that long ago? But it's a habit, a lapse, a relapse. I could've answered you just now, little girl, by saying, "The lady is an artifact, and she's going to see her mother."

But that very word requires so much explaining: *Mother*. At least I have a navel. A neat little navel, according to the medic who checked me out before my abortive departure for Australia and the Institute. The current artifacts have large, clumsily made navels that the scanner immediately picks up as not being the real thing. But you, now, it's almost invisible, extraordinary, what technical skill your.... And there he stumbled: *mother, creator, manufacturer?* He came out of his scientific ecstasy, suddenly conscious that after all someone was listening who hadn't known the truth. None of the other tests had ever revealed anything! But this Medical Center is connected to the Institute, and new detection methods have been developed that didn't exist when you were, er... (he cleared his throat—he was very embarrassed, poor man) *made*.

Yes, she made me like this so I could pass for a human being. Almost. In spite of everything I thought then, she surely didn't foresee that I'd learn about it this way. I

probably wasn't meant to know until the end, with its unmistakable signs. Why? Am I really going to ask her? It this why I came? But I'm not really going to see her. I'm passing by, that's all. I'm on my way to the Hamburg Zone.

Oh, come on! I know damn well I'll stop at Mahlerzee. I will? I won't! Am I still afraid, then? That cowardice which made me burn all my bridges, swear never to ask her anything, when I found out. But it wasn't only cowardice (you see, little girl, the lady always tends to exaggerate, to be too hard on herself). It was a question of survival. It wasn't because I was afraid or desperate that I ran away after the medic's revelations. I didn't want to see the others waiting for me outside. Not Rick, especially not Rick.... No, if I remember rightly, that lady of fifteen years ago was in a fury—still is—in spite of everything. A huge fury, a wild, redeeming fury. Surely this was why, on coming out of the Medical Center, she found herself heading for Colibri Park. It was there that she'd first seen the Walker.

Colibri Park. The first time you go there you wonder why it's not called "Statue Park". Of course, there is the transparent dome in the middle of the main lawn, enclosing its miniature jungle with hummingbirds that flit about on vibrating wings, but what one really sees are the statues. Everywhere, along the alleys, on the lawns, even in the trees, believe it or not. The young lady first came there with Rick, her lover, and Yevgheny, the typical street-wise city boy who teaches small-town greenhorns the score. The lady was sixteen. She'd barely been a month in Bañblanca. One of the youngest scholarship students at Kerens University. A future ornament of the Institute. The fledgling who had fled the nest, slamming the door as she went, so to speak. And all around her and her lover, there were the wonders of Bañblanca, the capital of Eurafica. I could say it was Eldorado for us, but you probably wouldn't know what Eldorado is.

Yevgheny had pointed out, among the people strolling by, the

Walker—a man moving slowly, very slowly. He was tall and could have been handsome, had something in his bearing been as imposing as his height. But he walked listlessly, you couldn't even call it sauntering. And then, as he passed them by, that blank face, those eyes that seemed to be looking far off, perhaps sad, perhaps merely empty.... He'd been walking like this every day for almost ten years, Yevgheny had said. The sort of thing old men do.... That was it, he walked like an old man. But he didn't seem all that old, barely in his thirties.

"He was never young, either," Yevgheny said. "He's an artifact."

And I'd never heard the word. How had my *mother* managed to keep me from ever hearing it? At least Rick seemed as stupid as I was. Yevgheny was delighted. "An artifact—an organic work of art. Artificial! Obviously you don't see them running around the streets of Mahlerzee or Broninghe."

This one wasn't doing much running either, Rick remarked. Yevgheny smiled condescendingly: this artifact was at the end of the road, used up, almost finished.

He made us go past the Walker and sit on one of the long benches facing the central lawn. Then he launched into a detailed explanation. (I was afraid he would wake the young woman in blue who was dozing at the other end of the bench, one arm resting on the back, the other propped by the elbow to support her head with its heavy black hair, but his brash voice didn't seem to disturb her.) Not many of these artifacts were made nowadays; they'd gone out of fashion, and there had been incidents. During their fully active period, they were far more lively than the Walker (who moved slowly, so slowly, towards the bench). Very lively, in fact. And not everyone knew they were artifacts, not even the artifacts themselves. Thirty years earlier, the great diversion in the smart circles of Baïblanca was to bet on who among the new favorites in the salon of this or that well-known personality was an artifact, whether

or not the artifact knew, whether or not the artifact's "client" knew, whether or not either would find out, and how either would react. Particularly the artifact.

There were *Sheep* and there were *Tigers*. The tigers tended to self-destruct deliberately before their program terminated, sometimes with spectacular violence. A biosculptor had made a fortune this way. One of his artifacts had reacted at knowing what it was by setting out to kill him; there was always some doubt about the precise moment when an artifact would stop working completely, and the biosculptor gambled that his would self-destruct before getting him. He almost lost his bet. Instead, he merely lost both arms and half his face. It wasn't serious: the medics made them grow back. After several premature deaths among the elite of Baïblanca in those inopportune explosions, the government put a stop to it. This didn't keep the biosculptors from continuing for a while. Artifacts popped up now and then, but no more *Tigers* were made; the penalty was too stiff.

Yevgheny rattled all this off with a relish that disgusted the lovers. They didn't know much about Baïblanca yet; they had heard the Judgementalist fulminating against the "New Sodom," and now they understood why. This decadent society wasn't much better than that of the Eschatoi, the dike-destroyers whom it had survived.... Rick and Manou understood each other so well, little girl. They were so pure, the brave new generation. (Oh, what high-flown debates we used to have, late into the night, about what we'd do for this poor, ailing world once we were in the Institute!)

With Yevgheny, they watched the Walker reach the bench and sit down beside the blue-clad sleeper. Yevgheny began to laugh as he felt the lovers stiffen: the Walker wouldn't do anything to them even if he heard them, which wasn't likely! It was an artifact, an *object*! But didn't he say they sometimes self-destructed? "I told you, they aren't making any more *Tigers*!"

The final moments of the *Sheep* weren't nearly as spectacular. They became less and less mobile, and finally their artorganic material became unstable. Then the artifacts vaporized, or else.... Yevgheny rose as he spoke, and went over to the sleeper in blue. Bending his index finger, he tapped her on the forehead. "...or else they turn to stone."

The young woman in blue hadn't moved; neither had the Walker. He seemed to have seen and heard nothing. He was contemplating the *Sleeper*.

When Yevgheny, all out of breath, caught up with Rick and Manou, he finished what he was saying: "...and you know what they call those two? Tristan and Isolde!"

He nearly died laughing. He probably never understood why we systematically avoided him afterward. We had some moral fiber, Rick and I. Small-town greenhorns are better brought up than Baïblancans.

You know, when you come right down to it, little girl, probably nothing would have happened, or not in the same way, if I hadn't been so much like her, like my *mother*. But of course I was. Oh, not physically. But in character. Typically pig-headed. Our reconciliations were as tempestuous as our rows. We had a marvellous time, we two. She told me the most extraordinary stories; she knew everything, could do everything, I was convinced of it. And it was true—almost. A man—what for? (Because one day, you must realize that too, the matter of fathers always comes up). And at this point I distinctly sensed a wound somewhere in her, deep down, a bitterness, despite her efforts to be honest. ("They have their uses," she had said, laughing.) But really the two of us needed no one else; we were happy in the big house by the beach. She took care of everything: lessons, cooking, fixing things; and the toys when I was little, made of cloth, wood, anything! Taiko Orogatsu, you see, was a sculptress. I still picture her now, smudges up to her elbows and even on her face, circling her lump of clay like a panther, talking to herself in

Japanese. Of course, I didn't understand any of it. I thought it was magic. She was determined to hold on to her language, but she never taught it to me. It was all she kept of Japan, where she had never set foot. Her ancestors had emigrated long before the Great Tides and the final submersion. She didn't even have slanted eyes.

But I'm not going to tell you about my memories of that time, little girl. Perhaps they're lies. Real memories? Implanted memories? I don't know. But even if they are implants, she wanted them that way. They must reveal something about her, after all, because I can also remember her faults, her brutal practicality, her impatience, our interminable, logical arguments that would cave in beneath her sudden arbitrary decision: that's-the-way-it-is-and-you'll-understand-later. My adolescent whining also was typical. Another series of implanted memories? Impossible to find out, unless I asked her. Did I really go through the adolescent crisis, I-want-to-live-my-own-life-and-not-yours, or do I merely *think* I walked out slamming the door? Looking back now, however, isn't it really the same thing? That old-fashioned career as a space pilot, did I want it for myself, or to thwart her? So as not to go into bionics as she wanted me to? Did I really mean it? In the end, when I fled the Medical Center after the medic's revelation, what really hurt wasn't the loss of a future career destroyed before it even began; I didn't shed any tears about it later, either.

I didn't cry at all, in fact. For years. It almost killed me. The young lady who'd just found out she was an artifact was furious. Can you understand that, little girl? Beside herself with fury and hate. The Taiko who had done this, who had done this to me, who had *made* me, she couldn't be the Taiko of my memories! Yes, she was. But could I have lived with a monster all those years without realizing it? Yes, I could. She had done this to me so that I would find out like this, go crazy, do dreadful things, kill myself, kill her, anything?



It was not possible! Yes, it was. A monster, underneath the Taiko that I thought I remembered. Two contradictory images met in my head, matter/antimatter, with myself in the middle of the disintegrating fire. Infinite emptiness, as the pillars of a whole, full life crumble.

Well, the lady was so gutted that she scarcely remembers the weeks that followed, you see. She dropped deep beneath the civilized surface of Ba Blanca, into the submarine current of non-persons. Threw her credibility card into an incinerator! Disappeared, as far as Kerens University was concerned—and the Institute, and the universal data banks. And you know what? It's extraordinarily easy to live underwater once you've given up breathing. The current wasn't fast or cold; the creatures who lived there were so indifferent that it was almost like a kindness. I haven't any really coherent memory of it. The shop were no questions were asked. The mechanical work, day in, day out. An empty shell. Automaton. I was never so much an artifact as then. And of course, the nightmares. I was a time bomb ready to explode, I had to become an automaton to protect myself. So as not to begin thinking, mainly, and especially not to begin feeling.

But one day, quite by chance, the lady encountered the Walker. For weeks after that she followed him around in horrible fascination. He walked slower and slower, and people turned to look at him—those who didn't realize what he was. And then it happened, in broad daylight. I saw him on the Promenade, walking so, so slowly, as though he were floating in a time bubble. It wasn't his usual hour at all. And there was something about his face, as though he were...in a hurry. I followed him to Colibri Park where the Sleeper slept, uncaring, in full sunlight. The Walker halted by the bench, and with impossible slowness he began to seat himself beside the motionless woman; but this time he did not simply sit: he curled up against her, placing his head in the crook of the arm on which the Sleeper was resting her

head. He closed his eyes and stopped moving.

And the lady follower sat down beside the Walker now at his final destination, and watched his flesh become stone. It was a slow and ultimate tremor rising from his innermost being, rising to the surface of his skin and then imperceptibly stiffening, while the cells emptied out of their sublimated substance and their walls became mineral. The extinction of life, as lightly as the passing shadow of a cloud.

And I...I felt as though I were awakening. I stayed there a long time, beginning to think, to feel again. Through the fury, I sensed...no, not peace, but a resolve, a certainty, the glimmer of an *emotion*...I didn't know what end had been planned for me—explosion or petrification—but I found that I could bear it after all. It wasn't so terrible in the long run. (I was absolutely amazed to find myself thinking this way, but that was all right: astonishment also was an emotion.) It was like one of those incurable diseases of which the outcome is at once certain, quick, and curiously problematical. You know it will happen, but not when or how. There were lots of humans who lived like this. So why not me?

Yes, astonishment was the initial emotion. The idea of revenge only came later. *I would not give her the satisfaction of seeing me die before my time.* I would not put on such a performance for her. I would not make a spectacle of myself.

But I still had enough sense of showmanship to sign on as a recuperator.

No. There were two ways of completely covering one's tracks. Either go and live in a Zone, or go and hunt in a Zone. The really theatrical thing to do would have been to go and live in a Zone: "I'm a monster, and I'm joining the monsters." Whereas becoming a recuperator....

Well, the lady still had a perverse streak, in spite of everything. She was meant to be caught in the net, and instead found herself doing the catching, ready to spring the traps

in which she would capture these quasi-humans, these para-animals... these *specimens*. She could have become very cruel. She could have. But she saw too many sadistic recuperators, fanatics, sick people. And then she inevitably recognized herself in her prey. She was teetering on the razor's edge between disgust and compassion. But she came down on the side of compassion; this recuperator was not a bogeywoman, after all. On the side of compassion. "By accident", or "because of adequate programming", or "because I had been properly brought up". It comes to the same thing as far as results are concerned, and that's all that counts.

That's what Brutus thought. The only result that counted for him was that I opened the cage and let him go. Brutus. He called himself this because the neo-leprosy had only affected his face then, giving him a lion's muzzle. Quite handsome, as a matter of fact. One finds everything in the recuperators' cage, little girl, and this *specimen* was terribly well-educated. There are still lots of operational infolibraries in the Zones.

"The complete programming of artifacts is a myth maintained by the Institute. Actually, it's not as simple as that. Implant memories? Yes, perhaps. But mainly, biosculptors who are into humanoid artifacts insert the faculty of learning, plus a certain number or predispositions that won't necessarily develop, depending on the circumstances—exactly as it is for human beings." How strange to be discussing the nature of conscience and free will with a half-man crouching in the moonlight. Because yes, Brutus often came back to see me, little girl, but that's another story.

The lady has remained a recuperator since Brutus, however. Not for the sake of delivering specimens to the far-off Institute, but to help them escape. If absolutely necessary, I bring back plants and animals. But not the quasi-, pseudo-, para-, semi-people. How long will I be able to go on like this? I suppose that will be another story, too. Perhaps it won't be much of a story, after all. The peo-

ple at the Institute don't really care. In Australia they're so far away from our old, sick Europe. They work at their research programs like sleepwalkers, and probably don't even know why any more. They merely keep on with what they're doing; it's a lot simpler.

And as you can see, little girl, the lady has also kept on with what she was already doing. She's been at it for quite some time. Thirty-two years old and no teeth missing, when most known artifacts only last a maximum of twenty years in the active phase. So one day, having seen how her fellow recuperators thinned around her—radiations, viruses, accidents, or "burnouts" as the Agency refers to the madness that overtakes most of them—she began to doubt whether she really was an artifact. And she had the tests run again. Not at the Kerens Medical Center, naturally. But one of the axioms of Bañblanca is that everything legitimate has its underground counterpart. In any case, my artificiality was confirmed! The only reasonable hypothesis was that I wasn't really thirty-two years old and had only fifteen years of actual existence behind me. My birth certificate was false. And all my memories until the time I left home were implants.

And it bothers me. Not only because I must be nearing my "limit of obsolescence", as the second examining medic so elegantly put it while admiring the performance of my biosculptress, just as the first had. But because I wonder why she made me like this, with *these* memories. So detailed, so exact! I've got a right to be a little curious, after all, since I've made my peace with the inevitable, up to a point. It doesn't matter so much now about not asking her anything. I'll be very calm when I see her. I'm not going there to demand an explanation. It's past history. Fifteen years ago, I might have. But now....

You want to know what the lady's going to do? So do I. See Taiko before she dies, is that all? Because she's old, Taiko is. Fifty-seven is very old now; you may not



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live that long, little girl. The average lifespan for you humans is barely sixty, and getting shorter all the time.

Perhaps you wonder, little girl, how the lady knows that Taiko Orogatsu is still alive? Well, she took the precaution of checking it out. Without calling the house, of course.

See Taiko. Let her see me. No need to say anything, in fact. Just to satisfy my conscience, liberate it, prove that I've really made my peace with myself. (With her? Despite her?) See her. And show her, to be honest. Show her that I've survived, that she's failed if she built me merely to self-destruct. But she can't have wanted that. The more I think about it, the less it fits with what I remember about her, even if the memories are implants. No. She must have wanted a "daughter" of her own making, a creature who'd adore her, not foreseeing the innate unpredictability of any creation, the rebellion, the escape.... *If I really did escape.* But if this is also a pseudomemory, what on Earth can it mean?

Usually, little girl, the lady takes some reading material or music with her when she's travelling; otherwise she thinks too much. Why didn't I bring along anything to keep me occupied this time? Because I didn't want to be distracted on the way north, to the past? Because I'm trying to work up nostalgia for memories which were probably implanted? Come on, Manou, be serious. I might as well go and have something to drink in the dining car. There's no point keeping on like this, speculating. I'll ask, she'll explain. People don't do what she's done without wanting to explain, surely. Even after all this time.

Really, is there any point going? It's perhaps another kind of cowardice, an admission of something missing somewhere inside me. Do I really need to know why she made me this way? I've made myself since. And anyway, I'm going into the Hamburg Zone. I'm not *obliged* to stop.

There, the train has finally ground to a halt. Mahlerzee. You see, little girl, the lady's getting off here.

Try to work up nostalgia? Artificial memory or no, it's impossible to avoid clichés: flood-of-memories, changed-yet-unaltered scenery. The wharf completely submerged by the high tide, the avenue of statues almost buried in the sand. The terrace with its old wooden furniture, the varnish peeled off by the salt air. An unfamiliar black and white cat on the mat in front of the double doors, slightly ajar to show the living room beyond. Not a sound. The porcelain vase with its blue dragon, full of freshly cut flowering broom. I should call out, but I can't; the silence oppresses me. Perhaps she won't recognize me. I'll say anything, that I am a census-taker, that it's the wrong house. Or simply go....

"Hello, Manou."

I didn't hear her coming, she's behind me.

Small, so small, diminutive, like a bird. Was she like this? I don't remember her being so frail. The hair is quite white, tousled, she must have been having an afternoon nap. The wrinkles, the flabby cheeks, chin, eyelids. And yet her features seem clearer, as though purified. And the eyes, the eyes haven't changed, big and black, liquid, lively. Try to think: she recognized me, how? Make out her expression...I can't, it's been so long that I've lost the habit of reading her face—and it's not the same face. Or it's the same but different. It's her. She's old, she's tired. I look at her, she looks at me, her head thrown back, and I feel huge, a giant, but hollow, fragile.

She speaks first: "So, you recuperated yourself." Sarcasm or satisfaction? And I say, "I'm going into the Hamburg zone, I'm catching the six o'clock train," and it's a *retort*, I'm on the defensive. I thought we'd chat about trivialities, embarrassed perhaps, before speaking about.... But it's true she never liked beating about the bush, and then when you're old there's no time to lose, right? Well, I haven't any time to lose, either! No, I'm not going to get angry in order to stand up to her; I've learned to control that reflex. It kept me alive, but it's not what I need

here. I don't, absolutely don't, want to get angry.

She doesn't make it easy for me: "Not married, then, no children?" And while I suffocate in silence she goes on: "You left to live your own life, you should have been consistent, lived to the full. With your gifts, to become a recuperator! You stopped half way! Really, I didn't bring you up like that."

I can't mistake her tone. She's *reproaching* me, she's *resentful*!

"You didn't make me like that, you mean! But perhaps you didn't make me as much as you think!"

There we go, fighting. It can't be true, I'm dreaming; fifteen years, and it's as though I left last week!

"So you actually took the trouble to find out? If you'd taken a little more trouble, you'd have learned that artifacts are not necessarily sterile. True, the Institute buried the really pertinent data, but with a little effort.... You didn't even try, eh? So sure you were sterile! When I think of the pains I took to make you completely normal!"

I cool down. Suddenly, somewhere, I cross a threshold, and once over it I am incredibly calm. That's Taiko. Not a goddess, not a monster. Just a woman set in her ways, with her limitations, her goodwill, her unawareness. I hear myself saying almost politely: "Still, I failed their tests."

Apparently she's crossed a threshold of her own at the same time, in the same direction. She sighs: "I should have told you. When you were little. But I kept putting it off. And then it was too late, you were right in the middle of the terrible teens, and I lost my temper. I couldn't tell you just then, you can understand that! Well, yes, I should have. Perhaps it would have calmed you down. I was so furious when you left. I expected a phone call, a letter. I said to myself, at least the Institute can't find out about her. And in fact they know nothing. The Kerens medic called me. A nice person, actually. He never said anything. You were a brilliant student who disappeared without a trace. They offered

me their sympathy, you know, Kerens and the Institute. Afterward, I tried to have you found. Why didn't you call me, you stubborn mule?"

I'm the one being accused, can you beat that? I stare hard at her. And all of a sudden it's too much. I burst out laughing. So does she.

We're still the same, after all this time.

"But you came, anyway. None too soon, either."

After that, a long silence. Embarrassed, pensive? *She* is pensive. "You ought to try. Having children. There's no guarantee you'll succeed, but it's highly probable. Have you really never tried?"

Does she realize what she's saying?

"What, there's never been anyone?"

Rick, the first, yes. And a few others, initially as a challenge, just to see, and after that because it didn't really matter what I was, thanks to Brutus. But still! I retort that knowing you're an artifact doesn't exactly make for harmonious relations with normal humans.

"Normal humans! I can't believe my ears! You were born. The fact that it was in the lab down there doesn't change anything. You grew up, you made mistakes and you'll make more. You think, you feel, you choose. What more do you want? You're a normal human being, like all the other so-called artifacts."

Oh yes. Like the Walker and the Sleeper, I suppose? I grit my teeth. She looks me in the eye, impatient: "Well, what's the matter?" Doesn't even let me try to speak. "There may have been biosculptors who were stupid or crazy, but that's another matter. Of course some artifacts were very limited. The Institute made sure of it by suppressing the necessary data, all Permahlion's research. They made him practically an outlaw, fifty years ago, and after that they did everything to discourage artoorganics. But it didn't keep us from carrying on."

I can't understand what she is saying. She must see it, and it gives her fresh cause for annoyance. "Well,

what do you think, that you're the only one in the world? There are hundreds of you, silly! Just because the original human race is doomed to disappear sooner or later doesn't mean that all life must end. It was all right for the Eschatoi to think that way, not for you!"

And suddenly, quietly, sadly, "You really thought I was a monster, didn't you?"

What can I say? I subside onto the sofa and she sits down as well, not too near, slowly, sparing her knees. Yes, she's old, really old. When she becomes animated, the expression in her eyes, her way of talking, her leap-frog sentences are there; but when she's quiet it all flickers out. I look away. After the silence, all I can find to say is, "You made others? Like me?"

The answer is straightforward, almost absent-minded: "No. I could have made others, probably, but for me, one baby was already a lot."

"You made me...a baby?"

"I wanted you to be as normal as possible. There's nothing to prevent artoorganic matter growing as slowly as organic matter. Actually, it's the best way. The personality develops along with it. I wasn't in a hurry."

"But you never made others...in the usual way?"

A sad-amused smile: "Come on, Manou. I was sterile, of course. Or rather, my karyotype was so damaged that it was unthinkable to try to have children in the usual way, as you put it."

"And I can."

"Theoretically."

"After working fifteen years in the contaminated Zones."

"Oh, but you're a lot more resistant than we are. The beauty of artoorganics is that one can improve on nature. That's the danger as well. But in the long run, it means I was able to give you a chance to adapt better than we could to the world you'd be dealing with. Do you remember? You were never sick when you were little."

And I still heal very quickly. Oh yes, the medic in the Kerens Center pointed that out. That was a constant

factor in artifacts. Not a proof, however; although short-lived, there had been a fairly widespread mutation of this kind about a hundred years earlier. "It is from studying this phenomenon, among others, that artoorganic matter ended up being created. There are still instances of it among normal humans." It was a parallelism, he emphasized, not a proof. But an indication which, combined with others, added to the certainty of my being an artifact.

"I'm telling you"—she's still adamant—"you should try to have children."

She's really determined to know whether or not her experiment has worked, is that it?

"Thirty-two is a bit late, don't you think?"

"A bit late? You're in your prime!"

"For how long?"

I'm standing up, fists clenched. I wasn't aware of getting up, wasn't aware of shaking. If she notices it, she gives no sign. She shrugs: "I don't know." And before I can react she smiles the old sarcastic smile: "At least as long as I, in any case. Longer, if I've been successful. But for exactly how long, I don't know."

She looks straight at me, screwing her eyes a little. Suddenly no longer old and tired, she's ageless; so very gently sad, so very wise: "You thought I could tell you. That's why you came."

"You made me, you should know!"

"Someone made me, too. Not in the same way, but someone made me. And I don't know when I'm going to die either." The small, ironic smile comes back. "I'm beginning to have an inkling, mind you." The smile disappears. "But I'm not certain, I don't know the date. That's what being human is like, too. Haven't you learned anything in fifteen years? The only way to be sure is to kill yourself, which you didn't. So keep on. You'll still live long enough to forget lots of things and learn them all over again."

And she looks at the old watch that slides around her birdlike wrist.

"Two hours before your train. Would you like something to eat?"

"Are you in a hurry to see me leave?"

"For our first time it would be better not to try our luck too far."

"You really think I'll come back?"

Gently she says: "I *hope* you'll come back." Again the sarcastic smile: "With a belly this big."

I shake my head; I can't take any more; she's right. I rise to get my bag near the door. "I think I'll walk back to the station."

Still, she goes with me onto the terrace and we walk down to the beach together. As we pass one of the statues, she puts a hand on the grey, shapeless stone. "It was his house, Permahlion's. He brought the statues here himself. He liked to scuba dive when he was young. I was his very last pupil, you know. He made the first artorganic humans, but he didn't call them artifacts. It killed him, what was done to them after him."

As always when the sun finally breaks through the clouds, it gets hot quickly. As I shrug off my jacket, I see her looking at me; she barely reaches my shoulder. It must be a long time since she was in the sun; she's so pale.

I scan the distance for something else to look at. A few hundred years from the beach there seem to be shapes jumping in the waves. Dolphins? Swimmers? An arm above the water, like a sign....

She shades her eyes. "No, they're Permahlion's mermaids. I call them 'mermaids', anyway. I don't know why, but they've been coming here for several seasons. They don't talk and they're very shy." At my stupefied silence, she remarks acidly, "Don't tell me you have something against humanoids?"

No, of course not, but....

She brushes off my questions, her hand spread in front of her. "I'll look for everything there is about

them in the lab. You'll be able to see it. If you ever come back." A cloud seems to pass over her rapidly, and she fades again. "I'm tired, my daughter. The sun isn't good for me these days. I'm going to lie down for a bit."

And she goes, just like that, without another word or gesture, a tiny figure stumbling a little in the sand. I want to watch her go, and I can't watch her go, as though it were the last time, perhaps because it is the last time, and "my daughter" has lodged itself in my chest somewhere; it grows, pushing my ribs, and the pressure becomes so strong that I shed my clothes and dive into the green, warm water to swim towards the sea creatures. My first burst of energy exhausted, I turn on my back and look towards the house. The tiny silhouette has stopped on the terrace. I wave an arm, I shout, "I'll come back, Mother!" I laugh, and my tears mingle with the sea. ■

PITFCS

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In 1958, Theodore R. Cogswell sent out a postcard to certain members of the SF establishment. The result, with really astonishing speed, was one of the craziest, most wonderful, occasionally dead-serious journals ever published. It was a fanzine for professionals, and over the twenty years that followed—well, there was a seventeen-year break in there—just about every professional, from all over the world, joined in. Now the original spotty, hectographed and photo-offset pages have been translated into a dignified and permanent volume. But it is not to be mistaken for a scholarly text. You will be astonished, amazed, delighted, and might occasionally foam at the mouth.

"I wrote the introduction to this volume, and I have seldom spent my time to better effect."

—Algis Budrys

BLOOD BONDS

Shira Daemon

Illustrated by Judith Holman

Perhaps I will take dance lessons, find someone to salsa with under bright, shimmering lights.

My shadow waits for me on the stoop. The rain has matted her hair, and her coffee-dark skin seems even richer in the mist. "What're you doing here?" I ask. The traffic light changes, surrounding us in a deep crimson haze. She shrugs, and I open the door.

Shadow never talks. As we silently climb the four flights of stairs leading up to my apartment, she exhibits a feline grace that I, tired and achy after a long day of shopping, find myself envying. She shakes droplets of rain from her hair before stalking over to my couch.

"Do you want more blankets?"

She growls, and I watch as my second-hand hide-a-bed is transformed into a lair.

I wonder what her parents are doing? Are they shooting up? Getting rough? Perhaps Shadow only leaves her noisy apartment to come and visit

my animal masks. Her presence imparts a sense of animation to their mute, wooden faces: the gazelle's angles round and blur, the elephant's tusks gleam as though wood had suddenly transubstantiated into ivory.

The phone rings and I drop my shopping bags as I fumble for the receiver. A toaster spills out of my bundles. Its burnished surface reflects a lopsided image of the painted rooster's bright beak. I make a face at the bird as I answer the phone.

"Hey, Ziba, are you coming to the ritual tomorrow?" a musical voice asks me.

"I don't know, Esther," I say into the receiver. "I'm having my Monthly, and I suspect all I'll really want to do is burrow under the covers with the *Sunday Times*."

"Aw, come on, we've still got to plan Beth's party, and we haven't gotten together at the Teapot in weeks."

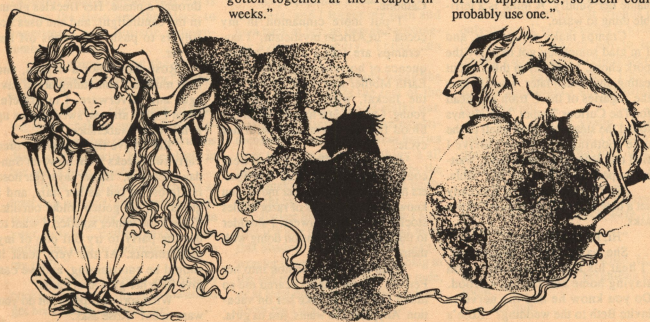
The Curious Teapot is where our old college gang meets for, as Esther calls it, the ancient Jewish cappuccino ritual. Esther has been trying to make me an honorary Jew for years. I keep telling her that my ancestors came from the wrong side of Africa.

"I figure if we get together tomorrow, Rose can organize the food for Beth's party, and you and I can get the entertainment and decorations planned," she adds.

The rooster's reflection appears to laugh at me. His suppressed mirth reminds me of Beth's ex-husband, Jerry, always cracking jokes and breaking hearts.

"I just bought Beth a toaster," I say. "Do you think a toaster's an okay present for a Happy Divorce Party? Don't people usually give those at weddings?"

"A toaster's fine," Esther reassures me. "I think Jerry got custody of the appliances, so Beth could probably use one."



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The rooster is making me uncomfortable. "I have to go," I say. "You win, I'll be there tomorrow."

The bird seems to waggle his beak, laughing at my inability to say 'no.' To break the spell I tap my fingers on his comb. Instead of discomfiting him, the drumming makes my cramps worse. I wince, and the rooster's beak softens, turns sympathetic. Now he reminds me of Jerry as I last saw him, crying over the sundering of our brief affair.

I hasten to the medicine cabinet for Midol. Ginger runs figure eights around my feet. When I pick her up, her paws dangle against my chest.

"Did you know," I whisper in a furry ear, "that animals could once take on human form at will?"

I want to be a butterfly, able to soar and dip, but Ginger just yawns. "Well it was a good myth," I declare as I climb into bed. "Much better than 'Mawu and the Monkeys,' or 'How Mama Leopard Lost Her Children.'" The cat kneads my pillow. She cares nothing for myths, although she does like munching on butterflies.

Shadow is gone by the time I wake up. I'm never missing any of the silver, but the leftover pork chops have been gnawed. While I make coffee I wonder what fit of erudition caused Shadow's father to name her Sundry. A mind is a terrible thing to waste.

Cramps make me queasy, and I'm glad somebody got to enjoy the pork chops. I can't even think about eating until much later, when I brave the vagaries of the C train and head for The Curious Teapot. I've always found the steamed cocoa smell of the café soothing, and when I arrive I find that Rose is already there, waiting impatiently for me at 'our' table.

"Did you know Jerry's already set a date to marry the bimbo?" Rose asks.

"Hi, Rose. Nice dress."

She waves off the compliment.

"I hear his fiancée is planning on staying home and raising a brood. Do you know he had the nerve to invite Beth to the wedding?" Rose's

wedding ring flashes as she pounds her clenched fist on the table.

You would never know it, since Rose is always primly swathed in Laura Ashley florals, but she has the soul of a street fighter. It's a good thing Jerry spends most of his time in Connecticut, or he'd be walking around with a busted nose.

"Inviting Beth to the wedding sounds like the polite thing to do," I say. "Maybe he truly wants her to wish him well." I always try to sound reasonable when Rose scuttles Jerry in public. I'm afraid Rose would deck me if she knew about our affair, even if it was during the separation.

"He's scum, pure and simple, and so is the bimbo he's marrying."

It's a shame Rose didn't decide to join Beth and go to law school; fund raising is not the best profession for venting spleen.

"Where is Beth, anyway?" I ask.

"She thinks she might be getting a cold," snorts Rose. "Heaven forfend she should put on a scarf and go for a ride on the subway." Rose looks swiftly around the room, probably to see if anybody we know is prowling the café. "You know, Beth seems to be embracing pain like it was some kind of sick penance. She's getting downright masochistic during her Monthly. I think she's decided that cramps are God's way of punishing her for not being a good enough Catholic."

I put more cinnamon in my cocoa. "In African mysticism," I say, "cramps are just a natural consequence of horrendous actions. The Earth Mother was raped by her son, the Jackal, when the world was young. Cramps just happen when our blood flows in sympathy with her cycle."

Rose sighs. "Well, I wish Beth could be so calm about it." She lowers her voice. "I helped her move, you know. She's got packs of razor blades stockpiled in her drawers. I shudder to think what she plans on doing with them."

Rose drips more lemon into her Perrier. "Those razors scared me so much I offered to take her on vacation. Anyplace she wants, just us girls.

'Let's go to Mexico or Hawaii or the Ukraine or something,' I told her. And you've got to know how worried I am to imagine the fight Lawrence and I will have if I go to some Third World junkyard without him."

She viciously stabs ice cubes with her toothpick. "We've either got to get her away for a while, or she's got to get better drugs for PMS. If I hadn't stopped by last month and force-fed her kahlua, I don't know what would have happened."

Before I can respond my shadow appears at the door. Sundry glides silently over to our table. Somehow she always knows where I'll be. She doesn't speak, and I order her a lemonade and a rare burger.

Rose squirms, eyeing our scruffy companion with distress. "Ziba," she finally says. "I understand that social work is your life, but do you have to bring your clients to lunch on the weekends?"

I glare back at Rose, sitting comfortably well-fed in her designer dress. After a moment she lowers her eyes. She tends to forget that my background is closer to Sundry's than to her own.

My shadow ignores us, running delicate hands through spiky hair. It is one of my trials that I can't get her to a doctor for testing. I can never tell if she's marginally autistic, literally mute, or just an adolescent going through a phase. Her freckles gleam in the candlelight, and she uses her fingers to push the onions off her burger.

Rose hands her a napkin, and then murmurs something about savages and silverware. I'm grateful when Esther arrives, sweeping us up in her noisy exuberance.

"Let's have the Happy Divorce Party two weeks from now, on Sunday afternoon," Esther says. Her nose is almost as red as her hair, and I guess that it's gotten colder outside. "That's the winter solstice. I want to use the party to try out one of my experiments. At the very least it should be entertaining, and we can give Beth her gifts afterwards."

"What sort of experiment do you want to do?" Rose asks.

Esther's last solstice party had us boiling tofu with garlic to see if our energy would increase. All my clothes smelled funny for a week.

"I'm going to try to cure cramps with music," Esther says.

She sounds happier than she has in months. I wonder how last night's date went.

"Esther, sweetheart," I say. "I've got cramps now, and unless something really unnatural happens I won't still be having them in two weeks."

"Well," she says. "You just get crabby during your Monthly, but Beth should hit about then. She and I have been in sync since college. I thought, what with the way she's been lately," Esther shrugs, and Rose and I echo the helpless gesture, "anyway, I thought that a healing ceremony might be just the thing she needs."

Esther takes a sip of her cappuccino and adds, "But I'm dying to try out this new vocal technique, and even without the candles and stuff we ought to be able to do something for your cramps, now."

"Yeah, come on, hon, try it," Rose says. "Esther's experiments are always a hoot."

"Traitor," I mutter. "Next time we boil garlic we'll make *your* house stink."

Rose sticks her tongue out at me, but Esther just tells us to "hush up." Though I want to protest that this is neither the time nor the place to experiment with holistic mumbo-jumbo, I give in.

"I'm going to find the note to open up your second chakra," Esther says.

"Oh, Lordy, she's back to talking about chakras again," Rose giggles. She brushes imaginary crumbs daintily off her skirt, but the gleam in her eye is pure mischief.

"Now, hold your breath for at least five seconds, all the while imagining a note rising and flowering in your pelvis," Esther says. "Then unfold the note by humming along on my pitch."

Esther demonstrates, and Sundry cocks her head to the side. I want to get her hearing checked, too.

I try to follow instructions, but where Esther's notes are mellifluous, mine are ragged. My voice warbles around hers like a staticky channel. We wander together up what I am assured is the pentatonic scale.

"That's the scale represented by the black notes on a piano keyboard," Esther tells me.

Perhaps I still haven't come to grips with the flats and sharps in myself, for I can't seem to stay on pitch.

Rose winces. "The only scales I know yell nasty things up at me on Monday mornings in the bathroom," she says. "You sound worse than that electronic pig squeal I get when I go over goal."

"If you wanted to hear good music you should've spent the afternoon in Harlem visiting the Baptists," I mutter.

But our experiment has caught Sundry's attention. She hums something so low as to be almost a growl.

I don't know if it's my 'second chakra,' but the kid certainly opens up something. I double over with the sudden pain.

"That's the antithesis of your healing note," says Esther. She sounds excited.

"I'd prefer to be trampled by wildebeests," I say.

Sundry chokes out something unintelligible.

Any response from Shadow is progress, and I forget my pain and hum back at her, as though encouraging a parrot. "Sundry," I coax, "do you like music?"

Somehow my words break the spell. Sundry stuffs the rest of the burger in her jacket and stalks out. Her exit shatters any more experimentation, since the waitress hurries over to make sure everything's all right, and the old man who sits by the door makes rude noises about badly brought up "Nigras."

Esther looks hurt, though I suspect it's less the racial slurs and more that Shadow wouldn't stay and play. I wonder if we should say something to the old man, but hey, the kid is rude, or at least out of touch. If he's talking about me I don't want to know.

"Well," Rose says. "I guess we'll just have to wait till the party to try again."

I'm only too glad to stop experimenting and allow her to organize us. Rose's 'power party planning' abilities always leave me in awe. By the end of lunch we've drawn up a menu, and I've agreed to go shopping with Esther for 'mystic stuff.' It's not until I've drained the dregs from my cocoa that I realize my cramps are gone. I'm afraid to tell Esther, she might want me to sing the Battle Hymn of the Republic or something, so I just wipe off my chocolate moustache and smile.

The week drags by. I've almost forgotten that I offered to help Beth paint her condo until Esther calls and reminds me. Beth is apparently too depressed to call people. Rose is going to some fund raising dinner, and Esther's got a singing job at the Jewish center, so I'm stuck doing the first coat alone with Beth.

Esther assures me she'll come by after her concert, bearing copious quantities of Chinese food. She thinks Beth isn't eating enough, so she figures if she brings a huge amount there'll be lots of leftovers for Beth to munch on.

I wish I could reschedule. Lately, being alone with Beth puts me into a panic. Does she know that Jerry and I had a fling? Should I confess? Out of all our friends the only person I've discussed it with is Esther. She's sworn not to tell, though I don't think keeping secrets makes her happy. When I get to Beth's apartment I am dreading a confrontation.

"What a great shade," I say, hunching over the paint. I stir it with one of those sticks that look like an oversized tongue depressor.

"It's okay."

"What made you pick yellow? I thought beige and peach were your favorites."

"Rose picked it."

"Well I agree with Rose. It's a cheery color, really brightens up a room."

"Uh huh."

I calm down. I've had rougher confrontations with my cat, and more interesting conversations with clients who don't speak English. Beth just barely drags herself from the can to the wall, occasionally fingering the shiny cross that hangs around her neck. The cross bounces between her breasts as though it were guarding her heart. She looks too depressed to accuse me of anything. If she was like this a lot, it's no wonder Jerry left—or is that just blaming the victim? We work in a silence that is broken only by the gurgling of my empty stomach.

The rumbling gets so loud that I go into the kitchen. There is nothing much there but a poster of an emaciated Jesus feeding the poor. Judging by the contents of Beth's fridge, I gather she is emulating her redeemer. Does anorexia absolve good Catholic women from the sin of divorce? I promise my stomach Chinese and try to keep the religious cynicism to myself. At least the silence is good for working, and when Esther arrives we are done with the first coat.

"Canary yellow," Esther says. "How great. You will be very active in this room."

"But it's the dining room," Beth protests.

I try to laugh—the irony is just too great—but the empty room swallows the sound. Perhaps we should get Rose to redecorate all our apartments, then we'd never have to talk. I viciously attack the little Chinese boxes with my chopsticks.

Esther ignores the tension and launches right into a discussion of her latest holistic success. "No, really, it's like Carole's cramps were transformed. We vocalized together, and she said she could feel each syllable vibrating right through her spine. I thought her astral spirit was going to come out and play."

I brush flakes of paint from my cheek. "I'm not sure I want my spirit going around visiting without permission," I say. "It's bad enough Shadow keeps showing up on the doorstep."

"Who's Shadow?" Beth asks. "A new cat? I thought Ginger didn't like company."



This is the first question Beth's asked about my life in months. Thank the Earth Mother she's finally showing an interest in something. Maybe we should get her a kitten.

"Shadow is Ziba's new project," Esther says. "She's a ghetto kid who's discovered that social workers are a soft touch."

"Her real name is Sundry," I say. Some days I could swear that Esther's a secret Republican. "And she's not sponging off me, I'm just busy providing her with a role model."

"Yeah, well, you can't afford to invest in adopt-a-waif," Esther says.

The doorbell interrupts. No one answers Beth's intercommed plea of "Hello, who is it?", but when I look out the window there's Sundry on the doorstep.

Can she tune in to the sound of her nickname? After I buzz her she wanders the room, lightly touching the wet paint on the wall. The acrylic leaves smudges on her fingers, and she tracks streaks of paint through her hair. I shake my head, hoping I can get her into a shower before she comes home with me and marks up my couch. It's hard enough trying to keep Ginger from shredding the fabric with her claws.

Then Sundry goes over and, I swear, she sniffs Beth.

"Maybe she's hungry," Esther murmurs.

Beth's shoulders shake, and she makes little spluttering noises, like a teakettle that's about to overflow. I think maybe she's laughing, but I haven't heard her laugh in so long that I'm not sure. She throws all the little Chinese food boxes, including one I wasn't finished with yet, into a plastic bag.

"Here." She hands the bag to Sundry.

Before I can question Sundry, she and the bag vanish out the apartment door. I turn to apologize for her behavior, but Esther is examining the three dark smudges Sundry's fingers have left on the wall. The smudges swirl with a life of their own. I imagine they represent tiny furred faces; masks trapped in transition: part wood, part paint, part flesh.

I slap yellow acrylic over the markings. The pattern fades, but somehow an afterimage remains. Beth peers at the wall, unsure whether there is still a problem. I must look as unnerved as I feel.

"Don't worry," Beth says. "I'll hang some stuff up later. Although all I have left are some hideous prints that Jerry didn't want."

Her compassion is a final humiliation. Not only have I slept with her husband, but my "guest" has marked up her new space. Sundry has never left tracks on anything in my apartment. Perhaps she really is brain damaged? I vow to redouble my efforts to get her into a good after-school program. Not that I think she's actually going to school.

"Did you know," Esther says, "that the print of a finger can be a road map to a different world?"

"Oh, Esther," I murmur. "You're always seeing connections between the fall of a sparrow and the song of a lark. You're just too esoteric for me."

"Ice cream," Beth says. "Ice cream isn't esoteric. It's just fattening, and I have some Chunky Monkey that Rose brought me. It's sitting unopened in the freezer."

Aha, when I searched the kitchen for munchies, I never looked in the freezer. Anything that will get Beth to eat seems like a good idea, and I applaud Rose's foresight. Beth's cheekbones are so sharp I'm surprised she doesn't cut herself applying rouge.

By mutual consent we leave the dining room and eat in the kitchen. There is just enough room there for all three of us to perch around a card table. Jesus stares balefully as I crunch down on a candied nut.

"So, what do you say we add some guys to the party?" Esther asks. Beth shrugs.

"Plan on dousing them in incense and feeding them tofu and lox until they fall madly in love with us?" I ask Esther.

"Only if you're buying the lox."

"Hey, Beth, should I get some lox to go with Esther's men?"

"Umm," she says.

I really hate it when she answers in monosyllables. It makes it so obvious that she's not listening. When Beth's mostly full bowl hits the sink, Esther's eyes meet mine.

"Well, if you don't want any single men coming, then let's invite Maxine," Esther says. Her voice sounds loud and falsely hearty, as though she can pressure Beth into responding by sheer force of volume. "Maxine's usually civil at parties where all the men are gay or attached. Besides, she knows all the best herbal stores. Maybe I can get her to come down next weekend and help us shop."

"Not Max," I moan. "She keeps telling me that I was a Herstory major, and what I really need is the love of some free woman."

Beth yawns. "Sure," she says. "Invite whoever you want. Invite Maxine. It's fine by me."

I sigh, resigned to spending time with a beautiful French botanist who practically lives in overalls, and who thinks wearing makeup enslaves us to the establishment.

Then Beth runs the cross lightly over the vein inside her arm. I see no scars, but the action brings shivers to my spine.

"Tell you what, hon," I say, feeling myself consciously imitating Rose. Beth always seems to listen to Rose. "Let's get a cake from The Erotic Baker and castrate Jerry in effigy. It would be therapeutic."

Beth just shrugs. When we get up to go, she barely acknowledges our departure.

"Well, what else can we do?" Esther wonders as we stamp our cold feet on the subway platform. "We can't lock her up. We can't cheer her up, and we can't fix her up. Maybe if we sing at her it will help."

"Something happened when you and I did it," I say. "I'll meet you Sunday, and we can shop for the exotics then. Beth always used to like jasmine incense during midterms." Guilt gnaws my innards like a rat with a dry cornucopia.

"Have you ever told her about you and Jerry?" Esther whispers.

"Do you think it would help?"

"I don't know what would help," Esther says. Her shoulders droop as she heads for the transfer stairs, and I climb into the noisy metal cage that rockets me toward home.

Tonight my shadow is not waiting on the doorstep. After the spacious gloom of Beth's place, my apartment feels crowded. The masks stare at me, their painted eyes accusatory. The elephant's tusks are pointed. The antelope grim. I avoid the rooster entirely. No need to wake any spirits that might want to dance with my guilt.

In the morning I phone the office and tell my secretary I'm doing field work. After I hang up I wonder if Jill thinks that means I've got a hangover. Field work is the excuse my boss always uses to take the morning off when she's got a headache.

Nobody tries to mug me as I make my way into Sundry's apartment.

"It's the Social Lady," Jerrell says. He launches his nine-year-old self at me. His hug is so thorough that I suspect he's checking my pockets for loose bills. I disentangle him, annoyed that I forgot to bring candy. The smell in the tenement is almost unbearable: sour milk and diapers mixed with the sickly sweet haze of pot. It's hard to discern how many people are clustered together. Cheap lamps make everything obscure.

"Hey, Social Lady," says Zanuba.

I can't tell if she's strung out. I'd take her kids away, but I doubt if foster care would be much of an improvement.

"Are they upping my benefits? I might be pregnant," Zanuba says.

I fervently hope she's not pregnant, but if she is, it's not showing yet. "Where's Sundry?" I ask. I don't want to get involved in another of our endless conversations about sexual responsibility, as though I have any right to talk. One of the toddlers puts sticky fingers all over my stockings, plucking runs in the weave with single minded intent. I pick him up.

"Which one's this?" I ask, wondering if little Huey could have gotten

so big so fast. His diaper is very wet. Hoping not to get drenched, I put him down. He drools on my ankle, and then crawls off.

"Oh, that's Liam. I'm watching him for Tootsie."

Liam grabs hold of a waterbug. He vrooms it over the broken linoleum as if it were a toy car.

"I'd like to set up an appointment for Sundry to have a complete psychological evaluation," I say. "When do you think you can bring her in?"

"Sundry?" she asks. "Whose child is Sundry?"

"Tall girl, about twelve." My voice is so dry I imagine Zanuba can feel the heat of my scorn. "One of your children by Delaware Jones." I pretend to consult a scrawled note. "She's got two full sisters, Various and Etcetera."

"I ain't got no Ectetras," says Zanuba. She swats two of the kids indiscriminately. "Don't know no Varies and Sundrys neither." She picks up Baby Liam and drops him onto his back. Her diaper changing technique is efficient. When he decides to use his baby manhood as a firehose, only a small stream of liquid dribbles onto my shoe.

The child wails as his privates get wiped down. Two of his older cousins join in the lament. I clutch my briefcase as though it holds my sanity. The wall of sound forces me back, until I'm leaning against the chipped door frame.

A man stirs in the bedroom. The deep rumbling of his voice sounds ominous amidst the higher-pitched chirpings of the children. His demand for beer cuts through the bird noises like thunder interrupting rain.

Zanuba answers the call of her male, seeming to forget about both me and the baby as she picks up an open beer can and wanders into the back room. Liam wails and kicks his feet. His new pampers lies open beneath him. I squat down and attach its sticky flaps. When I flip him back onto his stomach, he scurries away. I, too, feel like I'm crawling as I stumble down the rotting steps, skipping the second one with its heel-catching hole.

"Hey, Social Lady, don't you come around here asking about no more Sundrys. Just come back and let me know when my bennies are gonna go up," Zanuba calls out a window.

It appears she's not completely oblivious to my departure. Next time I come I'll take better care of my shadow. I'll make the doctor's appointment and then bribe Zanuba to bring the child in.

Various and Etcetera are playing with a jump rope on a driveway outside the tenement. They jump in tandem, the rope arcing over both their heads. The tricks they do are well beyond anything I ever imagined, even in my spryest pre-pubescent agility.

"Shouldn't you be in school?" I ask. One of the twins, Various, I think, does a handspring and lands behind me. She has kept hold of her end of the rope. Laughing and chattering in a patois I don't understand, she wraps the rope around me, entwining my legs in a way that is both frolicsome and threatening. Are they playing cops and robbers? Bind the social worker and steal her purse?

The twins chatter at each other.

"Come now, girls," I say. "Why don't you let me go? I'm on your side."

Their eyes meet and some message flashes between them. As one they drop the rope. It falls to the asphalt, forming a more complicated pattern than I would have expected from red striped cotton. For an instant the pattern on the drive resembles a face. It looks like a photo negative of Sundry's fingerprints on the paint. Then I nudge it with my heel and it turns back into a child's jump rope. Perhaps, like Esther, I've begun to see patterns in unrelated flows of chaos. While I'm staring at the rope, the twins vanish. I pretend to believe they've gone back to school.

At the office I spread out the family's files until they almost overflow my cubicle. Sundry has no medical history. While Zanuba's other offspring come with forms typed in

triplicate, Sundry's records—as well as Various and Etcetera's—have been handwritten in a shaky slant.

I wonder if it was this case that drove my predecessor out of New York. I hear she settled in Arizona, where if you hear screaming it's just the wind crying to itself amid the scrub and cactus. Still puzzling over Sundry's unintelligible history, and Beth's collection of razors, I fall asleep with my head atop my desk.

I dream that I am dancing on a hill. My feet know the steps and my fingers tap to the rhythm of the jump-rope. A leopard gavottes with me, and she is happy that I have come. Twin monkeys leap over her back, joyous in their freedom. Then the Jackal stalks us, he that created pain in his mother, the Earth. He scares my leopard until she hides herself deep in a subway tunnel. The tunnel grows a grate which becomes Beth's face, a closed wooden mask frozen in an attitude of pain and accusation. I throw my arms around the mask, begging it to forgive me, but it crumbles into painted dust.

My secretary, Jill, wakes me. "You were kicking the desk and making little whimpering noises," she says. She tilts my head up, as though checking for fever, or drug-dilated pupils. Would she look so closely into my white boss's eyes?

"I'm PMS," I lie. As though Moon madness justified all odd behaviors. Jill stops looking for evidence of needles and nods sympathetically. She even offers me an aspirin. I'm grateful she doesn't notice the shimmering teardrops that have appeared on Sundry's paperwork. I stare at them until they dry up and fade away.

On Sunday, Maxine, Esther, and I shop the Lower East Side. The trip is fraught with small tensions. Can Esther find green silk ribbons? Is hyacinth better than jasmine incense? Will I kill Maxine?

Esther has cobbled together a complicated ceremony where we will wave colored ribbons, burn healing scents, and hum away our distress. At least it sounds harmless, and this time

Esther's skipping the garlic except in the appetizers. The pungent Chinese groceries, with their exotic smells and spoiled meat, have made my nose itch. Now that we've entered Ye Old Alchemist I desperately want a kleenex.

"If I sneeze all over Maxine, will she get grossed out enough to leave?" I mutter to Esther. "Or will she just tell me that snot is a natural function and we women have an advantage in lactose production?"

Esther tries not to laugh. I can hear Maxine, loud with her husky French accent, berating a salesman.

"No, no, no! Do you think I am stupid? I know how much things should cost!"

"He doesn't realize she distrusts him just cause he's got a Y chromosome," I say.

"That man, he is an idiot!" Maxine continues, coming over to us with a paper bag full of dried flowers. "He does not know that these plants are so cheap that it is only because they have been dried and put in pretty paper that he can charge anything for them at all."

I shrug, and Maxine huffs off to pay for the herbs.

"We never would have found that fresh goldenrod without her," Esther says.

"I'm not sure fresh gold would be a good enough reason to put up with someone who's that nasty," I say.

If only Maxine didn't seem so convinced that all men are lice, I would find her easier to take. Last I checked, she was involved with a radical goddess cult, the type that wants to wipe out the male half of the species and start over. I've always voted that we should save some of the Sensitive New Age Guys. Retraining must be easier than raising them up from the diaper stage.

As Esther goes to help Maxine with the herbs, I paw through the candles. I'm supposed to pick out blue and white ones, since those are 'healing colors.' Sorting candles relaxes me, and by the time I've found a half dozen I guess that I can manage to have coffee with Maxine and not be

rude. The store is so quiet that I jump when the door chimes tinkle in a sudden gale. Various and Etcetera flurry past me, and begin throwing around a magic eightball.

"Stop that," I say, feeling responsible, although none of the help pays them much mind. The twins are so different from Sundry that it's hard to imagine they're siblings. Of course, when I look in their eyes, the family resemblance is clear. There is something liquid and trapped that they share with my shadow.

"Where's your sister?" I ask them.

They chatter at me, but I still can't understand them.

"Shad...Sundry," I say, growing impatient with their clattering tongues and moving hands. "Where's Sundry?"

"Hiding," says Various.

"She's lost," adds Etcetera.

Maxine comes over. The twins' prepubescent bodies appear to shrink and darken under her gaze. Their arm motions become menacing. Surprisingly, Maxine moves away.

"We'll tell her you asked," says Etcetera.

"She wants to be found," says Various.

We all want to be found, I think, as they hand me a scarf of many colors. When I look up from its rich depths, the twins are gone.

After we finish shopping, Beth is supposed to join us at the Curious Teapot. "She didn't want to leave her apartment," Esther tells us, returning from the pay phone.

"We can't just leave her to rot," says Maxine. As she sips her tea I wonder if she wins her arguments with men by force of personality, or because her French accent is so sexy.

"Beth, she is one of our own," Maxine continues. "We need to teach her the inner mysteries. Reset her fault lines."

"Maybe we need to discuss some of those fault lines," Esther says. She puts a napkin atop the stain my spoon has left on the table. "Perhaps blaming Jerry for all her troubles is unrealistic.

Did he mention anything useful to you, um, that week?"

"What week?" says Maxine. "I haven't heard from Jerry in months."

I wonder if confession will be good for the soul. At least I don't really like Maxine, so ruining our relationship won't be that awful.

"The week he slept over," I mumble. "When he and Beth first separated, and he was still trying to decide what to do."

"Oh, back then," says Maxine. "Merde, he is such an asshole. He spent a night sleeping at everybody's place back then. He even came to Boston, on business he says, but I think it was just to see if he could turn me. He tried that once in college, too. My roommate, though, she is bi. He got much further with her. Crying men always make her think they are sensitive. Stupid bitch."

So, he cried on someone else's shoulder. Were all those tears just an act, a way to get women into his bed? Or did the situation just turn him into a sodden mess?

"He told my roommate that Beth thinks sex for fun is sinful, and that he was made to be crazy with Saint's Days and fasting."

"Did Jerry sleep with your roommate?" I ask, thinking, *and you still speak to her.*

Maxine puts some honey in her chamomile tea. "He was very persuasive and sad. All people they are horrible when they are ending a relationship."

"But, you let him sleep over? I mean, I thought you hated men."

Maxine makes a confused motion with her shoulders. "Oh, well. He posted bond after I got arrested for breaking the windows at the Frat house."

"That was when the sororities were having trouble with telescopes and binoculars?" asks Esther.

"Oui."

My scholarship made me cautious, and I'd never gotten involved when Maxine played college terrorist. But Jerry had been a real activist, rescuing the Guerrilla Fems when they fought against peeping toms and for Wymyn's Studies.

"Do you think he helped the Guerrilla Fems just to meet girls?" I ask.

"Who cares?" Maxine shrugs. "He stayed at the jailhouse all night, raging and cursing until they would let me out."

Perhaps even Maxine's world isn't as black and white as I'd imagined.

Esther, though, is still mooning over Beth. "I could put up with her return to orthodoxy, if only we could get her to eat a full meal once in a while," she says. "I don't know what we can do to cause hunger in an anorexic fundamentalist depressive."

"Gesundheit," I say. Nobody laughs.

"Well, most shrinks, they are Freudian, and you know what a misogynist he was!" Maxine adds. "I think we should call upon Gaia. She will wrestle down the demons that are tormenting Beth."

"I'd go three out of five with Elijah if I thought it would help," Esther mutters. She gathers up the aromatic bundles and we go our separate ways.

The night before the party I get little sleep. Sundry hasn't turned up, and Zanuba still disavows their kinship. Throughout the cold night I hear my masks chattering to themselves. Their wooden teeth seem as lying as George Washington's. I weep for the ugliness of the world, for its many betrayals. I use the rainbow scarf the twins gave me to wipe my eyes.

Dawn brings snow. By afternoon chill white covers Beth's lawn. There are odd tracks crisscrossing her doorstep. Animals stranger than rats and squirrels have been visiting the garbage cans. A brazier steams in the center of her dining room and the apartment is overheated, as though outer warmth could make up for inner desolation. Beth is rocking autistically in her one dining room chair.

"She looks bad," I murmur.

"Cramps," says Rose. I marvel how one word can encompass such a wealth of female sympathy, and such a lack of genuine help. Even though all is in place for the ceremony, Esther stalls for time. She nibbles

Rose's salmon quiche, comments favorably on the cake, plumps up the cushions she brought for us to sit on.

Maxine hands me an oversized dixie cup. The wine tastes like waxed paper. I drink it down and pour myself another. Each time the phone rings it is someone else canceling, because of snow, they say. They would never admit it's because they can't stand to see Beth in this state.

Most of our married friends feel that the karmic magic of a Happy Divorce Party is a mistake. As though bad luck could rub off. Even Rose's husband, Lawrence, wouldn't come.

After an hour of waiting, Esther decides we might as well begin. "A smallish gathering will be best," she says, lighting a candle, "then we can cut the cake and open presents."

Beth blinks at the word presents, but otherwise she doesn't respond. Her language skills seem as scanty as Sundry's. Esther pulls her out of the rocker and pushes her onto a lime green cushion near Rose. Maxine sits opposite, looking stern and beautiful.

Incense smogs the room as Esther starts her chant. She assigns each of us a different note, and the dissonance wavers in the humid air.

"This is ridiculous," Maxine says, coughing. She goes over and hauls up the window.

A snowy breeze sweeps into the room. Various and Etcetera follow the damp flakes over the sill. The fire escape dangles behind them like some metal vine, or a displaced umbilical cord.

Maxine appears scared by their appearance, but Rose, bless her well-brought-up heart, sighs and offers them a cushion. Esther whuffles her *oms* as she hands them red velvet ribbons.

They don't condescend to sit. I can't remember ever seeing the twins at rest. They disdain the humming, and instead beat the floor with their hands. The red ribbons flare between their fingers, and the incense burns high. Maxine grabs wooden spoons and takes up the twin's rhythm, drumming out a syncopation on the base of the brazier. It's a shame Beth is untouched by our cacophony. So

deeply has she sunk that she doesn't stir, even when the twins anoint her with ash.

Her apathy does something to me. Rising, I stamp my feet on the floor. Esther almost stops humming. Though I know she wants me to sit, I refuse to remain passive. While she calls upon her angels, and Maxine beats out Beth's devils, I want to beseech the Earth Mother for aid. When I dance it is with the uncomfortable knowledge that the lushness of my hip rotations is alien to my friends. Only the twins look pleased. They taunt me; their unripened bodies lead me into ever more primitive posturings. I twirl the rainbow scarf over my head.

When Sundry climbs through the window, it seems only appropriate. She joins my dance, turning it into a game of hunter tag. Smoke billows from the braziers as I gambol with the children, timing my movements to the vibrations of my friends' wails.

Beth remains oblivious. She rocks quietly on her cushion, until Sundry reaches down and scratches her hand. Visible pain does what none of our tears could accomplish. Beth looks at her bloody palm and I can feel something click on where before there was only a vacant buzz. She gets up from the pillow and stalks after my shadow, brandishing her bloody fingers like some unhappy flag.

Their chase seems part of the dance, a hide-and-seek where both are It and neither can gain primacy. The twins leap about, casting hairy silhouettes on the yellow walls. I am joined, one of many, whirling my prayers through the dense space. We turn around and about the room, spinning like the Earth Mother rotating on her axis.

Esther's wail wavers as she collects ribbons, kissing them before they flutter—magenta, orange, canary, green, gentian, indigo, and violet—into the flame.

When Beth finally closes in on Sundry, her bitterness is fierce. She reaches back her arm to slap the girl, and Sundry, trapped, leaps toward me. Her taloned hands are spread as

wide as her eyes, and there is no understanding in either. I can't see a way to protect myself from my shadow's claws, or her hurtling body. The only object I am holding is the twin's rainbow scarf.

I throw the scarf at Sundry before tumbling onto a pillow. It lands atop the brazier and light explodes in the room. Esther's wail rises in pitch as Sundry flies over my head. In the brazier's piercing illumination she resembles a leopard drawn of smoke and flame.

The marks on the wall swirl. My eyes tear and through the glitter I see three dark tunnels where there was once yellow plaster. Sundry's leap carries her through the middle tunnel, and the twins climb into the outer passageways. Exotic air and the scent of warm, dank, foliage tickles my nostrils. I hear wooden tongues clicking in time to Maxine's drumbeat.

Esther has closed her eyes. I wonder what she sees, for her wailing has taken on a cantorial query. Her rising chant blends into a glorious atonality that harmonizes with Rose's steady hum and Maxine's pounding spoons.

Beth stands over me. She is squinting at the wall, as though intense scrutiny might pierce its mysteries. I imagine the twins reaching for the lathes, which then mutate into vines beneath their hairy palms. Beth waves after Sundry as the holes close.

The pounding stops. Maxine quits her spoons and goes through the smoky room to fully open the window. I lean out the sill and see that the snow trail has vanished. Twin monkey prints and leopard tracks are now covered by fallen snow.

"Does your hand hurt?" Rose asks. She puts down her colored ribbons and goes for the peroxide.

Beth shakes her head. She seems almost perplexed at finding herself free of pain. I jump when she begins laughing.

"Do you know I haven't played tag since Junior High?" she asks.

Is this the calm before a breakdown?

"I don't think I've played anything since I went to law school," she continues. "Poor Jerry. I'm just so tired of being angry."

"Anger is a good thing," I say. "It beats resignation."

"Uh-huh, but joy must be better," Beth adds. "Do you know what I saw when I looked at you dancing? A happy Madonna. A joyous harlot. Someone who could be full."

"Well, harlot might be right," I add. "I was one of Jerry's sluts."

Rose looks as though she is about to punch me, but Beth just laughs again.

"Hawaii," she says suddenly. "I want to go someplace warm. She contemplates the wall. "Perhaps I could even go someplace as warm as Africa."

I find that she has interposed herself between Rose and me, and I'm amazed by her sudden perspicacity.

"But I'll only go on a big vacation if Rose'll let me pay my own way. I did get something in the settlement, I guess it's time to enjoy spending it."

I can't believe she's not angry. "Beth," I say, a bit unnerved. "I slept with your husband, before you were divorced."

"It's okay," she says. "Life's like that sometimes. I'm so tired of hating him. Tired of hating me. I'm tired of being tired. Do I have to hate you, too? Besides, he used to cry to me about his infidelities. He might even have mentioned you—I lost track after a while." She goes to the window. "There's so little time, we ought to enjoy it and not do penance every minute for our mistakes. If he wanted to be with me, he would have stayed."

In the silence that follows, Esther pulls out the presents and Rose cuts the cake. Jerry's face, done in beaten cream and tufted sugars, seems surprisingly beaky on its bed of angel food.

Rose offers me a bit of his nose and cheek. "Do you want to come with us to Hawaii?" she asks quietly. "Maybe we could find you a grant to study homeless Polynesians, or volcanic insects, or something."

"You're not mad at me?"

"Well, hon, if Beth can forgive you, then I guess I can, too. Just don't touch my Lawrence," Rose says. Then she smiles, "And you've got to teach me how to roll my hips like that."

She practices her wiggle as she goes over to offer Maxine some ear. I doubt I will go with them to Hawaii. I feel no need to adopt more lost jungle creatures. Perhaps I will take dance lessons, find someone to salsa with under bright, shimmering lights.

I put the toaster on the table. It reflects my friends eating, drinking, making jokes. Beth actually cuts herself a slice of cake. I watch her silvered reflection eat it with a zeal that I find oddly refreshing, and very, very hopeful. ■



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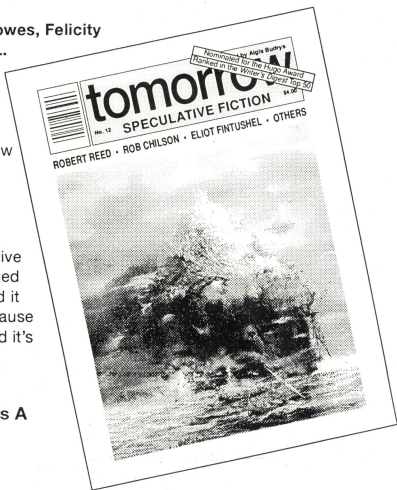
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